

**STEPHEN
LOUGHMAN**

IRELAND AT THE 26TH SÃO PAULO BIENAL

**DENNIS
MCNULTY**

IRLANDA NA 26ª BIENAL DE SÃO PAULO

**DESPERATE
OPTIMISTS**

STEPHEN LOUGHMAN
DENNIS MCNULTY
DESPERATE OPTIMISTS

*Representing Ireland
at the 26th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil*

25th September – 19th December 2004

IRISH COMMISSIONER: VALERIE CONNOR



Department of Art, Sport and Tourism/An Roinn Ealaíon,
Spóirt agus Turasóirreachta.

Ireland at the 26th São Paulo Bienal:
Stephen Loughman, Dennis McNulty, desperate optimists

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BEN SLATER

Many people have assisted the artists in realising their work for the 26th São Paulo Bienal. I would like to join the artists, firstly, in thanking Jenny Haughton of Artworking for her comprehensive management of this year's ambitious participation and Alvaro Petrillo for local coordination and artist liaison. With additional thanks to Siobhán Colgan for press management and the staff of the Cultural Division of the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism for administrative support.

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Finally, I would like to thank the writers for their insightful contributions to the catalogue and the artists for their considered and enthusiastic responses to the invitation to take part in Ireland's participation at the 26th São Paulo Bienal.

VALERIE CONNOR
Irish Commissioner

INTRODUCTION

Paulo-post-future

Stephen Loughman and Dennis McNulty live in Dublin and desperate optimists (Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor), from Dublin originally, live in London. While they have differing methodologies, use different technologies and operate in discretely different cultural economies, they all have a curiosity and enthusiasm for reconfiguring the conventions of their preferred media. Their interests and approaches converge around hot-spots of inquiry in cultural discourses about the stability of meaning. For one thing, their works take a critical approach to the values and ideologies at work in dominant discourses of naturalism and the representation of reality.

The bringing together of Loughman, McNulty and desperate optimists has come from a desire to start with threads of commonality already present in their work. While a unifying theme can offer a seductive sort of comprehension, especially in the massiveness of an event like the Bienal, it risks the erasure of the syncopated practice, so to speak, that most artists engage in on an ongoing basis. In January 2004, all the artists were asked to travel with me to São Paulo. The visit was a time for these erstwhile strangers to talk to each other about their work and timely in creating the links with people in São Paulo that have become vital in realising Ireland's participation this year.

Stephen Loughman's paintings *Finite*, *Friend*, *Moriarty*, *Remember?*, *Witness*, *Outer space*, *Dreamtime*, *Untitled*, and *Sensation* form the selection of work on show in São Paulo. Loughman's pictures are connected in an episodic way, rather than in a linear and sequential manner. Whether representing zoological enclosures, museum displays, municipal parkland or domestic space in London, Paris, Dublin or Constanta, one of the primary organising principles in his pictures is how three dimensional space (and the space of movement and action) is mediated by the effects of the optical technology of film and photography. In Yvonne Scott's essay, *Stephen Loughman: Through a glass darkly...*, Loughman's selection of subject matter is described as being consistently about making a choice to depict "environments which are not normally presented as subjects in their own right (as a landscape might be for example)." While Loughman does not paint the landscape as wilderness, he has been painting municipal parks, especially St. Anne's Park, Dublin. In those paintings, the *mise en scène* is the subject. The paintings do not include people. There appears to be no incident, no event, no witnesses and nothing to see. The picturesque design of the park, the civic space of nature, competes with the emptiness of its depiction. The painting *Finite* is the most recent painting to come from this ongoing attachment to that place.

Dennis McNulty's new soundwork includes recordings made in São Paulo. These have been used as source material in the generation of new sounds with regular collaborators in Dublin. McNulty's overall project is titled <http://alpha60.info> and is comprised of a CD, a website and live performances. The CD has been released by Bizarre Records in São Paulo (www.bizarremusic.com.br) and is a collaboration with serverproject, David Lacey and Alan O'Boyle. McNulty is involved in several collaborative group projects such as serverproject

(aka Donnacha Costello, Peter Maybury, David Donohoe and Dennis McNulty), which is an ongoing performance project based around 'live' electronic improvisation and the long-term creation of a sound archive. Commenting on McNulty's strategy of performing in a variety of spaces and places, in *Turn down the staircase: Dennis McNulty's sound installations*, Brian Hand writes that McNulty's "practice is not an art world specific practice but more an art world related practice." On the occasion of the Bienal, McNulty performs solo in Dublin at Busáras (bus station); as well as in São Paulo at the Conjunto Desportivo Baby Barioni/Água Branca (public swimming pool), under the outdoor Marquise adjacent to the Bienal building in Ibirapuera Park, and in collaboration with Minima at Galeria Vermelho (art gallery). McNulty's engagement with the sonic space of selected locations in São Paulo, and the collaboration of like-minded people working in electronic music in the city, will remain available for inclusion and processing in other contexts and forms in the future.

desperate optimists' project for São Paulo, *Civic life: Moore Street* is a 35mm single tracking shot filmed on Moore Street in Dublin. Existing familiar images of the street have typically been aimed at the tourist market to represent an idea of tradition and identity – that which is essentially 'Dublin'. Street traders line either side of the street selling flowers, fish, and vegetables. Some deliveries still arrive by horse and cart. The street is in the city's busiest north-side shopping area, surrounded with the usual Western European high-street shops, well-known local department stores, new and old shopping malls. Most of the commercial buildings on the street have not yet been developed as part of the current gentrification of the area. Here entrepreneurs from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa have set up shops, restaurants and ad hoc information centres (often established on short-term lease agreements). For *Civic life: Moore Street*, desperate optimists have worked with Arambe, Dublin's first African theatre group. In his essay, *Light on the city: The cinema of desperate optimists*, Ben Slater explains: "Their shift toward the moving image has been inflected by their theatre-making. Not only the 'live art' that they developed in the UK, but also their earlier experiences in Dublin's community theatre. It's this background that radically distinguishes them from other visual artist-cum-film-makers that have emerged in the last decade." Their recent commission, *Who killed Brown Owl?* is a forerunner to their new film for São Paulo, and further films using this technique will follow. *Civic life: Moore Street* will run at selected venues in São Paulo during the Bienal.

