

## SEMINAR



Practice discussion at Ormond Studios – with Davey Moor, Mark Cullen and Carl Giffney

## Practice Practice

SEÁN O SULLIVAN REPORTS ON 'PRACTICE: THE ORMOND STUDIOS LECTURE SERIES' (7 – 9 DEC 2010)

IN August of 2009, 13 BA graduates of Dublin's three major art colleges joined together to form Ormond Studios, Dublin<sup>(1)</sup>. They had a simple objective: to rent a building to work from, and offer a small programme of events throughout the year. Nearly two years on, that programme has gained both traction and perspective; Ormond Studios has publicly offered several curated exhibitions, critical texts, and peer-critique sessions, they host regular screenings for independent filmmakers, and offer a range of graduate-oriented artist residencies and studio exchanges free of charge. Perhaps most famously, the studio hosted an event, titled *Scarleh Fer Yer Ma Fer Havin Ya*, where the audience and organisers publicly read out their mid-teenage diaries – the dramatic descriptions of “black voids of emotion” and half-attempted poems incited peals of laughter. The variety of Ormond Studios' programme has culminated in December's 'Practice Lecture Series', a three-day conference focusing on early career education and the sustainability of a working art practice.

When the studio began to plan the lecture series, it sought to create an avenue for 'information gathering', a way of collecting a set of valuable ideas that could be useful to those beginning their career in the arts<sup>(2)</sup>. The first day of *Practice* featured Sam Keogh, Fiona Marron and Helen Horgan, artists who graduated in 2009, and have managed to enact a clearly distinct art practice since then<sup>(3)</sup>. Sam Keogh presented scenes from his project *Radical Love Vol. 1*, which he created with Dublin artist Joseph Noonan-Ganley. Fiona Marron discussed a series of ideas relating to economics within speculative fiction, the division of labour and Phrenology. She expanded on the themes that have motivated her completed works, one of which captured a disused trading floor in the IFSC, and another that studied a Gypsum mine in Knocknacran, Co. Monaghan. Helen Horgan described how she had begun working with, and eventually inherited, an entire library of generations-old books from a friary in Co. Westmeath. Aside from discussing their personal working methods, and the styles and ideas that stimulate their respective practices, the three artists detailed the most effective methods of exposing their projects to the largest audience possible. Later in the day, Rayne Booth spent over an hour answering questions from the audience on a range of issues surrounding arts organisations, working with curators, and publicising projects.

Carl Giffney of the Good Hatchery was present on the second day of *Practice*, he spoke alongside Mark Cullen of Pallas Projects and Davey Moor of Monster Truck Gallery & Studios.<sup>(4)</sup> Before graduating from NCAD in 2007, Giffney and four of his peers went in search of an unconventional outlet for their work. At the time the property boom was in full swing, and the group decided that the smartest move was to get out of Dublin—they were less than enthusiastic about the idea of “paying €600 for their apartment, and €400 for their studio every month”. Feeling adventurous, they posted a request on the Free-Cycle website reading: “Wanted: Derelict house or ruin for artists to live in and renovate.” They got a few joke replies, some offering princesses, but eventually received a surprising response from a woman named Eileen

Hanlon in East Offaly, who offered them a large derelict hayloft for their artists' studio at no charge, the group spent much of 2007 turning the building into a residential studio. The Good Hatchery is located in a plain of industrial bogland, and since it is so difficult to physically reach, the group conducts their outreach through the Internet.

This approach has attracted significant national recognition, the group receives funding from a range of local and national bodies, and has hosted over 50 artist's residencies since 2007. Giffney described a recent collaborative project entitled *Seahorses are Tired of Living in the Real World*, where he and Ruth E. Lyons filled a well in Waterford's Soma Gallery with gin and seahorses. The exhibition co-incident with the closure of the Waterford Glass Factory.

Sarah Tuck, the Director of Create Ireland spoke about the kind of projects that her organisation supports. Create is the national agency for promoting collaborative arts in Ireland, and Tuck spoke in great detail about her work to prompt a more radical, contemporary shift in proposals from artists. She explained that Create would heavily emphasise research-based projects in the near future, and gave an example of a recently successful model where a composer designed a chair that could interpret sounds as vibrations, and worked with a group of deaf collaborators to compose a successful series of musical works. Tuck went on to describe Create as strongly disinclined to support projects that position the artist as a social worker, or as the facilitator of a therapeutic outcome; she gave an example of the low bar set by frequent projects that worked with senior citizens on the theme of memory. The requirement of original and independent thinking was echoed across the three days by curator Vaari Claffey, members of Exchange Dublin and Sheena Barrett of Dublin City Council.

