

Doireann Ní Ghrioghair
Áine McBride
Mark Clare
Adam Gibney

FILE NOTE 2018

The sculpture workshop at Fire Station Artists' Studio is full of noise, banging and sawing, when I arrive to meet Doireann Ní Ghrioghair for a conversation about her work. There is a quiet office upstairs where we could sit but we decide to stay in the artist's berth, with some of the sculptures and the detritus of her work around us. On a table lies a long spool of resinous material, latex, a remainder from the cast of a capital at the head of a Corinthian column in Dublin Castle.

– DNiG

Around us, the sculpture workshop is strangely quiet. Áine McBride is working in one of the last booths in the row; the rest are, on a Tuesday afternoon, unoccupied. In the few months of visits, I never get a clear sense of when the place is empty, when full; seems arbitrary. I remember wondering if there is in fact some rhythm to this place or if it's as unexpected to the artists as it seemed to me.

– AMcB

Mark Clare spent his two months in Fire Station producing a single porcelain work. In his studio at the NCAD Annex on James's Street, I get to see it, a complex assemblage of geometric porcelain pieces balanced on a wood and copper frame: a reconstruction, in this delicate material, of a Siberian fur trap. Scattered around its base are a few stray porcelain bits; at first, I don't realise that these bits of jetsam are also part of the work.

– MC

Adam Gibney I meet, not at Fire Station, but at a coffee shop. He is not long home after a three-month residency in South Korea; he spent some time in Fire Station prior to this, and will spend time there again soon, but for now he is in between. This is a state – of mind and being – which he seems to find fruitful.

– AG

McBride says, during this first meeting, that she is interested in making work that, when encountered, seems like it might always have been there. On the screen of her laptop she shows me a photo of a previous work, a cast concrete bench she installed in an alcove on 'Red Square' at NCAD, a bench I have walked past many times in the past year, on my way in and out of the Visual Culture building, innocuous and unremarkable: I had never enquired into it, I hadn't noticed when it appeared. Had I been asked I'd have said I thought it had been there for years.

*She talks about 'seepage' between the work and its environment, as if her sculptures might simply dissolve into their surroundings. I am reminded, incongruously, of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, in which cyclists and bicycles are gradually – out of sheer inertia – beginning to merge.*

The latex spool is a remnant of Ní Ghrioghair's process. On the floor between us stands an example of the finished work, a waist-high, sagging, punctured pillar, white mostly but with daubs of lurid colour streaked along its length. This is one of a series of casts she has created – then deflated – from columns in two sites in Dublin Castle: George's Hall and Bedford Tower. Bedford Tower is a piece of original Georgian monumental architecture, the centrepiece of the castle's courtyard. George's Hall was built later, for the visit of King George V in 1911, a symbolic tribute to imperial power in an Ireland under British rule; it has also been the site of some of the controversial corruption tribunals of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, the Moriarty Tribunal and the Garda Tribunal, most notably. George's Hall has hence been an emblem of contested authority, a kind of fault-line for tenuous power structures, for more than a century.

– AMcB

This is reflected in Ní Ghrioghair's sculptures, which play out this contestation and disruption at a material level. Her series of 'deflated capitals' are mocking distortions of one of the standard forms of classical architecture, the capital (or chapter), the topmost segment of a column or pilaster, itself so often revived and pastiched over time now as to have become a kind of cipher or shorthand for power. These are playful ripostes to the formalised pomp of authority. To create them, Ní Ghrioghair creates casts of the capitals in unsupported latex; the resulting plaster works are wilted, flaccid distortions of the originals. They look like organic objects from which the life has gradually drained. These works respond to a particular philosophical lineage: the belief, reiterated many times over the last few centuries, in the 'classic' as the embodiment of a set of universal values and standards, and therefore somehow *timeless*. Ní Ghrioghair restores time to the equation, presenting the results of accelerated decay, collapse, disintegration.