Ireland's participation in the 26th São Paulo Bienal has developed from a wish to recognise commonality, embrace contingency and welcome all the possibilities that this can offer. I would look forward to further returns by the artists or their work to São Paulo and future exchanges with contemporaries internationally after the 26th Bienal has come to its close.

VALERIE CONNOR, IRISH COMMISSIONER FOR THE 26TH SÃO PAULO BIENAL, WAS ALSO COMMISSIONER FOR IRELAND'S PARTICIPATION AT THE 50TH VENICE BIENNALE. AN ARTIST, SHE FREQUENTLY WRITES ON CONTEMPORARY ART, IS A CORRESPONDING EDITOR FOR CONTEMPORARY MAGAZINE AND HAS EDITED SEVERAL ARTISTS' BOOKS. SINCE WORKING AS THE VISUAL ARTS DIRECTOR AT PROJECT ARTS CENTRE, DUBLIN SHE HAS UNDERTAKEN VARIOUS PROJECTS AND COMMISSIONS AS A FREELANCE CURATOR. SHE LIVES IN DUBLIN.

Stephen Loughman

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY...

by Yvonne Scott

Stephen Loughman's paintings in São Paulo address diverse subjects that range from a circular image of an imaginary night sky, to a stuffed gorilla in a museum. These paintings are offered as a series of separate, mutually independent works rather than as an integrated installation. To underline the point, Loughman deliberately avoids providing a unifying title. The intention is that each work is taken on its own merits and, initially, the scope of the subjects seems not only diverse but intriguingly perverse. However, these works collectively embody a significant conceptual consistency.

The common point of reference appears, at first sight, to be confined to the method of representation: all the paintings are executed in a 'realist' mode in similar, if not identical, styles. Loughman has in fact been described as a 'photo-realist' and whatever about the questionable accuracy of this designation in terms its original appearance in the mid-1960s, his inclusion in a stylistic category at all invites debate. Contemporary art-critical thought encourages the view that style is an outdated and superficial tool of analysis. Yet, it is the manner of expression that provides the initial clue to interpreting the content and function of Loughman's imagery: his driving interest is the exploration of levels of reality and illusion, and the filters that are placed by visual culture and social conditioning between the viewer and the object.

Post-Modern 'realist' artists, who like Loughman, articulate their ideas through verisimilitude in terms of the visible appearance of the material world, return to an age-old device whose provenance can be traced to antiquity. Pliny for example tells the story of artists who competed to create *trompe l'oeil* images which could fool the viewer into believing the depicted objects were real rather than invented. From the Renaissance to the dawn of Modernism, the academic tradition sought to render, illusionistically, an ideal world – an apparent contradiction which the Realist school of the nineteenth century sought to amend. In their hands, naturalism of method was adopted to convey realism of meaning: a purported intention to represent with honesty and candour – form and content inextricably linked. Even here, however, there is an incongruity in the notion that the depiction of reality (truth) depends on any kind of illusionism (fiction/falsehood), however naturalistic. If reality/truth is the prerogative of the original object or event – i.e. as it occurs in nature, the traditional repository of absolute authenticity – can art be more than delusion? It was this issue that led Plato to ban artists from his conceptual Republic as mere 'imitators' knowing 'nothing of reality' and functioning at several removes from the creativity of the divine maker.¹ Plato's philosophy has given rise to numerous expositions on the theme of art and illusion, with complex interpretations of the various meanings of realism and naturalism, original and copy, imitation, artifice, and simulacrum. While Modernism dispensed with the requirement of illusionism to convey reality, in its various forms it has been retained as a largely ironic mechanism through which the concept can be interrogated.

Stylistic realism has long been adopted as a strategy for credibility. To be convincing, naturalism requires technical prowess, which in turn is visually seductive and carries the authority of the gifted and the articulate. The apparent readability of the image is both comforting and persuasive: we believe we understand what we see, and it is tempting to believe to be true that which we experience with our own eyes. In Modern and contemporary art, 'realism' is often something of a smokescreen: Loughman invites these responses, but then applies various tactics to contradict expectations, inviting exploration beyond the surface. In *Finite*, for example, Loughman stylises the naturalistic setting to the point of surrealism, highlighting the bizarre quality of unnatural paradisaical environments, which parody nature, such as the golf club which inspired the image. Another work, *Friend*, depicts a stuffed gorilla in a museum of natural history. Loughman's depiction mimics the tokenistic 'scenery' that typifies such tableaux, while the gorilla is posed to replicate the assumed fierceness of the wild animal. The irony of the title reflects the crudity of such attempts to make nature accessible within such confines, and the stereotypes which interpret man's paternalistic relationship with nature. Just perceptible is the glass barrier – to protect the viewer or the exhibit?

It is tempting to relate Loughman's work to previous explorations of reality and illusion during the twentieth century, and occasionally affinities can be discerned with Metaphysical art, Surrealism, and Photo-realism. As with the original Photo-realists, Loughman's work has a dispassionate quality – but in his case it is usually coupled with an uneasy atmosphere achieved through various devices: the dramatic contrasts of chiaroscuro, and the unexplained inclusions or absences which are both evocative and engaging. *Moriarty*, for example, replicates a film-set reconstructing one of the tunnels that are a feature of New York's Central Park. The tunnel dominates the image, the deep and threatening darkness contrasting with the eerie lighting. This disturbing device recollects de Chirico's shadowed arcades with their implied but unseen danger. The street-light is reminiscent of Magritte's *Empire of light*, and while Loughman does not adopt Magritte's overtly illogical juxtapositions, his predilection for abandoned environments is similarly unsettling.

