

Neil Carroll
Michelle Doyle
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**FILE
NOTE III
ROBERT
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MCCLEAN**

FILE NOTE III:

NOTIONS OF A QUASI-MYSTIC COMMUNISM

‘Let us return to detective novels.’ — Bertolt Brecht

Something like a shop front window being bricked

I heard someone call my namesake, I swung around in the mizzle to see Helen Hughes had found me in the grounds of DIT Grangeegorman. Thankfully, I was not as lost now as the memory of the multi-story car park in which I’d abandoned my whip.

As we entered *Summer Studios*, the bon vivant brightness of Helen’s aura became pleasingly apparent as we sat down on a few fold-up chairs in her allocated, obliquely defined space.

Helen seemed to revel in an air of mischief, when considering the various angles that viewers may take of her art. At her most recent group show, a child punched a hole in one of her contributions.

As much as Helen’s previous work has disrupted industrial processes as we commonly perceive them, the works in progress that surround us resemble glossy ornaments, but they’re too uncanny, fancifully disturbing at the same time, like that Chris Cunningham video for Aphex Twin’s *Windowlicker*, where Richard D James’ skewed grimace is transposed onto the big booty bodies of a troupe of beautiful twerkers.

Helen’s sculptures are clever enough to converse with the creepy umbra of capital and come out not as the butt of the joke, but as the trickster telling the joke who has since shifted dimensions, is there but isn’t, isn’t there but is, leaving an ethereal, will-o’-the-wisp effect of cheek and knowingness, that only serves to endear the viewer to enjoy the joke afresh in admiration of the attitude.

Helen encourages the viewer to relish a hopefully revelatory moment, a moment taken to participate and engage with capitalist concepts and constructs differently. Desire is distorted in a voided modality, permitting us to consider consumerist driven, digitally hosted, financial markets defaulting, in a melting prism of irreconcilable glitches.

I imagine Helen inversely scaling up with showrooms that are like temporal theme parks, like *IKEA* on acid; shiny, reflective fluorescence, pastel paint, elegant metal sheens, useless decorations that dupe you by sheer virtue of their inventiveness; a false exchange-value by proxy of any purchase, as deterioration of the object was deliberately set in motion from the outset.

These objects are devoid of any possible misconception of potential functionality, they have absolutely no obvious utilitarian use, not even a hint, instead they prompt hilarity, acting as levelling devices, bringing an equality to all who wonder bemused at them, in befuddlement at their intangible eloquence, they act up, all goonish, like a mute pulling a funny face.

Thinking about that famous scene from *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin, where the protagonist can’t keep pace with the production rate of the conveyor belt, I consider Helen working with her materials and I feel a comparison is apt. Helen must work quickly against the rate of production set by her materials. It takes only four to five minutes for resin to set, so in effect, Helen’s process is a perpetual experimentalism, in which (she admits) there is lots of wastage in the wreckages she manufactures in the wake of her beautifully disarming sculptures.

Helen is interested in who has the authority to make the absolute decision as to how these materials, ingratiated in industrial processes, can be used outside of their original design and purpose. Helen disrupts the diktats of the capitalist narrative with her tragi-comic deconstruction of the factory with the incisive cleverness of the cultural critic.

I don’t think Helen has been averse to traditional sculpture techniques of production per se, but she has been maybe more reticent to use them than most in her field. Helen is driven by a more immediate conjuration of the art object, embracing being baffled herself by unexpected mistakism, a prominence for objects cast out of the normative order.

Helen’s impetus to produce appears dynamic and improvisational, but she did invest her time at *FSAS* to enable a transitional praxis in her work; moving from wooden frames or resin framing for her sculptures, (when she felt they necessitated it) to that of metal frames produced at *FSAS* using once avoided, traditional sculptural techniques.

