

SEMINAR

A&E: ANALYSE AND EXPERIMENT

SEÁN O SULLIVAN, A BOARD MEMBER OF THE BLACK CHURCH PRINT STUDIO, DUBLIN, REPORTS ON A&E, AN ONGOING SERIES OF PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS ORGANISED BY THE STUDIO.



Sam Keogh hanging his paintings during A&E, 7 February 2011.



An audience member inspects work by Sam Keogh, A&E, 7 February, 2011.



An image presented by Sofie Loscher during the second A&E, 7 February 2011.

THE Black Church Print Studio⁽¹⁾ first opened its doors in 1982. Today, it occupies a five storey repurposed clothing factory with both Monster Truck Gallery and Temple Bar Gallery and Studios. It is a place where the oldest printmaking methods, such as etching and lithography can easily cohere with new developments in photo-reprographics and computer-aided design.⁽²⁾ The studio is a fully communal space; it has 70 full-time members and operates a public programme that includes international residencies, night classes and technical demonstrations. The challenges presented by working in a shared space are naturally offset by a really meaningful value in the friendships that come from working closely alongside others. Members share acid baths, ultraviolet lights and an inkjet printer the length of a Mini.

In the later months of 2010, many of the artists who work in the Black Church Print Studio had expressed an interest in forming a peer-critique project. This came from a desire to have a greater deal of skill-sharing and critical engagement with one another – the studio is full of people who master very distinct processes and skills. We were further motivated by a feeling that we worked together every day, but knew very little about one another's practices.

In October, a group of 10 Black Church Print Studio artists met to plan the project that would become A&E, a regularly occurring critical seminar programme. We were quickly in agreement that the discussions should be publicly open, and would make a strong effort to address fields outside of printmaking. Our planned structure was roughly that we would invite artists, writers and curators to discuss their work publicly, amongst their peers, and that an invited moderator would keep the discussion in flow. It was agreed that Colin Martin, Mary A. Fitzgerald and I would manage the project, and select its contributors. My notes from that October recall a multitude of discussions where we wondered how to best run our programme without a budget, although I expect that we weren't the only ones in Ireland asking that particular question.

The first A&E took place on 6 December 2010. Our neighbours in

Monster Truck Gallery kindly agreed to host it in their gallery, which sits at street-level in Temple Bar and has an impressively large front window. Colin Martin and I presented our own work, while Pallas Projects co-founder Brian Duggan acted as moderator. The two conversations lasted for a combined 90 minutes.

Colin Martin showed a selection of short films that he had completed during his MFA at NCAD. Each one was a crisply coloured, slow take that hovered through a very large open space: a film studio's sound stage, the National Museum of Ireland as it looked under refurbishment, and across a rural wooden footbridge. The audience were interested in discussing Colin Martin's process of shifting his print work into film. I presented a short set of line drawings that I had been working on for nearly two years. These hypothesised a reconstruction of the Sumerian Ziggurat at Ur – an ancient religious structure that predated the pyramids. Brian Duggan peppered the conversation with suggestions and challenges; he suggested that I go to Iraq and visit the ruined monument for myself – I haven't done that yet. I think it's outside of the green zone.

Eight weeks later, the second session of A&E had been organised and publicised. This time, attendance rose from 20 in December to a now quite substantial 50. It featured artists Sofie Loscher and Sam Keogh, and was moderated by Clodagh Emoe.

Sofie Loscher had prepared 11 photographs of her readymade sculptures; these images were reproduced in a large projection, near to 15 feet across. Loscher uses materials such as magnetic ferrofluids and checkout till rolls, manipulating them into a state of structural flux. She took care to emphasise her focus on the process of actually making the work, on the acts of constant repetition that characterise her practice. Clodagh Emoe was quick to highlight the significance of the artist's chosen materials, and the objects' serene setting when they were photographed.