– DNiG

Deadfall will be exhibited as part of Clare's solo show at Sirius Arts Centre in Cobh, a month hence; it fits within a body of the artist's work focused upon ecological disaster. Previous work has been engaged with systems of exchange value and the nature of a shared public space, whether real or imagined; Clare is a pointedly political artist. He has also always had a very multiple, open approach to the disciplines and media through which he makes work: animation, video, photography; public intervention; collaboration; site-specific sculpture. What unifies his work is a set of ongoing preoccupations with the economic interests that underpin how we interact and co-exist. As he explains to me, his is not a materially-driven practice, or at least it hasn't been, up until now, though it seems what he's developing for Sirius may mark something of a departure. Still, as he makes clear, it is the idea that comes first. The material matters, but only insofar as it serves or relates to some conceptual framework.

The materials in this case have particularly rich resonances; they have been assembled in part because of their commodity value. There is, of course, the fragile preciousness of the porcelain itself, though Clare's use of copper – a stock market basic material – is also pointed. The form of the work, too, plays upon connections between natural resources and the unnatural voracities of international capital; the Siberian fur trap is a traditional device of a particular region of northern Russia, but it is also connected to an enormous, stratospherically lucrative global market for Siberian furs, sables mostly. In this way the work alludes, gently, to how folk tradition can be co-opted by global capital.

— MC

McBride is preparing work for an exhibition, in the new year, at mother's tankstation. When I meet her first she is thinking about this show though there is no material made yet. She shows me some ceramic objects, like freestanding clips, which will join works together – a material she has been experimenting with at Fire Station. It is one element of a material register – she mentions concrete, lino, tiles, raw timber, sand, gesso. At the same time she does not want to talk about material. She wants to talk about resonance, context, staging. She mentions theatricality; she does not want to create work that is 'theatrical.' (I am not sure what she means by this; it seems at odds with the idea of the ensemble.) It is hard to talk in this abstract way about work that is still hypothetical. But I get the sense that this difficulty is part of the process, for McBride. She seems to want to resist any resolution for as long as possible. In some ways, she says, she doesn't want to know what she's doing until she's actually installing the work, in the gallery, the week before the show opens.

— AMcB

In the coffee shop, Gibney talks about Charles Olsen's 1951 manifesto, 'Projective Verse', a text which has had an influence on his thoughts on writing. This curious document, first published as a pamphlet but later quoted – with full approbation – by William Carlos Williams, outlines an approach to poetry that constituted, when it was written, an alternative to received poetic traditions. Olsen argued for the poem as a 'field of action'; he argued for a conception of the 'breath' as an alternative to the 'ear', imagining a kind of poetry based not upon metre and syllable but upon the physiology of the poet, rooted, that is, in the 'heart' instead of the 'head':

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to
the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH,
to the LINE.

His interest in this connection of breath and line, of body and word, fed into the work he made during the residency in Korea, as part of the Gachang International Residency Programme in Daegu. During his time here he worked on an installation, *Projective Verse 9: Deep Breadths* (2017), which was exhibited at a gallery in Daegu at the end of his three-month tenure. For this work, he created a computer programme which used a number of algorithmic rules to disassemble and disperse a single poem across a series of concrete-embedded transistor radios around the gallery. The lines of poetry – meditations upon space – were themselves cast around and reconstituted in the space of the gallery, full of hesitations and gaps, mimicking for Gibney the action of the breath. The result was a near-abstractation of articulated sounds; a poetry that bordered on illegibility.

He has not been home long from Korea when we meet in the coffee shop; not long enough to have begun any new work. Instead he is still musing over the Daegu show. He wants to inquire further into the extent of his control over what he makes. He talks about making the work larger, about breaking up the space. I'm not sure what he means by this; I gather it's a personal shorthand, a way of thinking about his work which I cannot understand.

— AG

Earlier this year, as part of the Douglas Hyde Gallery's series of installations around the Trinity College campus ('Gallery 3'), McBride installed a series of objects around the concourse of the college's Arts Block: an assemblage of low-lying, innocuously-clad units, suggestive of storage units or tables, mimicking functionality, yet subtly resisting utility. They melded with such strange ease into the brutalist surroundings that it felt strange, one afternoon during Spring term, to stand and 'look' at them. Students flowed around them without noticing any distinction between these objects and the mass-produced furniture surrounding them.

Unlike the cast concrete bench, however, McBride did not want them to be used. The units were out of reach of any bench; the surfaces were not laid out for people to leave down books or cups of coffee. These were not to be mistaken for 'usable' objects.