I get the impression Helen will continue to sample techniques of traditional sculpture after this reassessment of their potential in her work, maybe like DJ Screw would if he had been a sculptor. In fact, Helen’s sculptures do have that sort of quality an object might take on if observed through the prism of a sizeable cup of *sizzurp*.

Helen shows me a piece of non-descript pink plastic, she says she can’t ever part with it and that she returns to meditate on its existence, often. I suggest to Helen that this sounds like she nurtures a talisman, that she is pronouncing a sentiment of protectionism, an authentic tenderness towards a fragment of disposable packaging via her own anthropomorphic projection.

Like a vase with its center of gravity smashed out, the studio suddenly becomes a fashion retail outlet, an alive exhibition space of faux commodity fetishism, wherein Helen and I are waiting for a phantastic model to come out of an adjacent inter-dimensional changing room, wearing one of Helen’s sculptures like a scarf. I can’t remember who said it, whether it was me or Helen; a good joke that’s hard to get is difficult in its telling.

Punk is dead, long live punk!

My whip abandoned in a multi-story car park on the outskirts of the city centre, I begin my walk to Belvedere, specific location; *Jigsaw Collective*, to meet Michelle Doyle.

Michelle comes down after a text alert to meet me at the entrance. The ground floor space is amazing, like a cavernous, furniture free, open plan living room, complete with bar and kitchenette, a place where underground noise musicians and leftist activists mix and measure progressive concept and prepare for protest. After an upstairs tour of the *Dublin Digital Radio studio*, (from which Michelle had just hosted and broadcast her radio show, named the same as her solo noise project, *Rising Damp*) Michelle informs me that certain circumstances mean that the collective are soon to lose this hub of radicalism. She brews me a coffee as I offer my sincerest sympathies.

Michelle is currently interested in the relationships between, technology, innovation and capitalism in contemporary Ireland, considering ancient Ireland as being perpetually present in the Celtic psyche, still pronouncing itself in Irish culture today, often commodified by the tourist industry, but often as contrary to commodification, that is if it is utilized as a temporal device to reconnect to our pagan ancestry. Conceptually here, there may be some mining of ideas that embody a not-for profit intellectual currency, presenting historical precedents as potentials perhaps, for a fresh, radical subjectivity, founded on empathy and trust.

During her residency at FSAS Michelle took the opportunity to become accustomed to *Adobe After Effects* and *Blender 3D* modelling software. Michelle sees these two programs as digital collage applications in which she can use and develop open source, pre-built assets in her future video work. Michelle is thrilled at becoming adept in using these applications, in which she believes; you can virtually build anything; a digitally confined type of nanotech for the virtual. She is also thrilled to be awarded an *Arts Council Next Generation Award* of 20,000 euros. We discuss remaining in Dublin with this award and the probable decimation of the funding in rental payments to landlords. Sligo or Glasgow is attractive.

Michelle also used the time at FSAS to produce her *Sleep Concert*. The opportunity for her to have access to great microphones and top of the range sound editing software in the HD suite, has given us as an audience, a tremendous soundscape to tune in, zone out, and tweak our ideas to. If Mark Fisher had finished *Acid Communism*, Michelle Doyle's Sleep Concert might have been the perfect ASMR background noise to get reading to, to go psyche tripping in. It is available to listen to on the *Dublin Digital Radio* website archive.

Michelle was recently artist in residence at Cork Sound Fair 2019, along with Coilin O'Connell at which they curated a fascinating piece of art. Michelle gifts me a copy of the artwork, of which there has been a limited production run. The artwork is called *Data Dump*.

The work is essentially a zine but not as we know it. This zine questions the zine format as it is not paper printed, but USB stored, and more than that, it is a USB covertly designed as a debit/social security identification card. The production of this art object, mixtape disguised, communication and storage device, is not just an inventive mode of distributing a zine, it is a pertinent, contemporary political statement for modern Ireland, in relation to data ownership,

the anti-democratic resonances of which can be transposed to any state apparatus involved in data harvesting and compartmentalization of citizens' profiles.

