

Who Can Fail

by Cherry Smyth

At the recent Artivism Conference organised by the London University of the Arts, artist David Cross (of Cornford and Cross) included in his slide show of works two proposals that were refused funding and never produced. Both were public art projects, one of which proposed to hoist three national flags from countries with whom Britain had severed diplomatic relations, on the roof of a public building in Liverpool. As the audience viewed 'The Ambassadors' slide showing the imposing façade of the building and the three bare flagpoles against the sky, the unmade project came alive in that room. It no longer depended on being realised to exist.

Cross's performative appropriation of failure released tremendous energy in the audience. What artist present had not invested a huge part of their identity in an artwork only to experience its rejection as a personal rejection and shamefully bury the idea? For Louise Bourgeois, this is where to begin: 'First you have to conceptualise what you want to do; you have to have an idea. The idea... comes from a failure somewhere, a failure of power.' (1)

In many ways, public art itself continues to fail the public it addresses, and yet continues to question art's function and responsibility beyond the white cube. Any art offered to the non-gallery public is exposed to the multiple, conflicting interests of cash, location, space, access, permission, property, ownership, heritage, function, aesthetics, politics, liability, durability, ephemerality, identification, distrust, vulnerability and love. Its delight springs from its ability to catch the spectator unawares, netting them in a surprise relationship. Therein also lurks the paradox. While public art strives to be non-elitist and inclusive, it risks reiterating elitism through public hostility and indifference.

Artists make something out of nothing until they need funding, and then more often than not, make proposals towards something that remains nothing. As Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested: 'Propositions represent the existence and the non-existence of states of affairs.'(2) Funding proposals become their own entities, developing a personality and direction to fit the funder's remit. For public art, these remits intensify considerably.

'An artist is the one who can fail and fail and still go on,' wrote Agnes Martin (3), the American painter, who spent most of her life withstanding disappointment. Failure drives the engine of this 'No Respect' exhibition: each artist has been invited to respond to a public artwork that failed to fully materialise in Ireland and propose one of their own that plays with ideas of elusiveness and temporality. Public art remains provisional until it is installed. Provisionality is the heartbeat of my essay, since, until now, only the artist's propositions exist.

The work of English artists, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan, interrogates the function of art in the public realm. Former projects have traced how commercial culture has been repackaged as public art: for example the decorative iron gates we've all seen securing high income housing apartments, designed by a 'local artist'. Their interventions problematise the way public art has been co-opted as a marketing windfall in the rush to regenerate post-industrial cities. A billboard installed in a rebranded area of Sheffield read: 'The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property.'

In 1977, 'Wrap-Stars', Jeanne-Claude and Christo, proposed wrapping a section of the path through St Stephen's Green in yellow tarpaulin (pictured left). 'Walk Ways' failed to win approval of the Office of Public Works, but the preparatory drawings and list of materials were displayed recently at IMMA. In researching the 'Walk Ways' proposal, Hewitt and Jordan unearthed the hidden negotiations between the public bodies and the artists. They were astonished to discover that Jeanne-Claude and Christo didn't seem concerned that the folded fabric may have been hazardous to the elderly using the park and simply assured the OPW officials that they had worldwide public indemnity. This apparent disregard for the function of 'Walk Ways' is the nub of Hewitt and Jordan's proposal, which they conceived as an integral social activity rather than something imposed for the spiritual betterment of the user/spectator.

Situated on a section of path intended for Jeanne-Claude and Christo's project, Hewitt and Jordan propose a reconstructed 'Bench' which will carry engraved texts detailing the clash of public art and private use. Hewitt and Jordan's memorialising

bench will invoke the 'deceased' 'Walk Ways' project, while providing a practical place for contemplation and inverting the spectacle of Jeanne-Claude and Christo's large gestural work. Since the bench will still be utilised, Hewitt and Jordan will not force the public to engage and will make the failed 'Walk Ways' re-inhabit the space differently, more critically.

(Ironically, New York City has just approved the installation of 'The Gates', Jeanne-Claude and Christo's proposal for Central Park in February 2005, estimating that the spectacle will generate \$72-136 million in economic output and boost the city's damaged profile.)

Karen Henderson is a Scottish artist whose previous work suggests her concerns with space, entry and boundaries with titles such as: 'Shed Folly', 'Stable Door', 'Fence', 'Lap Pool' and 'Driveway'. Her sculptural pieces intervene in an already determined space - an office atrium, a gallery in a house, a garden. Architectural motifs like doors, shutters, mirrors invite the viewer to re-view a particular space or view and thus become actively integrated into it and its mode of display. Permission to touch, to alter perspectives is built into much of her practice, highlighting terms of negotiation and interaction. The spectator is encouraged to rearrange the visual codes and thus question their role and inclusion in everyday urban architecture.