Like the Photo-realists, Loughman often draws on photographic methods and references to explore the complex relationship of the medium with reality, and its capacity both for objective reportage and for selective distortion. However, the earlier artists were more interested in emulating the portrait photograph (Chuck Close) or the tourist snapshot (Malcolm Morley), than the culture and devices of movie making that attract Loughman. *Moriarty* was based on the film *They might be giants*, while the painting *Remember?* evokes nostalgia for the era of black and white movies. While the latter scene is modelled on a real place (the flat of a friend of the artist), it is observed as though through the lens of a cine-camera. The viewpoint is that of someone mounting the stairs, with the landing and the doors leading from it about to come into view. The cut-off perspective suggests a frame on a



TUESDAY
oil on canvas, 118 x 122,
1998 private collection

Photography: Liam O'Callaghan



THE SECRET
oil on card, 70 x 105,
2000 private collection

Photography: Michael Boran

continuum and prompts anticipation of the unfolding of the narrative. The potential distortion of reality in film-making is reflected in the abstract qualities of the image, emphasised by the deliberate flattening of perspective. *Irrevocable* depicts what is probably the single most common symbol of television and movie narrative – the gun. This perspectival image shows the device lying on its side, more an exhibit than a tool of destruction in reality or fiction, but the title indicates its capacity to coerce, damage or destroy.

Many of Loughman's works depict environments which are not normally presented as subjects in their own right (as a landscape might be, for example). These are at once evocative, but devoid, of human presence. They tend to have, therefore, a theatrical quality, functioning like empty stage sets, and conveying a sense of expectation. The viewer is invited to participate, to fill the void with their own presences and imaginings. As cinematic images, *Moriarty* and *Remember?* both fall into this category. By setting up physical barriers, *Untitled* and *Finite* place the viewer in the role of audience, awaiting the performance that never happens.

The act of representation involves the interjection of a layer between the observer and the object. However, Loughman's defining interest in the levels of mediation extends to all manner of contrived displays: waxworks museums, aquariums, stage/theatre, television and cinema, zoos, golf courses and public gardens. Their common function is to select, re-present, and interpret fragments of the external world with some coherence. Performance and display operate similarly – actively or passively participating in a process described by Preziosi:



As the theatre's existence ironicizes imagined divisions of behaviour into the natural and the artificial, so the museum, by marking the world into the museological and the extramuseological [i.e. that which is not in a museum], renders paradoxical distinctions between original and copy, reality and fiction, presentation and representation, while at the same time keeping such dualities in play.²

Theatricality and drama are not confined to fictional narrative; they are tools also of public address. The entire space of *Witness* comprises a long red curtain, suggestive of the potential for concealment and revelation inferred also in the title. The microphone provides the medium of communication, a means of amplification, literal and metaphorical. Theatre is associated with the imaginative interpretation of reality, a role which is paralleled in *Outer space*, a fictional but credible constellation. It is presented in a form which suggests the eye of the telescope or the cosmic map, two channels to access and communicate scientific fact. Fact may be the foundation of reality – but new knowledge undermines that of previous assumptions, so the perception of scientific 'reality' is constantly shifting. Like the photographic image which similarly has the capacity to absorb and display objectively, facts are passive and their selective inclusion/exclusion distorts and misleads. The mirror/reflection is also associated with perceptions of the real. *Dreamtime* – a humorous play on the antipodean world – was prompted by a display at Expo 2000 in Hannover, involving the perfect reflection, in a pool, an artificial forest/garden that was suspended upside down from the ceiling. What was perceived in the pool appeared the right way up; in a reversal of logic, the reflection had the visual rationalism of 'reality' that was denied to the actuality.

UNTITLED
oil on mdf, 62 x 122,
2000 private collection

Photography: Michael Boran

AN ETERNITY
oil on canvas, 118 x 122,
1998 private collection

Photography: Liam O'Callaghan

The filters through which Loughman observes/presents the world include the telescope and camera lens, and the sheets of glass which protect museum and zoological displays. Glass is not easily detected by the naked eye whose focus is the object beyond, and its apprehension in the paintings depends on context and material clues to indicate its presence – the reflected light on its surface, discernible in *Friend*, or the structural stanchion of the underwater section of the polar bear enclosure in *Untitled. Sensation* is inhibited by such barriers, however translucent, while the camera lens translates its subject into a mediated image. In *Finite*, the barrier is a social one, physically flimsy but psychologically robust, represented by the wire-netting fence through which the voyeuristic gaze observes a deep but limited space. It is Poussinesque in its synthetic perfection; a seductive paradise unsullied by the familiarity of access, the reality of experience.

Perception of reality is filtered through the distorting effects of nostalgia and memory both of which are evoked in *Remember?* Films, like songs, associated with one's past, carry with them the baggage of individual histories and recollections, interjecting more layers and departing even further from the potential for objectivity.

The physical filters/barriers (lens, glass, mirror, fence) inferred in the paintings symbolise the cultures of entertainment and knowledge that they serve; their function – to project, direct, reflect and deflect – mirrors the role of the images themselves. Stephen Loughman's realist 'style' is less a mechanism for literal depiction than one of the devices in a complex iconography of perception.

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, 601b. He gives examples of the divine creation in nature, which is copied by the carpenter, whose product, in turn, is painted by the artist.

² Donald Preziosi, "Collecting/Museums" (quotation on pp.409-10), in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London, 2003, pp.407-18.