McBride talks to me about the language of 'affordance,' the idea that a well-designed object should furnish the user with a sense of how it is to be used. These objects both invite and frustrate. They take the language of affordance, that is, and subvert it, suggesting use where there is none. In our conversation, McBride quotes Morgan Quaintance's critique of the Turner Prize-winning architectural collective Assemble; in an article for e-flux in December 2015, he set out his critique of the award committee, arguing instead for the need to safeguard some 'radical uselessness' for art.

She also mentions Pierre Huyghe, whose approach to creating landscapes she admires. She wants her assembled elements to work as a group in articulating something. She is interested in the idea of the ensemble; the interrelation of objects as well as their relationship to what's outside the group. The context is as important, for McBride, as the objects themselves; she wants an assemblage that extends into the world around it, a whole environment, the distinction between the work and its environs, blurred.

— AMcB

Gibney has been working with technology and language for some years now, though this has not always been the kind of work he's made. It seems, as an artist, that he pursues philosophical questions through whatever media might provide a solution.

In the works I've previously seen, both exhibited as part of the RHA's Futures exhibitions, technology has been the medium. For his contribution to *Futures 14, Synthesiser 7:(un) Certain* (2014), Gibney assembled a pulsing circuit of large black ten-sided speakers on the gallery floor, each one lit by a neon ring and connected by a large snaking black tube, through which a babble of language was channelled, erupting from one speaker after another. For his contribution to the *Futures: Anthology* the following year, *Affirmation 3: understand(ing)* (2015), a microphone was hung over a speaker, dropping (it seemed to be dropping) isolated sound bites, the decomposed elements of a single word, into what felt like a void. The speaker was embedded in a stack of papers on which were reproduced lines of text, quotations from Heidegger. The result was a sparse, introverted work that seemed to suggest an inescapable philosophical quandary, as if querying the very possibility of meaning. A sense of its disquiet resonated across the crowded gallery, casting a strange unsettling pall.

— AG

In 2013, during a residency at Cow House Studios in Co Wexford, Clare made work out of the landscape; he took a bundle of large twigs, leftover from woodland maintenance and path-clearing in the forested stretch of the farm, and used the industrial-level pencil sharpener in the studio to sharpen them. He returned the resulting piles of sharpened twigs back where he found them, a kind of absurdist, menacing intervention – *Anthropocene Marker* was the name he decided upon for this work – in the regulated wildness of the woodland.

— MC

Ní Ghrioghair first started working with architectural elements while living in London some years ago, studying for her MFA at Chelsea College of Art and Design. Previously she had created sculptural work out of food; in a 2009 work, *Untitled (Block)*, she introduced organic food components – cabbage leaves and Cheerios and sloppy cooked spaghetti – into a large concrete block, mirroring and undermining the aesthetics of *béton brut*. (This work was made in response to an exhibition of the work of David Chipperfield, an architect who works with what Ni Ghrioghair calls 'the aesthetics of austerity'.) She is interested in countering the purported 'impersonality' of this kind of architecture, its purity and abstraction, with the organic mulch of decay, the reality of exhaustion. She mentions exhaustion, more than once. She is often exhausted, she says. 'We all are. It is a part of the contemporary condition.' This is something her work reflects: the sagging column, for instance, in the artist's booth at Fire Station, lolling, like the air's been taken from it.

— DNíG

Provisionality is an important part of McBride's work. There is a deliberate refusal of the machine finish. She wants things to appear make-shift, precise in some ways, certainly, but not extremely well-made.

This tendency in her work relates, as she sees it, to the provisionality of the contemporary moment – the demands upon new generations, artists and otherwise, to be 'flexible', to be 'lean'. She is responding to the discourse of precarity. She is working with modular forms and cheap materials, making work that is movable, durable, un-precious. She is operating in accordance with current conditions, but deliberately; her work is also a very clear riposte.

