

RESIDENCY

Light: The Arts Council – 60 Years of Supporting the Arts

Bridget O'Gorman *All Places Are Distant From Heaven Alike* (video still)Jennie Moran, *Hot Furniture*, 2012, Workman's Boatclub, ClonmelJoanna Billings, *This is how we walk on the moon*, 2007, DVD, 27.20 min / loop

Language That Tells

BRIDGET O'GORMAN PROFILES 'DIG WHERE YOU STAND', A YEAR-LONG RESIDENCY-BASED PROJECT THAT TOOK PLACE IN SOUTH TIPPERARY.

"It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature."¹

IN an essay from 1951, Martin Heidegger explores the etymology of the word *buan* or *bauen*. He maintains that in Old English and High German the true meaning of this word, belonging to the imperative form *bis* – to be or to build, is really 'to dwell' – "this signifies: to remain, to stay in a place".² The philosopher intimates that the very nature of being is rooted in the earth below us. What can be found in raising questions about location, its history and the significance of evolving or forgotten languages? These were some of the themes investigated by South Tipperary curators-in-residence Eilís Lavelle, Sarah Lincoln and Rosie Lynch through their curatorial residency project entitled 'Dig Where You Stand'.

Initiated in 2011 by Sally O'Leary and The South Tipperary County Council Arts Service, the goal of the residency was to create a platform whereby the curator would "engage imaginatively with the public and local communities, developing a new approach to the commissioning and presentation of visual arts within a local context, while maintaining a critically challenging environment for a contemporary art exhibition of national and international status".³ The curatorial team was appointed after three stages of an advertised open submission competitive process that included submitting a project proposal, shortlisting and interview.

The projects total budget was €19,000. €13,788.20 (72.5% of the budget) was allocated for artists' fees and production costs for the reading events and publication. The balance covered curators' fees, expenses and administration. The South Tipperary County Council Art Service, The Arts Council of Ireland and the Department for the Environment, Community and Local Government funded the project under the Percent for Art scheme.

This ambitious task was undertaken with conviction, sensitivity and spirit by the selected residency team. It was their aspiration that "the visual arts speak in strong and original ways to a locale, and strengthen a sense that inspiration does not have to reside elsewhere, but exists in latent form under one's feet".⁴ The result of this enquiry unfolded gradually throughout 2012, taking the form of a series of reading groups, an exhibition and a publication.

As one of the artists commissioned to make work as part of the project and a native of South Tipperary, I was excited about the prospect of re-discovering the well-known terrain of my birthplace as a site for inspiration or new, potentially enriching dialogues. This was fortified through a series of reading groups initiated through the residency at various venues throughout South Tipperary over the following months. Poised at the core of these gatherings was a subtle balance of elements: a connection between place, text, film, artwork and those individuals present. The selection of site and material were often charged one against the other – the context allowing each to be viewed imaginatively and in a different light.

In March 2012, the Workmen's Boatclub in Clonmel hosted the first of these events, featuring artist Jennie Moran's *Hot Furniture* and a screening of Joanna Billings' *This Is How We Walk On The Moon*. The latter is a film that documents the story of a group of musicians who are invited to a coastal area in Scotland to be taught how to sail. This narrative of working and learning together somehow set the tone for

gatherings to come – which involved engaging with often challenging historical and philosophical texts, to share alternative perspectives, to navigate a way forward.

Headed by Sarah Lincoln, this journey took us to the Bolton Library in Cashel for our next meeting, where we looked at excerpts from Walter Benjamin's *A Thesis on the Philosophy of History* and Jan Verwoert's *The Crisis of History*. According to political theorist John Keane, "crisis periods... prompt awareness of the crucial importance of the past for the present. As a rule, crises are times during which the living do battle for the hearts, minds and souls of the dead".⁵ Considering the seemingly hopeless destruction of the twenty-first century and the fallout after the economic catastrophe in 2008, there began to emerge a sense that this kind of meditation or supposition might somehow be cathartic in finding ways to face our future. Sitting among the vitrines of ancient manuscripts and artefacts, our discourse led us to consider the potential value in uncovering silent historical moments or the importance of finding new ways of articulating our past. Verwoert argues that such 'speculative histories'⁶ could provide us with "a counter narrative to the big epic narratives"⁷ and that this could somehow lend us a more realistic or balanced version of ourselves.

Verwoert's concept of 'theatrical gesture' provided an apt foundation for our next gathering at a movie theatre in Tipperary town in April.⁸ Congregating in this space, one that is used traditionally to transport us to fictional realms or to provide an escape from everyday life, we read through extracts from Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* and Alan Weisman's *Earth Without People*. We focused on "the potential utopias and the genre of science fiction... in helping to re-vivify our imaginings of the future" and these texts led us to contemplate the role of the imagination, desire and creative freedom in activating real change for the future.⁹

While artist and writer Sarah Lincoln investigated a text and related publication, curators Eilís Lavelle and Rosie Lynch were formulating how 'Dig Where You Stand' might exist through the structure of an exhibition. The resulting four-person show featured work by both Irish and international artists and diverse approaches to talking about the progression of time, its residual effect and how this can be used to question the present moment.