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DENNIS MCNULTY

LIVE PERFORMANCE, DUBLIN:

STAFF CANTEEN, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY AFFAIRS, ÁRAS Mhic Dhiarmada (BUSÁRAS)

LIVE PERFORMANCES, SÃO PAULO:

CONJUNTO DESPORTIVO BABY BARIONI/ÁGUA BRANCA, RUA DONA GERMAINE BUCHARD; GALERIA VERMELHO (IN COLLABORATION WITH MINIMA), RUA MINAS GERAIS; THE MARQUISE, PARQUE DO IBIRAPUERA

DENNIS MC NULTY HAS PRESENTED SEVERAL SOLO WORKS IN ADDITION TO HIS ONGOING PET SOUNDS PROJECT OF SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCES AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS, INCLUDING SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCES AT TEMPLE BAR GALLERY, DUBLIN, 2004; 'VM01', HOXTON DISTILLERY, LONDON, 2003 AND DECOMPRESSION 2, 'THE CAPTAIN'S ROAD', TV PROJECT, DUBLIN, 2002.

HIS COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS INCLUDE ONGOING IMPROVISATIONS WITH DAVID LACEY, PAUL VOGEL & MANY OTHERS AS WELL AS THE ONGOING SERVERPROJECT AT [HTTP://SERVERPROJECT.INFO](http://serverproject.info). IN ADDITION HE HAS COLLABORATED ON SEAPPOINT (WEB PROJECT WITH CLÍONA HARMEY),

[WWW.VARIABLEMEDIA.ORG](http://www.variablemedia.org), 2002; FALKENS MAZE (SOUND INSTALLATION WITH DECAL), STRAYLIGHT FILM FESTIVAL, DUBLIN, 2002 AND AS PART OF THE DUO DECAL, A COLLABORATION WITH ALAN O'BOYLE FROM 1993 TO 2003.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY: [HTTP://ALPHA60.INFO](http://alpha60.info) BY DENNIS MCNULTY, BIZARRE, 2004; 404 NOT FOUND BY DECAL, PLANET-MU, 2002; LO-LITE BY DECAL, ULTRAMACK, 1998; ULTRAMACK 004 BY DECAL, ULTRAMACK, 1994.

FURTHER INFORMATION AT
[HTTP://DENNISMCNULTY.COM](http://dennismcnulty.com)

*CD design for <http://alpha60.info>
by Peter Mansbury Studio, Dublin*

TURN DOWN THE STAIRCASE

Dennis McNulty's sound installations by Brian Hand

At the base of the stairs he is seated at a desk. Looking down from above is an audience dispersed over three landings. On the table there is a laptop computer with a control board and a long lead to a microphone perched on a first floor window ledge over a busy street. Beneath the table is a mass of cables to amplifiers, mixing desks and a knotted bundle around a small sports radio. The software playing on the computer is MAX/MSP, a graphical programming language that can be used to create networks of information and commands. The graphic interface on the small screen has the appearance of a cybernetic flow chart. It is a constructed patch with discrete operating tasks which do a number of different things to a sound source/signal. The pitch can be altered, the interval of processing can be altered, and the envelope of a segment of sound can be adjusted. MAX/MSP is indiscriminate in what it will work with, sound is just information to a computer processor and information can just as easily become sound. This particular patch is symmetrically arranged not unlike a set of turntable decks: an instrument for two hands. The view from above creates an aesthetic distance to the performer on top of the equipment.

For this piece Dennis McNulty was performing with live recordings of street noises, and sampling small snippets of this social traffic. At the base of the stairs, the sounds start to ascend. Sound dissolves into sound, speed gathers and disperses. It flows from the laptop archive; the passing pedestrians and the manipulating live hands of the performer on the control board. The MAX/MSP programme does so much. Dennis McNulty does so much. The gathering pace of the Friday evening crowd in Dublin's Temple Bar does so much. Not to shrink from fully exploiting the potential of this performance the small FM radio pitches in to manipulate the information/sound flow with the aleatory variety of its broadcasts. The sound is processed over and over, folding in sweeps over moving sequences. There is variation, manual dexterity and computability.

On paper this scenario might sound dramatic but that adjective would be a misrepresentation of McNulty's work. The concentration or will of the piece is to steer a course away from drama into setting simple diagrammatic tasks that try to organize sounds in a particular space. For the audience in Temple Bar Gallery & Studios the active pleasures of the performance or sound installation are in the areas of listening, acoustics, and space perception. There are difficulties however with this in that it takes considerable concentration to appreciate the inherent qualities of sound effects-in-themselves and to change from our typical conditioned way of listening. The piece starts with recognizable sounds of the street, but starts to degenerate into complex textures after a few minutes. The audience on the night also starts to make considerable noise despite an initial request for silence.

McNulty is an artist who constructs unique performances in spaces that produce sound events or passages through improvisation. His live work is less a time-based reproduction of sound as

in a concert performance, and more of a spatial physical experience. From a small laptop he can make a seemingly never-ending amount of sound or noise, or noise becoming sound becoming noise. The multidimensional volumes of the spaces he creates installations for, frame the listening experience. The swirling sounds in the atrium stairwell document the acoustic signature of the space like a brass rubbing. The separation between the place of audition of the audience and McNulty, coupled with the dispersal of several sets of speakers in the corners over three floors, suggests that a totality of the live composition is incomplete or partial to both composer and audience. Members of the audience had the choice to actively traipse up and down the grey levels of the atrium to sample the multi-sonic effects. The specific boundaries of the gallery and studios with the busy world outside were chipped away at with dry broken rhythmic segments of processed sound.