During 2010, three of the Ormond Studios members travelled to colleges around the country sharing information that they had learned during their first year of independent art practice. The reaction from the lecturers was quite positive. In many ways it demystified the next step for their art students, who had been in a rare situation where the Internet couldn't offer any answers. In a very tangible way, the Practice project had its genesis in those discussions. The students' response prompted the Ormond Studios members to reassess how their careers began, and so the final day of Practice focused on early career issues.

John Flanagan and Eileen Ryder of Citizens Information (CIC) spoke about civic and domestic issues. It is somewhat unusual for a civic organisation like CIC to receive a speaking invite for a lecture on visual art, however it was soon apparent that their message was quite appropriate to the occasion. They discussed the difficulties that artists might expect during early career development, when the precariousness of their independent work is slowly advancing towards financial sustainability. Flanagan and Ryder took a range of questions from the audience, primarily focusing on rent. They also explained a number of services that Citizens Information make available to people in all sorts of circumstances, these include specific experience in fields such as tax, tenancy, employment, social welfare, healthcare and education.

Further to this, CIC offers a crisis budgeting service in association with MABS, and can work with credit card companies or creditors to resolve debt issues. They also provide one-to-one legal advice from a range of multi-lingual solicitors. All of their services are provided free of charge by an entirely volunteer corps.

Artist Aileen Barry gave an energetic talk on three of her major projects. She described taking inspiration from her first cousin, Dr. Bridget O'Callaghan-Hay, a Cork mathematician who began training as an Astronaut with NASA as part of the Reaganite 'Star Wars' defence program. Barry applied to the Arts Council and NASA for part funding so that she could also train as an Astronaut, and mortgaged her house to cover the shortfall. Her training is chronicled in a documentary about the experience, which culminates in a scene of her taking a parabolic flight, also known as a vomit comet, that rapidly scales an ellipse from around 24,000ft to 34,000ft and back again at 45-degree angles achieving the effect of zero gravity. The scene sees her floating around the aircraft with a household vacuum cleaner. Barry also gave a preview of a piece that she is currently preparing for exhibition in both Dublin and Basel, it involves forty remote control helicopters programmed to simultaneously lift up a woman's enormous skirt, alluding to what she called “the Marilyn Monroe effect”. The artist is working with a German company on a remote control that can power 160 helicopters and lift her off the ground.

The ambition for personal projects continued in a talk from John Carter and Jay Roche of Dublin's Projector Collective. They discussed their 2009 collaboration with Via Collective entitled *Bright Shadow*, which took place in St. Agatha's Court, Dublin. The group appropriated a disused senior citizens housing block, they then grew its entire front garden thick with sunflowers, and gilded the 16 large boarded-up windows with 23-carat gold leaf. Dublin City Council granted permission to use the site, but in what Carter described as their most financially demanding project, the artists themselves paid for the gold. Jay Roche mentioned that they had never intended to make a political or economic point with the project, but he said “it was interesting to hear people projecting their own ideas on to it, [...] it just happened to be a building, but it was right for the time.”

John Carter ended the discussion on this point: “In the past [artists] had very much waited for the funding to come along before they made the work, before they even put the idea into effect. And I think we've always seen the reverse as being important; that it didn't matter, that we would find one way or another of allowing the idea to happen, and *maybe* the funding could come later.”

Ormond Studios will launch a publication detailing the outcomes of their 2010 Graduate programme this July.

Seán O Sullivan

### Notes

1. <http://www.ormondstudios.com/>
2. Information for this article was graciously provided in a conversation between the author and Ormond Studios members Alan-James Burns, Jennette Donnelly, Jackquayn Gray and Nicky Teegan, 13 January 2011.
3. The featured speakers at 'Practice' were Sam Keogh, Fiona Marron, Helen Horgan, Vaari Claffey, Rayne Booth, Mark Cullen, Davey Moor, Carl Giffney, Andreas Kindler, Jonah King, Jennette Donnelly, Nicky Teegan, Sarah Tuck, Clara Scanlon, John Carter, Jay Roche, Aileen Barry, Sheena Barrett, John Flanagan and Eileen Ryder.
4. The organisations represented at 'Practice' were Pallas Projects / Studios, Monster Truck Gallery & Studios, The Good Hatchery, Exchange Dublin, Ormond Studios, Mart, Projector Collective, Dublin City Council, Create Ireland and Citizens Information Council.