— AMcB

Clare talks to me about the show for which he's preparing. The body of work to be exhibited at Sirius will attempt to reckon with multiplying threats of environmental devastation, dangers that have been amplified for the artist – as for all of us – by alarming political developments in recent times. Clare wants to pursue and illustrate some of the invisible ecological processes through which habitats are being destroyed, the pressures upon the polar ice-caps but also less widely-known natural systems that are under threat, as for instance the channelling of algal dust along an aerial wind tunnel between South American and the Amazon basin, a natural (and endangered) valve for the rebalancing of the earth's resources, essential for life to continue. Sitting in his studio we talk about the Paris agreement, which Trump has recently repudiated. We talk about the irony of this situation, how all criticism of the Paris agreement is apparently being washed away in a gesture of strategic retrenchment: in the face of a radically re-energised right, the previously-compromised middle ground of political centrism – as represented by suddenly-glorified statesmen like Macron and Trudeau – suddenly seems like 'enough'. There is little awareness, in the commentary on Trump's actions, of the fact – previously widely agreed – that the Paris agreement was itself an unsatisfactory compromise, a political fudge calibrated to appease industrial lobbyists while simulating ecological 'progress'.

'The economics are inescapable.'
— MC

I ask McBride again about 'theatricality.' She says these works are not immersive. She wants a proximity to the real – a recalculation of the urban environment or the gallery environment or the otherwise shared public space. She wants the work to be unnerving, uncanny; she does not want it to be 'transportive.'

This question of theatricality comes up again the next time we meet, a month or so later. (The workshop now is thrumming with activity. Every booth is occupied.) For this second meeting, some more work – a mould with which she is making bollard-like concrete objects. More importantly, she explains, she has worked up a series of drawings. These are no more than crude sketches, tacked to the wall; she laughs at how unfinished they look. But this is how she works, allowing looseness, resisting fixity too early in the process. Alongside the sketches are some photos of the gallery space itself, and a floor map, on which she has started to make marks. In particular, she is considering the introduction of some partition walls, to rearrange the space. These would be self-supporting, she says. They are not architectural interventions. Again she mentions their 'untheatricality.' She does not want any of the apparatus concealed. No trickery. No moment of revelation.

She goes further this time; her intention, in this, is to level the dynamic between maker and viewer. She does not propose to illuminate anything with her work. She does not want to assume some position of superiority. She is modest about her aims, to choreograph a group of objects. It is the materials, she says, which articulate something. Her practice is simply an investigation. The work figures itself out. The most she can make, with a show, is a proposition; each show builds upon the last only in the accumulation of technical skills.

— AMcB

When we do finally meet at Fire Station, Gibney has begun making work. Beside his desk a waist-height metal stand is lit with what seems to be an LED strip. From it, a wire dangles. On the ground beside it is a small speaker and a Pepsi bottle half filled with liquid and electronics. Gibney's laptop is open on the desk; the coded instructions of a computer programme are laid out on the screen like set of unintelligible diagrams. This is Gibney's work in a rough, unfinished state. I sit down next to him, hardly knowing what to expect.

Before he shows me the work in action, he fills me in on what he's been reading: a book of essays by the late-Victorian philosopher William James, on 'radical empiricism'. Gibney runs through a rapid gloss of a philosophical concept with which I am utterly unfamiliar. He mentions, at one point, 'uninterrupted experience'. I know a little about James, a philosopher whose influence on literary modernism has been widely acknowledged. Still, though I don't want to say so, sitting with Gibney in his booth at Fire Station, I am slightly disorientated.

We proceed to talk, again, about the work made and exhibited in Korea, with which, he says, he now realises he went as far as he could in one direction. He used the radio receivers to enact a kind of contemplation of space. But 'space' remained a subject, an abstraction. What he wants now is to find a way to allow space *itself* to play a role in the work.

Hence the work he has been doing since, he says, indicating the various objects on the floor beside us. He plugs and unplugs two cables, then leans over and clicks a few buttons on his laptop.

'Just wait and listen.'

The speaker on the floor produces a single guttural syllable. Then another. Another. As it gasps its way through a set of isolated sounds, the bulbs in the Pepsi bottle light up; the liquid begins to bubble and steam. Another sensor is designed to react to this steam, to convey this information back to the computer programme, which will process it and translate it into its alphabet of sounds, to be reproduced again by the speaker. I realise I am looking at a kind of circuit board, controlled by a series of sensors; a self-generating work, making use of organic and digital flows to perpetuate itself, creating an unscripted sequence of unforeseeable sounds.