Sound is a material temporal spatial phenomenon. It is only made sense of upon hearing or being detected by other mechanisms, yet we know it is ever present. There is no universal or transcendent point of audition. We imagine silence where it is not and we tend to repress the fact that we only hear certain frequencies; certain animals, for example, hear so much more. The sense of control that guides and structures our visual perception is not as keen with our aural senses. There are no eyelids for the ears and it is not typical for our culture to emphasise the power of hearing. An awareness of how sound exists and how it can be manipulated is a central skill of Dennis McNulty's practice. This practice is not an art world specific practice but more an art world related practice. It is significant that McNulty is something of an outsider to the art world, and that for the Temple Bar Gallery & Studios performance he chose to work on the stairs and landings as opposed to a studio or gallery space. It is also important to emphasise that his sound installations and sound projects are configured through site, medium and time specificity. McNulty's creative work is not restricted to galleries or indeed art world contexts; it also inhabits the fields of experimental music and technological research. While this is undoubtedly a political and aesthetic orientation, explicit political issues do appear in pieces like the Temple Bar Gallery & Studios performance, where direct contact was made between the small art audience inside the gallery and the volume of passing street crowds outside. A link not often dwelled upon by a contemporary art gallery.

Similarly in his video piece *Decompression*, exhibited in *The captain's road* – a group show that took place in a domestic house in a Dublin housing estate in 2002 – McNulty created a disorientating work that sampled and manipulated the live auditory stream of familiar daytime TV (again through a MAX/MSP patch). *Decompression* altered our perception of time as mapped by TV time, compressed time, structured time. The new frontier of digital TV may offer interactivity with search engines compiling individual viewing schedules but *Decompression* offered an immediate solution to unscrambling the scrambled time flow that governs most of our lives.



Atrium performance
documentation

Volume event, Temple
Bar Gallery & Studios,
Dublin, March 2004

Photography: Dennis
McNulty/Pios Kavanagh

In the work *Falkens maze*, exhibited at the *Straylight* show in 2003, sampled sounds from the kid's fantasy film *War games* (1983) were played into a very large disused wholesale supermarket. The samples were of the sonification of technology in this drama about war and hacking: telephones, dial tones, and computers. The sound appears in the space only upon certain acoustic conditions as 'understood' by a computer. The principle condition controlling the appearance of the selected sound effects in the cavernous space was the reverberation as monitored by the computer, when the volume of reverb and noise in the space fell to a certain threshold the unfolding sequence of sound effects from the film would appear. An audience making too much noise would be deprived of the listening experience; even the physical presence of warm bodies in the space affected the acoustics. Passive interaction was the response required for the delivery of the work. This is of course very different to the sound pacification of Muzak that typically controls the acoustics of supermarkets.

An important understanding of certain works is their live dimension. In the music world McNulty is respected for his improvised performances with David Lacey as well as with a number of other musicians including Keith Rowe. A guiding philosophy about this experimental work is that it must be heard live and that CD recordings are a poor substitute for appreciating the work. In essence the improvised happening is a unique event not to be repeated. This does however make a considerable demand on an audience with lazy habits. Sound work that is fixed in a (commodity) recording is composed of unique sound events that can be repeated and repeated by the listener until their depth and significance is fully known in what Pierre Schaefer describes as 'reduced listening'. As Michel Chion writes about Schaefer's theories, "reduced listening requires the fixing of sounds, which thereby acquire the status of objects".¹ In a live audience, reduced listening or listening to this specific objectification of sound (and its implicit commodification) is significantly challenged. Instead the listener is encouraged to be open to receiving the raw materials of sound in an exchange where the performer understands the difficulties for the audience of attention to abstract noise.

McNulty's appearance in São Paulo gives important recognition to this contemporary work/movement in Ireland. It also comes at a time when sound art is gaining greater audiences in the art world through a number of important sound art exhibitions. The reasons for the development of the emergence of practitioners working with sound in Ireland such as Dennis McNulty are multiple but two principle factors might be the increased availability of digital technology: the laptop, the internet and programmes such as MAX/MSP and an important graduate course in Music and Media Technologies at Trinity College Dublin (which McNulty attended some years ago). Graduates from this course (and others like it) have contributed to this new wave of art related practitioners engaged with sound.



*Atrium performance
documentation*

*Volume event, Temple
Bar Gallery & Studios,
Dublin, March 2004*

*Photography: Denis
McNulty/Ros Kavanagh*

The work of these individuals is not only creating new approaches to sound, composition and improvisation, they are also reinterpreting the tradition of experimentation in sound in the last fifty to a hundred years. In discussions and emails over this text Dennis McNulty has introduced me to many fragmentary sources on sound art and improvisation, for which I am very grateful as there is a poverty of published writing on sound installations, generally, as well as in Ireland. In one particular exchange he sent me a quote with an attached comment from an interview with David Tudor. In it Tudor describes his own approach to sound installation and the composition to which he first signed his name:

The first time was... in 1964 which was done at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and at that point I had not titled the piece. I titled it after that [*Fluorescent sound*]. It was done at the Festival for Modern Dance and Robert Rauschenberg who was doing a dance collaboration with Steve Paxton asked if I would do the music. I said yes and I walked around the museum and thought, 'what am I going to do?' I noticed that there were – it must have been – a thousand fluorescent light bulbs. One day I was in the room when someone was turning on the fluorescent lights and they didn't know which to turn on and all of a sudden there was the most beautiful music. I thought, 'OK, I'll put some contact microphones up there from the bulbs to see if the sound can be made really audible.' In these days the museum had only two large rooms. The room where the sound was beautiful was actually the foyer but the room I had to work in was the larger gallery and when I tried it there, it worked OK but less beautifully than in the other room. I think there were more light bulbs on the same switch in the large room which seemed to make a difference.²

To which Dennis McNulty observed: "Seems like the room beside 'the Gallery' has always been more interesting [for sound installations]."