We must learn to omit as much as we declare, to know where the power lies in the dynamics of social activity as the gamification of politics continues with servicing and selling data as the fundamental, base currency of capital exchange and propagation.

Michelle's art mocks and challenges the itineration of everything, how our everyday experiences are being choreographed holistically in their differing and separate circumstances by an omnipresent hierarchy of managerial systems, of which capitalist and neoliberal ideologies are the base foundation and building blocks of our purported source of limitless human progress. But we all know the planet as a biosystem has reached a limit.

As I watch Michelle's, *Distance from Stone*, I see a gem of a lampoon of the quintessential, educational visitor attraction video, beautifully rendered in pink hues and floating pebble dash masks that suck you into the joke, blind to the bombastic conceit that your participation and interaction is the obvious punchline. The pebble dash is a reference to inner city Dublin social housing and in turn the ongoing housing crisis, and furthermore perhaps to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

As we riff another dialogue, distracted from the images of the video streaming, Michelle urges me to consider Wi-Fi and the internet in terms of property, land grabs, the colonialization of the virtual, the imminent arrival of 5G. We can both still hear, though in a state of cognitive dissonance to it, the soundtrack to *Distance from Stone*, battle drums syncopate a rhythm that calls subliminally for an uprising, questioning; do we want authentic socialism or neo-barbarianism? Using maybe logic; the choice is ours if we have the courage to take it. I'm erring towards a quasi-mystic communism focused on the four-fold breath.

Uncanny comrades

My meeting place was pre-arranged to be Simon's Café. I arrive and get debriefed on how the artist duo; Ella Bertilsson and Ulla Juske, initially met. Through aleatory conversations and some clandestine and rebellious printing operations by Ella, of Ulla's drawings for her then pending MFA show, the beginnings of their collaborative output manifested mischievously, on its own terms, at an appropriate time in space.

Time and space were themes in Ella and Ulla's early collaborations:

Isolated Pockets of Memory, *Gazing at a Cosmic Map of the Past* and *Uncertain Matter*, a series of works in both audio and video installations, evolved out of a three-month *SÍM* research residency with *The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists in Reykjavik*. The works taken together, shape a studied stillness, conveyed from their documented footage of vantage points from the observatory in Seltjarnarnes, Iceland. But this meditation is blasted by poetic litanies of subjective deep space perceptions

and statements of scientific fact, informed by members of the *Seltjarnarnes Amateur Astronomy Society*. These collected expressions clash in a cosmic assimilation, feeling like offerings of counsel, projected by outer space bodies without organs; a polyphonic disembodied extraterrestrial poet society with a non-linear understanding, contemplating this surplus, universal knowledge collated *Gazing at a Cosmic Map of the Past*.

The Hut Project — Time is what happens when nothing else does, a narrative-driven installation, also focuses on tangential meditation. This work, initiated by the *Office of Public Works (OPW)* in association with the *Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA)*, resonates with me, as I myself worked as a hotel night porter while a postgrad. The work is a collage of experiential accounts, based on numerous conversations with security men and attendants, focusing on the separateness of custodians and their considered thoughtfulness towards human relations, solidarity and to the contrary; alienation. Both antithetical considerations are cognitively incentivized by the worker's conditions. The artwork positions its subject(s) as the mindful measurers of time, in shifts that speculate on unexpected interventions in processes of being and security.

Interventions are another feature of the dynamism at play in Ella and Ulla's art. They were involved in tactically ferrying willing voters to polling stations in a Repeal the 8th decorated *Fiat Cinquecento* on the day of the referendum. This admirable and conscious act for parity and the recognition of essential human rights in the Republic of Ireland was instigated by Ella, Michelle Hall and Sophie Lynch. The same *Fiat Cinquecento*, though this time without any decoration, was used in Ella and Ulla's *Mother of Birds Taxi Service* escapade, this time ferrying members of the public to view an exhibition of theirs in Blanchardstown. This participatory happening, documented in a series of videos, is truly hilarious, spontaneous and full of improvised jouissance.