The work operates in fits and starts, giving the uncanny impression that it is communicating with itself.

— AG

Ní Ghrioghair talks me through some of the parameters and references in which her work is embedded. In particular she mentions two French historical figures. Etienne-Louis Boullée was a French neo-classical architect, notable now mainly for those of his works that went unrealised – many of them, like his 'Cenotaph for Newton', ludicrously impractical, involving severely inflated classical forms, domes, columns, designed to convey what he described as an emotionally 'committed' classicism. Marie-Antoine Carême, on the other hand, was a chef who worked with architectural forms to create extraordinary decadent set-pieces, often based on architectural structures and drawings; also the originator of many of the tropes of French haut-cuisine. Carême cooked for the King Of England and the Tzar in St Petersburg, creating fantastical facsimiles of famous buildings, an absurd historical amalgamation of architecture and food, verging on the kitsch in a way that seems particularly appealing to Ní Ghrioghair, whose work is anything but 'tasteful'.

This term, 'taste', with its gastronomic connotations, is of some interest here. First usage of the word to describe aesthetic appreciation in the 1670s; it was Joseph Addison, however, who did more than anyone else to popularise the idea of 'taste' as a mark of cultivation. A coffee-house intellectual in early eighteenth-century London, Addison was a quintessential Enlightenment figure, expounding in his famous periodical, *The Spectator*, a decorous internationalism, an idea of 'civilised' society founded upon canons of taste, culture, and gentility. In his disquisitions on 'taste,' Addison configured a common metaphorical language drawing upon references to food and consumption; this metaphor was conjoined with strains of Enlightenment thought, founded upon the works of the classic philosophers, as well as a particular neo-classical style of art and architecture.

Ní Ghrioghair works against this tradition of 'enlightened' civilisation, opposing the tasteful, implicitly male, western ideal of the 'classic' with her use of impure materials, collapsed forms, and lurid colours. She is interested in exploring this fault-line, exploring what might be considered 'tacky', and asking why. Ní Ghrioghair plays with the bleached artificiality of the classical tradition, the false classic 'impersonality' or 'purity' of white marble. Her work is a riposte to such seemliness; she wants to include impurities in it, to provoke with it distaste, revulsion, disgust.

— DNíG

*McBride talks about how, for this exhibition, she might try to extend the work beyond the physical confines of the gallery, the way the concrete bench in Red Square tethered her degree show to the outside world. This could be as simple a thing as putting posters up in the vicinity. Or perhaps there will be some human aspect to the work in the gallery itself? Not a performance, though: she is very clear about this. Her work is not performative. It is not 'durational', she says. She mentions duration specifically; that is the word she uses. Consequently I think of Michael Fried's famous opposition – outlined in *Art and Objecthood* in 1967 – between visual art and theatre, in which he mounted a critique of Minimalism on the basis of its theatricality, its foregrounding of process, duration, and context ('objecthood') over the sacrosanct integrity of the art work. I ask McBride about this, if this is what she means when she talks about untheatricality. Does she want to retain the work's material integrity, its existence outside of time? But this isn't what she means either. This isn't 'static' work. She doesn't want it to read like a tableaux. Rather, it is not 'durational' in that it does not – she does not want it to – 'start' or 'finish'. She wants the work to be continuous, in time as well as space; for there to be no clear sense of where the work ends, no limits upon its extendability. She wants the work to be continuous with its surroundings.*

Continuousness rather than duration; another fine distinction, an important one too, I realise, beginning to think through its implications, beginning to share in the rumination.

For a while we stand there silently, peaceably, separately thinking things through.

— AMcB

Continuousness: this is a quality in Gibney's work too, the creation of feedback loops, digital circuits, increasingly refined devices for the removal, wherever possible, of the artist's hand.

I confess to Gibney that I haven't read William James. I know of him as the person who first theorised the 'stream of consciousness,' a concept applied (in very different ways) by writers like Proust, Woolf, and Joyce. 'Radical empiricism', as Gibney explains, is a related philosophical model of experience, encompassing in its terms both the onslaught of immediate sensory data as well as the abstraction of logical hypotheses. It is an idea of the world that embraces discontinuity, complexity, the ineffable.