During a project residency in Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, Sofie Loscher had started unravelling till rolls, removing their

cardboard core and rolling them back up tightly with a hemispheric protrusion from their top. To complement this work, she showed photographs that she had taken of geological activity in Iceland – a geyser that was just ready to burst upwards; it had formed a swollen bulb, and in the following photograph, broke upwards into an explosive column of steam and water.

Sam Keogh arrived with a suitcase bursting at the edges with paintings and sculptures, and knotted closed with a scarf. He had taken the prospect of peer-critique quite literally and thus dispensed with the projector.

Keogh took our chairs and asked that the group stand around the room in a circle. Once everyone was in place, he walked around the room, unpacking his paintings and hanging them around people's necks. The works were backed on a light coloured wood, and had thin ribbons strung to their frames. Each one depicted a bright shining stone, lit in fluorescent blues and pinks. Keogh also handed out fist-sized stones, shining again, and sculpted with cheap model-making materials. The volume of chatter in the room had risen progressively, but once the excitement of standing up subsided, the artist asked everyone to discuss the works publicly. He would not be making any further declarations.

For the first 10 minutes, the discussion was confined to a group of about ten people, but over time the audience as a whole began to develop quite divergent views, and our discussion became unexpectedly, and usefully, contentious. It seemed like precisely the sort of situation that would demand a moderator to highlight and further interrogate the most valuable arguments, and Clodagh Emoe performed excellently. Sam Keogh's paintings appeared as part of the exhibition 'Repo Man' at the Kerlin Gallery this past May.

The most recent A&E session took place on Monday 4 April; it was formatted as a panel discussion on art criticism, and sought to present the different sorts of philosophies and ethos that would be brought forward by new critical organisations such as Paper Visual Art Journal and Billion Art. Timothy Stott, James Merrigan and Niamh Dunphy were invited to give presentations on the topic; Kevin Atherton moderated the panel.

Tim Stott began the evening with a discussion of theory; he explained the historical lineage of the term as it dates back to ancient Greece, and the discursive influences that have produced our current understanding of it. Stott claimed that the speed that art criticism works is very different to the speed of the exhibition – that criticism and exhibitions communicate in different ways, each having their own heuristics and textures. He remarked that the territory of art criticism lies in a place beyond the constant updating of facts, or of providing commentary from one's experiences. Instead, he claimed that criticism depends upon the authority that is granted by an appropriate use of knowledge. Stott is currently a doctoral research scholar, and the joy that he takes in language shone through in his discussion, particularly in his extended opening remarks.

James Merrigan stood up to talk about Billion Art Journal, his frequently released online publication that endorses an artist-centric model of art writing. He discussed his focus on the art object, and his desire to publish writing every two weeks, which allows him to be, as he put it, relentless. Merrigan went on to discuss the French philosopher Jacques Rancière with members of the audience, and made extensive reference to recently published works by Dublin-based writers Declan Long and Gemma Tipton.

Niamh Dunphy spoke about the editorial ethos behind Paper Visual Art Journal, an online publication that focuses heavily on emerging art practices. Paper was founded two years ago, in response to what its creators saw as a vacuum of critique and dialogue around emerging artists particularly. Dunphy spoke about the responsibility of editors to reduce and mediate overwriting, and work towards the presentation of clear, descriptive language.

Kevin Atherton set the pace with a string of questions throughout the near-two hour discussion. He brought a good sense of humour to the job of moderator, and an end to the awkward pauses that typically follow a request for questions. The responses bled into the comments section on Facebook that evening, and ended sometime the following day.

At the time of writing we were preparing for the next A&E session, which featured presentations by David Lunney, Alison Pilkington and I, and was moderated by Gemma Tipton. It took place on 19 August as part of 'Transference', an exhibition curated by Clíodhna Shaffrey and Cliona Harmey, which took place in Monster Truck Gallery and Broadstone Studios between 4 – 20 August 2011.

Seán O Sullivan

Notes

1. <http://www.print.ie/>
2. Kate Betts, Milestones (Dublin: the Black Church Print Studio, 2007) p4