Carrier of Memories, in its soap opera style was instantly reminiscent to me of Kalup Linzy's early works, especially *All My Churen* (2003). The tone of irreverence here though is wonkily different, the deadpan but deftly emotive humour, of both Ella and Ulla, is black metal black, but oh so sincere, because the stories the pair tell are human, all too human. Anecdotes of making a house a home against the current economic and ecological crises, are shared through familial working class, uncanny, outcast subjectivities, who are sometimes docile, sometimes paranoiac, always embedded by displacement, their territories both physical and temporal, but no matter what never guaranteed secure.

Co-dependency is explored in the work, *Beyond the Sandy Suburbs*, which I found to be more than its immediate allusions; precariousness via the housing crisis, the unbalanced relationships between landlords and tenants, the question of whether shelter and privacy are even still connected when everything is so interconnected and surveilled. This video installation is about more than those apposite themes, it is about the relationships we make in the madness of civilization, relations that enable our survival in a support network built on solicitations of each

persons need and ability. They call it solidarity, comrades. Perhaps think of the odd couple of the deep sea; the Goby Fish and The Pistol Shrimp.

The relationship of the artists themselves was the focus of their residency at FSAS. The project they were working on there, and at RHA and PS2, Belfast, is an exploration of the pair's *WhatsApp* messages over a four-year period of texting each other daily. This accounted for 750 double-sided pages when printed out, to edit down into short script formats, to be read as monologues by one person. This confuses the duality of the expressions into a consolidated shared experience, birthing a verbal symbiosis of narrative.

'The themes we picked were: sex, periods, pregnancy, deaths, breakups, makeups, extremely boring stuff (which we excluded), drugs, drink, dysfunctionality and fights...'
— Extract from an email from Ella Bertilsson to me

The project remains unfinished, but the pair used their time at FSAS to learn how to use *Da Vinci* editing and post-production software, as well as *Reaper*, a virtual studio technology software program, with an exciting sound design functionality for devising surround sound installations. The duo could avail of the state of the art audio-visual recording equipment at FSAS, to document rehearsal performances of some of these short *WhatsApp* scripts. Now the duo is on hiatus, who knows what appropriate time and space will forge further collaborations in the future? I hope they soon make art again together that celebrates this friendship, the scripts I read conveyed in their relatable drama of cosmic domesticity, a spry camaraderie.

Autonomy and the art of altered deconstructions

I've arranged to meet the painter, Neil Carroll, in his residency studio at FSAS. I arrive, unannounced at the front entrance and press the buzzer. There is no response. I press the buzzer again, no response, then again and still no response. I email Neil, because I'm down from Belfast and it costs a small fortune to make or receive calls, south of the border with a UK number. As I press send, the door opens and a kind, welcoming FSAS representative grants me access.

I walk into the studio space and Neil is on the phone, conversing, so I'm guessing he won't yet have seen my email, an email suggesting that I'm not actually stood before him, but outside stranded on the street.

Neil explains how he is working towards a show, for RHA to be exhibited in February 2020. What I can see on the workbench before us is the makings of the process towards that exhibition. What I look at on the bench is not the partial, material fragments of what will become the collage elements of a series of 'constructed' paintings, but instead, what I look at on the bench is the purest representation of the noumenal chaos of Neil's process as the thing-in-itself. Neil seems not to be so sure what this process is, not so sure what is happening, not so sure what he is even doing from one moment to the next. Neil suggests that he is not sure what is happening, that he is not sure what he is doing, that he can't and doesn't want to define this process, to deaden somehow a supramystery.