¹ Michel Chion, *Audio-vision: sound on screen*, translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, NY, 1994, p. 30

² An interview with David Tudor by Teddy Hultberg, in Dusseldorf on May 17th and 18th, 1988, <http://www.emf.org/tudor/Articles/hultberg.html>

BRIAN HAND IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN THE BLACKSTAIRS MOUNTAINS, CO. CARLOW, IRELAND. HE HAS PUBLISHED ESSAYS ON A NUMBER OF ARTISTS INCLUDING NOEL SHERIDAN, ANNE TALLENTIRE, THOMAS HIRSHORN, COLIN DARKE AND SHIRLEY MACWILLIAM. HE FIRST WORKED WITH DENNIS McNULTY IN 1999 ON *C O B L I Q U E O*, A FILM BY THE ARTIST GROUP BLUE FUNK, IN MEMORY OF THE LATE EVELYN BYRNE. IN 2003, HE WAS CURATOR OF THE ARTS COUNCIL'S *CRITICAL VOICES 2* PROGRAMME AND EXHIBITED HIS MOST RECENT WORK IN THE GROUP SHOW *DEARCADH* AT KILMAINHAM GAOL MUSEUM, DUBLIN.

DESPERATE OPTIMISTS

SCREENINGS, SÃO PAULO:

SELECTED VENUES AND ONLINE AT WWW.DESPERATEOPTIMISTS.COM/CIVICLIFE

DESPERATE OPTIMISTS ARE JOSEPH LAWLOR AND CHRISTINE MOLLOY. THEY HAVE SHOWN DIGITAL VIDEO AND FILM WORK INTERNATIONALLY INCLUDING CATALOGUE AT TRANSMEDIALE 04: 'FLY UTOPIA', BERLIN, 2004; MAP50 AT TRANSMEDIALE-EXTENDED VOL 1, BIENNALE OF VIDEO AND NEW MEDIA, SANTIAGO DE CHILE, 2003; NIGHTTRIS AT 'WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?', FERENS ART GALLERY, HULL AND CORNERHOUSE, MANCHESTER, 2003; MAP50 IN 'ART OU RECIT ET NOUVELLES TECHNOLOGIES', 2002 AND STALKING MEMORY (A CD ROM INSERT) IN PERFORMANCE RESEARCH: 'ON MEMORY', EDS.

ADRIAN HEATHFIELD & ANDREW QUICK, VOL. 5, NO. 3, ROUTLEDGE: LONDON, 2000.

THEIR WORK IS INCLUDED IN THE FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION A.C.E. NEW MEDIA ART: PRACTICE AND CONTEXT IN THE UK 1994 - 2004, ARTS COUNCIL OF ENGLAND & CORNERHOUSE PUBLICATIONS: UK, 2004.

FURTHER INFORMATION AT
WWW.DESPERATEOPTIMISTS.COM

Catalogue image scans for Civic life: Moore Street by Lip Sync Post, London

The filming of Civic life: Moore Street was supported by Project Arts Centre, Dublin in partnership with the British Council in Ireland

OPENING SEQUENCE

It's not easy to argue with desperate optimists about cinema. Once they've decided that a movie is bad, they show no mercy. Out for the kill, they will take all the things that you thought you liked and rip them to shreds. Forget attempting a considered defense of critics' favourites such as Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko*, Takashi Miike's *Audition*, or the Coen brothers' *O brother, where art thou?* When their blood is up, Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy have no mercy. They abhor self-consciously quirky and off-beat indulgence, or performances and camerawork that are anything less than riveting. The best you might be able to squeeze out of them is, "there were a few good scenes", and that's if they're feeling generous.

I mention this by way of introduction, because the brutality of their criticism is partly one way in which they articulate how much they care about cinema. Film challenges and obsesses them. For Lawlor and Molloy it's the ultimate creative medium: "(the) central force of gravity throughout the twentieth century for artists". Robust enough to contain their myriad interests, while having the potential to create extraordinary experiences for audiences, it's hard for them not to be passionate about it.

And you know deep down, as they lambaste some accolade-drenched, flavour-of-the-month, that they are capable of being just as hard, if not more so, on themselves.

BACKSTORY

desperate optimists belong to a roughly defined generation of British 'live artists' in the 1990s, creating experimental performance for theatres. Lawlor and Molloy's work in this area was informed far more by filmic imagery, editing, and mise en scène than it was by the traditions of the stage. They used 'multi-media', peppered their text with film references, and frequently created moments that moved so far beyond the conventional framing of theatre, that they could only be described as 'cinematic'.

Their shift toward the moving image has been inflected by their theatre-making. Not only the 'live art' that they developed in the UK, but also their earlier experiences in Dublin's community theatre. It's this background that radically distinguishes them from other visual artist-cum-film-makers that have emerged in the last decade.

They work collaboratively. Frequently opening out their process to include other artists, schools and community groups. In these environments, they take the role of artistic and project directors – guiding and interrogating, encouraging and cajoling, rigorously and ruthlessly applying their self-described 'filter' to ideas and material.

LOCATION SHOT

They locate their work in real places. Most of their projects since 2000, have been firmly rooted within an area or linked multiple locations; always in cities, be it London, Hull, Dublin or Singapore.

This awareness of ‘civic space’ has increasingly underpinned their activities. Not only in setting, but also through the stories they tell. Restless, fragmented, humorous and edging towards violence, they express the complex feelings we have about public spaces in our cities.

These are defiantly not the official narratives, but rather the fictional (and occasionally real) voices of the hidden, marginalized and self-exiled. Characters whose relationship to space and property is always fragile and threatened.

For years, after leaving Ireland, Lawlor and Molloy had no permanent home, nomadically shifting between temporary locations. They have tactically retained that outsider sensibility. Listening to and telling stories about cities in order to root themselves somewhere. Drifting, stalking, *tracking*.