Henderson has been invited to respond to Richard Serra's embedded steel artwork situated outside the Guinness Brewery Hopstore (pictured above). Mimicking the disused tramlines on the street, Serra's work is a straight line of steel that bends sharply in on itself making an open-ended triangular form. Installed in the early 1980s, Serra subsequently disowned the piece, claiming that it failed to meet his requirements. Later, his 'Tilted Arc', (pictured right) commissioned for the Federal Plaza outside New York's FBI building, became synonymous with debates about public art after eight years of massive public disapproval won its removal in 1989. Serra was accused of elitist disregard of a public who argued that the 120 foot wall of self-rusting steel prevented them using the Plaza.

Working in direct antithesis to Serra, Henderson will erect a transient, prop-like stud wall inside the

windows of the Civic Offices of Dublin City Council titled 'Shutters'. The wall will be hinged with fluorescent orange shutters faced with mirrored acrylic that will allow the passer-by or employee to reposition the shutters and thereby alter the view in and out of the building. By highlighting notions of accountability in the Council itself through what is revealed and concealed, Henderson aims to politicise the formal aesthetic of minimalism. Unlike the imposing durability of Serra's works, Henderson's embraces temporality and a confused functionality. Henderson hopes that the interaction of the local people who use the entrance as an unofficial bus shelter will question the Council's transparency and the accessibility of the building itself. Given the power to become integral to the work, what will the active participant do?

Irish artist Vanessa O'Reilly's work often consists of a series of proposals that adapt strategically to the public site she chooses. She draws with graphite direct on gallery walls and uses video, sound installation and sculpture to challenge ideals of public art in civic space. O'Reilly is concerned with how we observe any given object and its representation. In 'Premises', she drew two 'identical' drawings of stills from cult classics like 'Stalker' and 'Pulp Fiction' to highlight their theatricality and composition in space and time and the failure of the filmic gaze to address the emotion of viewing space.

Fittingly, O'Reilly has been asked to respond to Ludwig Wittgenstein (pictured left, house designed by Wittgenstein in Vienna below). One of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, Wittgenstein spent three years in Dublin, Wicklow and Galway from 1947. In her installation 'record/release' in a book store, O'Reilly will use sound recording and a video, filmed in the style of CCTV, to echo Wittgenstein's pioneering thinking. She hopes to relate the idea of harmonious space and proportion to the notion that everything is subject to a mathematical definable logic.

In 'Philosophical Investigations', completed in Ireland, and published posthumously, Wittgenstein wrote, 'Observing does not produce what is observed.' (4) 'His work is open and empty,' says Vanessa. 'You can apply anything to it - like my work which is variable and re-worked and extended through different media. I once tried to discover why I drew still life and it ended up being much more about the object than the drawing, so now my work is more sculptural.' Dogged by failure in his lifetime, Wittgenstein only published one work. In the introduction to 'Philosophical Investigations', he lamented that 'after several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into a... whole, I realised that I should never succeed... the philosophical remarks... are... a number of sketches of landscapes... made in the course of

these long and involved journeyings.' Naming his book 'an album' suits the conceptual processes that O'Reilly undergoes to produce what is seen and the representation of the seen.

In 1989, American artist James Turrell was commissioned to create an elaborate series of outdoor rooms and networked passageways (called 'Sky Spaces' by the artist) in the gardens of Liss Ard, a County Cork estate. Inspired by the landscape and its Neolithic sites, construction of The Irish Sky Garden (pictured below) started in 1992, but was later abandoned, and the project eventually disowned by Turrell. Irish artist Ronan McCrea has based his sound installation 'Voice over' on the text by German critic, Oliver Wick, written for a book celebrating the Irish Sky Garden that never (fully) was. (5)

Promising 'an inner adventure' in language that is grandiose, sentimental and aspirational, Wick goes where Turrell's work conscientiously avoids. Regardless of the rigours of the meteorological real, Wick's sky is envisioned as 'the vault of heaven so perfect', 'crystal clear and of flawless beauty' as Ireland is mythologised into a paradise, which no-one could leave without a painful melancholy. In Wick's romantic didacticism, there is no room for the fractured spectator, the alienated urban visitor, the participant who is hostile to what Wick calls Turrell's 'natural' interaction with landscape in all its 'naturalness'. Those who 'do not find the Absolute within reach', will have failed to experience the garden, and Ireland itself, as they should. Ireland becomes an enormous piece of land art, conceptualised and sold as a unifying, majestic experience for the perfect spectator.