The workbench is strewn with a collection of what look like various remnants of construction refuse from a demolished building. These, what will be eventual segments of an assemblage painting, (a diptych, maybe, Neil thinks out loud) these fragmentary objects already define themselves in their scuffed, contrary finery, the cement grey is the prominent feature, but beyond the simple reduction of colour and material, this prominent cement grey seems like a pulse, a pulse that is present in all Neil's paintings, irrelevant of what colour it might eventually become when painted. This pulse, when Neil lifts and lays the pieces on the bench into different collaged arrangements, seems vulnerable to elemental collapse, as if the entirety of the cement grey is threatening to dissipate into dust, serving only to be difficult, inversely there are moments where it seems that everything is in its right place and rendered, but remaining susceptible to reassessment and reassembly.

Neil recounts, that yeah, sometimes the materials like to do their own thing. Though, the plaster, cardboard and mesh have proven to be gracious in their malleability to affective aesthetic ends, especially when coloured effectively, as in Neil's 2018 painting; *Fissure*. This painting is absolutely startling in its vivid eminence of dust pink and complimentary emanations of pale blue grey's, the total image is mesmerizing, as if a helicopter's perspective overlooking an urban sprawl that has just suffered an earthquake, your mission as witness is scoping out survivors. If you were down below and alive, you'd be orienteering by emotion, your recognitions altered by unexpected transformations in the landscape as a fractured urban space.

Neil is tremendously grateful for the residency at FSAS, as he had been stuck to secure a studio space to work on the forthcoming *RHA* show, FSAS also offers him access to site-specific techniques and open, critical conversation with other residents.

Neil explains to me how his fascination with landscape art developed, from an appreciation of formalist landscape painting in the Irish Tradition, into the type of work that he is making now, work that garnered his inclusion in *Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2017*.

When he left his first stint in art school, he went to work in the construction industry. On-site he would see how buildings emerged from architects' brains to confront civilians in social space. Sometimes as a haven, sometimes as an imposition. As well as the whole construction process, he could also see how there would be lots of leftover materials on-site that he mulled over might be interesting to make something out of.

Years later when he'd returned to art making, Neil was invited on a residency in the states. He arrived skint, so for materials he went to the local skip. He appropriated some detritus that he could further damage and deconstruct into fresher, newfangled fragments, reconceptualising the chance forms of found objects and material, into a sculptural, collage format, the makings of a painting he thought, so he bought the cheapest paint he could at the local hardware store and gave this structural form a simple coat. This practice evolved into the vitalist paintings, Neil is now producing.

We talk of our shared interest in a third space, the space between art and the artist and what can or does inhabit this unknowable space in flux? Bataille's 'Base Materialism'? What William Burroughs and Brion Gysin called 'The Third Mind'? There is part of me that thinks maybe I wasn't even there, conversing with Neil Carroll, and maybe I'm still standing outside FSAS awaiting entrance, on Lower Buckingham Street, the whole city and me, myself and I, atomized.

Fully automated luxury communism or digital death drive moronathon, you decide

What happens to our ideas of what constitutes work, if labour becomes totally automated? If we consider this rupture in human history as a potential neo-genesis of radical collectivism, can we imagine a place where we might ensure the rights of each other to a universal basic income, food, shelter etc. as a direct result of automation? Could we co-opt our social media addictions to help us connect in a radical empathy, entering new cognitive spaces of ontological freedom, all at our socially acceptable leisure?

Think of it in terms of the *Google (Deep Mind) AlphaGo* Robot beating the world's best known Go players, then a year later *AlphaZero* beat the world's best chess playing computer program, after learning how to play chess with a mere four hours' practice. Now, imagine an AI robot that can program, then an AI robot that can program the original AI robot. The question begs asking; are we totally doomed or primed for emancipation?

Alan Magee's art reconceptualises the everyday tactile experience of material existence to establish its potential for agency, but undermining it at the same time, it's essentially a feedback loop, he conveys. So, we're totally doomed then?

The work he produced during the residency at FSAS, he calls, *Celestial Machines*, is pretty epic. It was exhibited at *Castor Gallery*, London, 2019, under the title; *Data Dust, Dust Data*.