I'm reminded, now, of the work of Henri Bergson, who – around the same time – articulated a philosophy of 'flux,' a theorisation of unconstrained subjectivity, an idea of relativity in the field of philosophy that seems connected to ideas of relativity in other fields, a refutation of empirical notions of order and rationality; a philosophy of 'vitalism.' This seems an apt association, talking to Gibney: about his proposed removal of the human agent from the work, his devolution of control.

— AG

In the 1920s this idea of 'flux' became a point of debate in England. Wyndham Lewis argued that it represented the apotheosis of a kind of 'time-cult', a glorification of pure relativism in science and business and art, an idea of unimpeded subjectivity which, in fact, eroded the stable bases upon which critical interrogation – of the iniquities of global capitalism, for instance – once stood. I talk to Ní Ghrioghair about this: her work makes a critical virtue of a precisely opposite principle, re-inserting time (age, decay, impurity) into the purportedly timeless.

— DNíG

Free-standing, unattached, modularisable, 'lean,' transportable, extendable: these are words that have come up in the conversation. McBride does not want to disguise the work's 'objectness'. She wants it self-sufficient, its supports showing. She does not want it to melt seamlessly into its surroundings. Yet she wants it to be 'continuous'. By this, I realise, she doesn't mean it should be physically continuous, like Martin Creed's 'protrusions', say. Instead she wants the work to feel like it could be anywhere, that it could extend, repeat, duplicate; that there is no clear distinction between the work and another ordinary object in the world.

— AMcB

One of the points of origin for *Deadfall* came from watching a Werner Herzog documentary, *Happy People: A Year in the Taiga* (2010), which focuses upon the lives of Siberian trappers in a village on the Yenisei River: their interactions with his environment, the traditions within which they work, living in line with the land, yet connected, umbilically, to the fur trade, dealing in the exchange of a luxury good within a complex network of global commodity capital, with all the fiction and risk that entails.

Clare remembers being fascinated with the portrayal of this way of life; nevertheless, it has taken a long time for *Deadfall* to develop. For two years now he has been making these small traps, working on the form, making sense of it. And at the end of this long painstaking process, the work in the gallery may simply break.

For Clare, it is important that this work is breakable – that it might actually crack and collapse in the gallery. He hasn't yet worked out how this aspect of the work will be conveyed to the viewers. Will its breakability be announced? Or will this alter public interactions with the work? And if it does fall and smash, what then? Will it be cleaned up, removed, or just left on the gallery floor, an illustration of its own fissure? At this stage, he hasn't decided. He only knows that the gesture must be sincere. If this is a work about commodity systems – the impartation of value to materials – then the possibility of its breakage, its loss, must be genuine. *Deadfall* is a work imbued – like the financial superstructure of which it is a metonym, like the natural environment from which it derives – with risk.

— MC

We go on to talk about language. (The conversation is headily, enjoyable nebulous – not unlike Gibney's work itself.) Gibney is interested in biolinguistics, in the sources of language. We talk about the sound script for this work. For now, he is using the same lines of his own poetry used for the work produced during the Korean residency. I ask him whether there is some way of generating language that could be as reactive and organic as the other elements of this work. He smiles. He has been thinking about this very question.

— AG

The other word that comes up – the word that comes up more than any other – is banality. McBride's work is an exercise in the banal. It fades into its surroundings. When she says this, I think of Robert Wasler's writing, his soft plod through the banalities of service and bureaucracy, with prose apparently designed – in W.G. Sebald's words – to 'dissolve upon reading'. McBride's work seems to operate on something of a similar register. I think, too, how Walter Benjamin's described Wasler's writing (a description which could, I feel, with some slight adjustment, equally apply to McBride's work): 'each sentence has the sole purpose of rendering the previous one forgotten'.

— AMcB

Ní Ghrioghair's works are named according to a definite schema: capitals and deflated capitals and the smaller, more abstract-looking 'shafts'. When we meet in Fire Station, I see only the one 'deflated capital' in the workshop, but later I will see others at MART, bent and folded in unpredictable ways, their particular deliquescence unforeseeable, surprising. The capitals and shafts bend and spool around the two adjoining galleries. One of them looks like a coiled turd on the concrete gallery floor.

— DNIG

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