TRACKING SHOT

There are two main reasons why they have become compelled to work with extended takes and elongated tracking shots in their recent films.

It's a relatively straightforward and affordable way of making films. Editing is time-consuming and expensive. A lengthy, single shot may require immense choreography and planning, it may need to be shot several times, but once “CUT” has been yelled on a good take – the film is made.

It permanently captures real moments in real-time. The unflinching gaze of a shot that refuses to cut away is akin to the viewpoint of a live audience. An editing process can eliminate or hide mistakes within scenes shot from multiple set-ups. With extended, single takes, the moment has to stand for itself, imperfect, flawed – a kind of performance.

And then the act of creating that moment – the marshalling of camera, crew, actors, space and time – needs to be performed with the utmost precision and confidence – something that I think greatly appeals to Lawlor and Molloy. Then, their films become a spectral documentation of this *other* performance.



INTERIOR: BUS STATION: NIGHT

CATALOGUE
Website and DVD
2003

WHO KILLED
BROWN OWL?
Film, 35mm,
anamorphic, 9 minutes
2003

NIGHTBUS
DVD, Single screen,
50 minutes
2002

For *Nightbus* (2002), Molloy and Lawlor shot during the 'dead zone', pre-dawn shift at three bus stations in Hull, Nottingham and London. A repeated narrative at each location. Loners, separated lovers and a gang of ludicrously fancy-dressed reprobates stalk around de-populated, neon lit spaces delaying an inevitable confrontation.

The DV camera glides along with the figures, movement smoothed out by Steadicam. The extended nature of the takes gives the setting and the cast (teenage volunteers from local youth groups) an ominous, haunted quality.

It's a technique that intensifies the malevolent potential of space, generates quickening suspense from corners, deserted phone-boxes and abandoned bus lanes.

EXTERIOR: A STREET IN LONDON: TWILIGHT

This sense of lurking darkness beneath banal and desolate surfaces, is developed further in *Catalogue* (2003), a DVD and web-based project, which presents an alternative to London's 'A to Z'. Twenty-six back-streets, side-roads, untended avenues and neglected lanes, seemingly picked for their evocative names (Crucifix Lane, Xylon Road) are documented in silent single-takes. For each location a story is told, parallel to the journey, in subtitles. Traffic is supernaturally absent. No actors here, just real people, walking, hanging around, unwittingly casting themselves in the narratives that unfold between the white text and the moving image.

When you first engage with *Catalogue*, the stories appear blackly comic – sardonic tales of anger, revenge and the scuppered dreams of illegal immigrants, suicidal entrepreneurs, broke pensioners, disillusioned security guards, but gradually, as we are forced to look, for one time only, at routes which are fixtures in so many daily lives, the work gathers an accumulative power. Evoking the way that indelible memories of intense experiences are often welded to the most innocuous of places.

EXTERIOR: A RIVERBANK: DAY

It's a sunny day in the English countryside. Strains of elegiac classical music fade up on the soundtrack, as a camera begins to gently move along a riverbank gradually revealing an elaborate tableau.

The crane shot feels fundamentally different to the Steadicam, a different point-of-view physically and emotionally, we are enjoying this spectacle with a certain omnipotent detachment.

Burnt sunbathers, beer-drinking kids, an abandoned baby, a rabbit in a boat, a bicycle accident. In *Who killed Brown Owl?* (2003), the perfect English arcadia gives way to varying kinds of misfortune, disruption and violence.

Finally, the unveiling of the mystery which gives the film its title – the fresh corpse of the 'brownie' leader, surrounded by her strangely subdued charges, one of whom has the grimly satisfied expression of a murderer, another who glances momentarily at the lens – a second killer, momentarily destroying the illusion that the camera is invisible.

This was the best and last take of the day; no chance to return. The long tracking shot is always a risk, and perfection is virtually impossible to achieve. It's also not necessarily what Lawlor and Molloy are searching for. "Every second you shoot without cutting the riskier it becomes", Molloy states, "The more prone to failure and retake. It's not surprising therefore that the history of long takes is fraught with mistakes and slightly sloppy edges."

They have done their homework; poring over film history before making their own, and arriving to this conclusion: "it's the roughness, the rawness and the lack of perfection in the shoot that we really like."

INTERIOR: A CINEMA: EVENING

35 mm is a format that, despite the advance of digital video, still sustains a certain awe. To work with it successfully is to somehow channel the great deities of film history, and to invoke a grand tradition of cinematic spectacle.

It also opens up possibilities for exhibiting in cinemas. Films in galleries play to a drifting audience. desperate optimists would prefer to have their audiences rapt in the dark in what Lawlor describes as an "infinitely more focused space", rather than wandering away amidst the visual noise of the gallery.

It also seriously ups the stakes. An audience watching a film in an auditorium, cannot help but compare the experience to other movies, whether it's Kiarostami or Spielberg. So the work not only demands production values, but a more sophisticated awareness of the viewer's rhythms of attention.

Lawlor and Molloy are exploring the mechanics and effects of *cinema*, as opposed to the ceaseless flow of television, or even the trend of short, narrative film-making that superficially reproduces cinematic style. Rather, they are going deeper into the elements that make the medium unique and distinct unto itself, the ways that image, sound and editing are combined to build texture, form, ideas and emotions.