The work comprises a kind of roofing panel that you would find in any modern office, which has dislodged itself from the ceiling and hangs, suspended on chains. A video monitor encased in transparent plastic, wires, circuit boards and LED displays visible, onscreen plays a *YouTube* style tutorial. You soon realise this instructional video is edited out of sequence, corrupting the utility of the tactility being illustrated. From the underside, from the surface of this industrial style roofing panel, reaches out an artificial limb, a robot arm, like the video monitor, stripped of a metaphorical skin. Again, wires, circuit boards and the beauty of human ingenuity and engineering takes precedence over flesh and bone.

Alan triggers the conceptual artistic contraption and I'm given the illusion from its movements that the robot has agency. In problematic reality, the robot has no agency but the mathematical parameters of its randomized code mean it is highly improbable that the robot will ever perform the same two gestures in a row, even over the course of a thousand years, if left to its own algorithmic devices. The robot is controlled by the artist's designation of abilities, as to what individual movements it can perform, but the random variations in series of movements do

appear in an aleatory order, this is what gives this unsettling illusion of an agency apart, an agency at work, an agency in competition.

The mathematical and randomized coding of the robotic arm, was worked on with a systems designer, Christopher Steenson. The arm, the video monitor, the whole sculptural ensemble including the associated video works and terracotta ceramics of 12 bodily organs were all produced at FSAS. Alan spent half the time in the digital media lab getting to grips with VR, and the other half in the sculpture studios working with ceramics. He has managed to merge a cutting age art of immateriality with the history of art and traditional sculpture techniques, fused through the acts of his own bodily functions.

The human organ replicas made from terracotta are stunning. Another video monitor illustrates how, like doing a blind contoured drawing using a VR headset, Alan negotiates the disconnect between what he is seeing in the headset, (virtual 3D image representations of each individual organ he eventually replicated) and what he was forming with the clay material he moulds in his hands. (The 12 bodily organs, heart, intestines etc.)

Essentially, Alan is trying to actualise the immaterial object into a material replica just through the sense of touch. There are many creation myths I could refer to that promote this articulation of our human genesis. The *Immaterial Organs* were then hand painted and glazed afterwards, when he could examine the articles as serious achievements of his devised estrangement.

Then there is the *Handmade Hand*, five disconnected fingers; a palm to hold them together and enable movement and functionality has seemingly vanished, or was never there in the first place. Rather than a cast, the five fingers and thumb are sculpted life size using polymer clay. The dialogue between a hand making a hand, that is recognisable as a hand, but useless as one, offers us at least what Alan refers to as a set of relatively well made fingers. One of the digits is detailed with a sticking plaster, mooted hazards of labour.

This *Celestial Machine* is letting you understand that there is something beyond what you know, but referencing the fact that you can't really figure, absolutely, whatever that is out. This *Celestial Machine* symbolises the threshold between two situations or worlds; management/staff, the noumenal/the phenomenal, human/machine, all these permutations evoke the complicated pathos of our current predicament. If we err on the side of doom, should we be bricking it enough to start throwing bricks? Or are we, ourselves, bricked? Like another dud smartphone in landfill?

In its third year we are proud to commission and publish new writing by Robert Herbert McClean, and platform our 2019 FSAS awardees Michelle Doyle, Helen Hughes, Neil Carroll and Alan Magee

Robert Herbert McClean is an Irish writer and audio-visual artist. His debut book *Pangs!* was published by Test Centre in 2015. In 2016, his debut album, *Infinity*, was released by Blank Editions. He has been artist-in-residence at Forum Stadtpark, Belfast Exposed, and The Curfew Tower. His most recent text, *Skrubolz Garbillkore*, was commissioned by Maria Fusco and published by Book Works in 2018. He was a finalist for the *Arts Foundation Futures Awards for Poetry* in 2019. His next book, *Songs for Ireland*, is forthcoming from Prototype in 2020.