McCrea has rewritten Wick's text in two versions: the past and future tense. A recording was made of Fiona Richardson reading both new versions in a authoritative 'inter-pretative centre voice-over' style. Both recordings were then carefully synchronised on the left and right speakers of the final audio track, creating an echoing stereo effect whereby the flow of two voices is disrupted by grammatical tense changes. Standing between the left and right speakers, one is left standing between past and future, creating simultaneously an elegiac review and a wistful promise, of an event that never happened. The dissonance between the dingy setting of Tangier Lane, leading appropriately to the stage door of the Gaiety Theatre, will emphasise the gap between the imagined experience and the problematic status of the failed project.

Oreet Ashery is an interdisciplinary artist who disrupts gender and cultural dichotomies in powerful work that relies on social contact. Through street interventions as alter ego Marcus Fisher, Ashery adopts the cultural drag of an orthodox, Hassidic man, taking him into secular

and religious spaces and so giving herself rare access to male-only sites. This theme of exclusion/inclusion threads through her practice. In her video, 'Why Do You Think I Left?', 2001, she asks members of her family in Israel to frame answers to her emigration to London. Loss, cross-generational attitudes to Israel and unsaid conflicts reside at the centre of the piece.

Ashery's video, 'It's Been a Long Time', has been conceived in response to Belgian artist Chantal Ackerman's (pictured right) film 'News From Home', 1976, in which a daughter living in New York City reads out letters from her mother in Europe. The letters are never answered. Imagining what Ackerman might address if re-making this video in Dublin in 2004, Ashery's initial proposal was to place herself in a travel agent and ask visitors to write letters to those who left Dublin. However, after a visit to Dublin she decided to explore the disjunction between home and exile in a more personal or individualistic way. Her film centres around a world expert on clematis flowers and plants, Dr Mary Toomey, who immigrated to Dublin from Sri-Lanka in the 1960's. Ashery discovered her through an article in a national newspaper on her first visit to Dublin. The article describes how in 1999 her daughter left to live in America, as she had become increasingly tired of racial slurs. Ashery became engrossed by this contemporary story in relation to Ackerman's film and tracked Dr Toomey down asking her to write a letter to her daughter. Documenting aspects of Dublin's changing ethnic demography, Ashery hopes to offer this and other stories of the city, of loss and displacement. The resulting video will be played in the travel agency.

Joseph Beuys' expanded view of art and creativity which he termed Social Sculpture was a bid to reach an alternate politics within the context of the Cold War world. As a way of exploding the rubrics of performance into a discursive zone with broad social implications he developed the concept for a Free International University. Ireland was briefly considered as a site for this project which was never fully realised. However during Documenta 6 in 1977 there were a series of workshops under this title over the 100 days of the exhibition. The events included trade unionists, lawyers, economists, politicians, journalists, community workers, educationalists, women's groups and sociologists who joined actors, musicians and young artists in various workshops.

The 'One Hundred Days of the Free International University' incorporated Beuys' (pictured right) own unself-conscious mode of curating in which discursive explorations were facilitated to those in attendance. Ultimately though, it is questionable whether Beuys' expanded notion of the artist - 'everyone is an artist', inadvertently validates the very structures of power and administration

which he saw as problematic. Furthermore, Beuys' object-work is utterly curatable and collectable in conventional terms, a factor which obfuscates his political potential. His use of myth and pan-celticism adds a veneer of exoticism and universalism to the situation, the potency of which offers the dealer, collector and the curator a value-added imperative to proceed unaffected by any politics.

Alan Phelan and Jane Speller, the curators for this exhibition who also work as artists, have proposed to explore this troubled legacy of Beuys by re-staging elements of the FIU around Trinity College via leaflets, posters and flyers. These 'Lessons' will be distributed in an around the college campus notice boards, offering free advice on a variety of cultural, social and political issues referencing the original range of participants and concerns.

The uncertainty and risk of failure of this group exhibition present its most exciting challenge. Gallery art has largely a self-selecting audience. Public art is more vulnerable to unpredictability, ridicule, neglect. By framing the venture with the rubric of failure and ephemerality, the curators have focused on aspects of public art that have often been ignored or downplayed. The permission to fail releases a forgiving optimism, famously celebrated by Walter Benjamin in 'Some Reflections on Kafka': 'To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure....' (6)

(1) Louise Bourgeois, 'Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father', Violette Editions, 2000, p.131

(2) Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Tractatus Logico-philosophicus', 4.1

(3) Agnes Martin, 'Writings', Cantz, 1992, p.93

(4) Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophical Investigations', Blackwell, 1953, ix. p.187e

(5) Oliver Wick, 'Gardening the Sky/Am Himmel Gärtnern', (translation: Dr. Hilary Heltay) in James Turrell, 'The Irish Sky Garden', Turske Hue-Williams Ltd, in collaboration with the Liss Ard Foundation, 1992

(6) Walter Benjamin, 'Illuminations', Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968