The exhibition was housed within the South Tipperary County Museum and was also titled 'Dig Where you Stand' (6 July – 28 September 2012); it pertinently incorporated the adjoining museum collection. Philippa Sutherland (Ireland) created a series of thoughtful interventions within the museum, placing found objects and artworks throughout the display and alongside specifically selected artefacts. The exhibition also presented poignant archival recordings of the only remaining speakers of a series of extinct or endangered languages in *The Last Silent Movie* (2007) by Susan Hiller (UK). Through lens-based media Swiss artist Uriel Orlow explores multiple perspectives of an incident on the Suez Canal in 1967, resulting in a fleet of cargo vessels being marooned there for eight years. *Yellow Limbo* (2011) and *Anatopism* (2011) are indicative of Orlow's practice – researching quiet yet significant details in history that might otherwise remain hidden in a blind spot.

My contribution to the exhibition consisted of a metaphorical

excavation of the structure and contents of the Bolton Library situated on the grounds of Cashel Cathedral, where we had congregated in April for one of the 'Dig Where You Stand' reading groups. I returned to the county in 2011, having spent much of my previous adult life developing a practice elsewhere. Although the Bolton Library was a place I had grown up only a few miles down the road from, until now it had remained unknown territory for me.

All Places Are Distant From Heaven Alike takes its title directly from Robert Burton's 1621 exploration of depression (often deemed 'the twenty-first-century disease') in *The Anatomy Of Melancholy*. Exploring the library and its surrounds, the work was created out of ideas of human resilience, of past knowledge, epochs and their relevance today. The video reveals medieval manuscripts and bound literature preserved and entombed in a silent space. The piece alternates between imagery of the interior of the library, a place of reflection or stasis and the continuous movement of life outside in the exterior graveyard: views of open skies at dawn, cathedral structures pointing heavenward over earthy tombstones, dewy foliage, birdsong and insects. In the seventeenth century, Burton posited the notion that we as human beings are always searching for a 'greater other' an imagined place, rather than simply being happy in our immediate surroundings. A first edition volume of this work in Old English is housed within the Bolton Library, as part of a unique and little known collection of antiquarian books collected by Archbishop Theophilus Bolton from 1730 – 1744. The collection also includes pivotal works by Machiavelli, Dante, Swift and Erasmus. It was the Archbishop's stipulation that these books should never be moved from Cashel.

The project was prevented from becoming an esoteric discourse through the willingness and generosity of the people of South Tipperary to facilitate and engage with 'Dig Where You Stand', as well as the curators who fostered those new connections. While aspects of the project were transient, the resulting publication exists as lasting evidence of this multi-faceted collaboration. This is reinforced through an additional text by curator / writer Sean O'Sullivan, who also worked closely and intuitively with the 'Dig Where You Stand' team in its design and realisation.

On a final meeting in July we gathered on the shores of Bay Lough in The Vee. The purpose was to share ideas about the place and also to launch this book. My memory and imagination was reignited once again as Philippa Sutherland read a local folk story about the area that I had heard often from my grandmother as a child.

I grew up close to this place on a farm where the physical act of digging, to cultivate the soil or in the retrieval of food was a commonplace activity. Albeit a different kind of 'unearthing', the opportunity to contribute to 'Dig Where You Stand' brought with it a renewed sense of purpose to my returning here – to work in my native county this time as an artist. This was what felt like a serendipitous offering, a chance as Heidegger puts it, 'to remain, to stay in a place'.

Bridget O'Gorman is a visual artist based in Cork and Tipperary.
www.digwhereyoustand.com

Notes

1. M Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' 1951 in A Hofstadter (translated from German) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971, Harper Colophon Books, New York
2. M Heidegger, 1951
3. S O'Leary, 2012, 'Introduction' in S Lincoln (ed), *Dig Where You Stand*, South Tipperary County Council, Tipperary
4. Eilís Lavelle, Sarah Lincoln, Rosie Lynch *Dig Where You Stand* statement, 2012
5. C Lorenz, 2010 'Unstuck In Time', in K Tilmans, F Van Vree F and Jay Winter (ed) *Performing The Past – Memory, History & Identity in Modern Europe*, Amsterdam University Press
6. J Verwoert, 2006 'The Crisis of History' in T Joyce and S Steiner (ed), *Cork Caucus: on art, possibility and democracy*, Revolver / National Sculpture Factory, Cork
7. J Verwoert, 2006
8. *Ibid*
9. S Lincoln, *Dig Where You Stand*, 2012, South Tipperary County Council, Tipperary