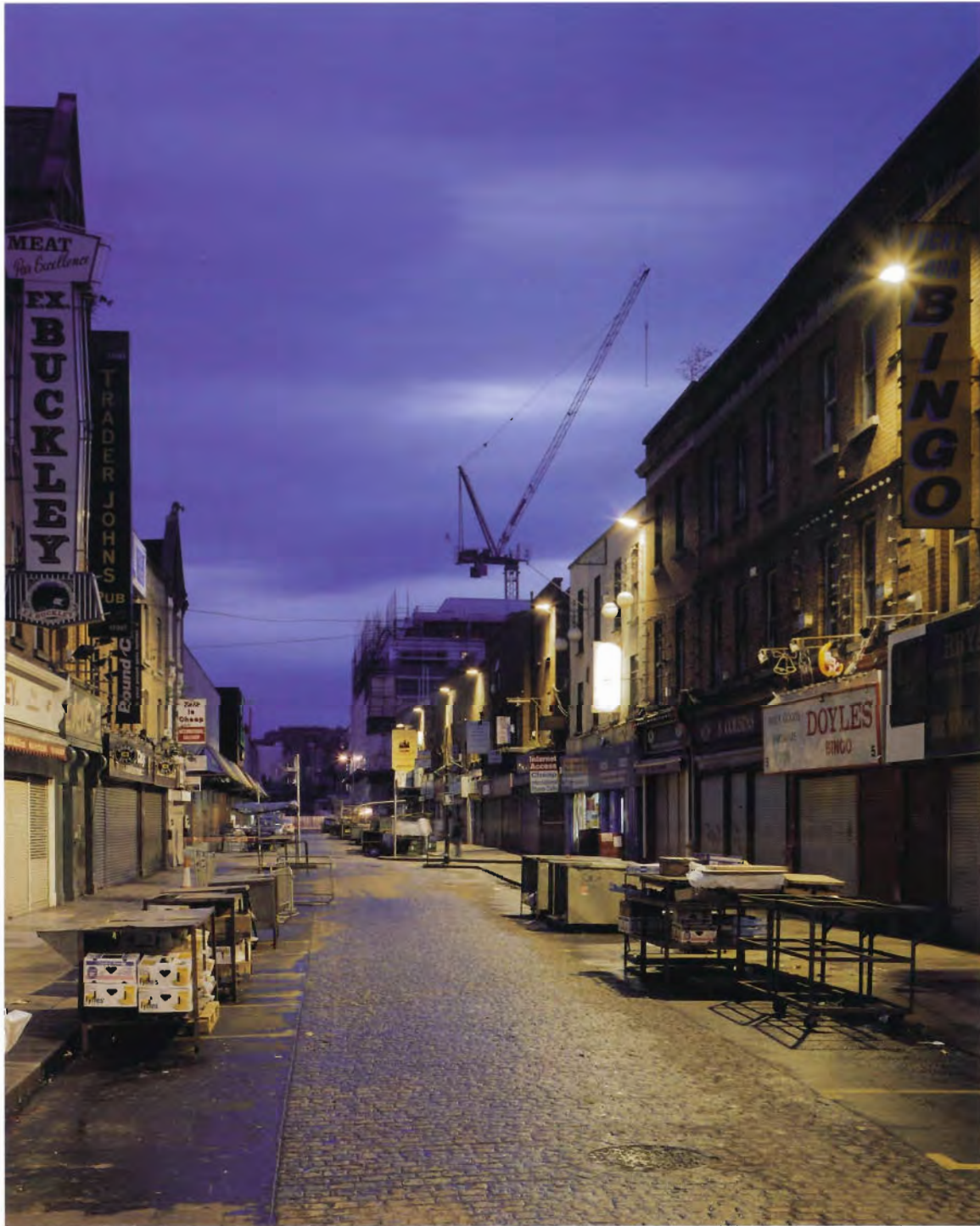
THE MAGIC HOUR

Lawlor and Molloy email me a photograph of Moore Street in Dublin where they plan to shoot the film to be exhibited in São Paulo. Taken at twilight (the time known to cinematographers as 'The Magic Hour'), in the background a crane, and some half-finished modern buildings slip into view. The foreground shows the old street – rows of shops and businesses, the remains of market stalls on the pavement. Signs offer Chinese and Nigerian food, fresh meat, bingo and cheap long-distance calls.

The film, a return to their home town, will be an exploration of this contemporary Ireland, in which layers of immigrant culture, a new kind of globalised modernity, are built upon the fabric of the existing city.

All this is rich material for Lawlor and Molloy. The street encompasses their fascination for changing urban terrains, *and* it's a tracking shot waiting to happen. They will use it to delve deeper thematically and formally into what cinema does; how it reflects upon and (re)constructs both real and fictional places. The dialogue desperate optimists are having about cinema, cities, people, spaces and stories will continue long after night has fallen and the light has faded.

BEN SLATER IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND CURATOR. A CO-EDITOR OF ENTROPY, A MAGAZINE COVERING EXPERIMENTAL ART AND CULTURE IN THE LATE 90S, HE THEN PROGRAMMED FILM AND FILM-RELATED EVENTS FOR THE CUBE IN BRISTOL, WHILE WRITING FOR VARIOUS NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS. AFTER JOINING THE SHOWROOM IN SHEFFIELD, HIS INTEREST IN DIGITAL FILM LED HIM TO WORK CLOSELY WITH LOVEBYTES, BRITAIN'S LONGEST RUNNING DIGITAL ARTS FESTIVAL. HE IS CURRENTLY BASED IN SINGAPORE WHERE HE IS THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE COUNTRY'S FIRST AND ONLY NEW MEDIA ARTS FESTIVAL, *THE YEAR OF LIVING DIGITALLY*.



Film location test shot
Moore Street, Dublin,
April 2004

#Stobography: Rois Kieranagh

The first Bienal de São Paulo was held in 1951. Founded by the Italian-born entrepreneur Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, it was modelled on the Biennale di Venezia. Originally organized by the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM), in 1962 the Bienal was separated from MAM and transformed into a foundation. Having increased greatly in scale, the 4th Bienal was moved to the immense Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion designed by Oscar Niemeyer at Ibirapuera Park. Ireland first participated in 1985 and again in 1994. Since then, Ireland has been a constant participant at the Bienal de São Paulo.

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