

# Anna Berndtson

## Fire Station Artists' Studios and Arts & Disability Ireland *Studio Award* — 2010

### Fire Station Artists' Studios

Located in Dublin's North East Inner City, Fire Station Artists' Studios was established in 1993 to support professional visual artists. It provides subsidised combined living and working studios for Irish and international artists, large scale sculpture workshop facilities and training opportunities for artists. A key policy of Fire Station is to contribute to the debate on collaborative and socially engaged arts practice, through a commissioning process that incorporates critique.

Past projects commissioned by Fire Station include *Inner Art* (1997), *The Memorial* (1998-2000), *Consume* (1997-2000), *Daedal(us)* (2003), *Moore Street Lending Library* (2005), *100 Flowers to Bloom* (2006), *12 Angry Films* (2006) and *Two Monuments* by Artur Zmijewski (2009). Since 2001 Fire Station has run an annual Studio Award which supports professional visual artists who work in a collaborative and socially engaged context. Since 2007 Fire Station, in partnership with Arts & Disability Ireland, has managed a studio award for visual artists with disabilities. Past award winners include Noemi Lakmaier (2008-9) and Anna Berndtson (2010).

Anna Berndtson is the winner of the Fire Station Artists' Studios and Arts and Disability Ireland ( ADI) Studio Award 2010. Performance is the foundation of Berndtson's practice, particularly in the form of long duration performance installations. Her practice also incorporates video and photography where the artist places herself in the centre of the work.

Berndtson was born in Malmö, Sweden in 1972. She moved to the UK in 1992 where she studied Theatre Performance at Dartington College of Arts. After graduating in 1999 she moved to Berlin and in 2001 joined the performance class of Marina Abramovic at the HBK Braunschweig, Germany. In 2003 she co founded the performance duo Tall Blond Ladies (TBL) with Irina Runge. She has performed and exhibited work extensively including Rencontres Internationales, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin ( 2010), The 10th Open International Performance Art Festival, Beijing, China (2009) Artists Space , New York (2007) PS1 MoMA, New York (2006) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, (2005) and Venice Biennale ( Recycling the Future –VV2 Performance event (2003). During her residency in Dublin in 2010 she performed in the LAB, Mill Streets Studios, IMMA (as launch of Connect mentoring programme) and in Dublin Theatre Festival.

[www.berndtson-art.net](http://www.berndtson-art.net)

[www.tallblondladies.com](http://www.tallblondladies.com)

## Introduction

Clodagh Kenny,  
*Fire Station Artists' Studios*

Padraig Naughton,  
*Arts and Disability Ireland*

Building on its partnership initiated with Arts and Disability Ireland (ADI) in 2007, and following an independent Access Audit by UK Consultant Ann Poynton in 2007, Fire Station Artists' Studios entered into a formal partnership on our 'Studio Award for an Artist with a Disability' Sept 2008 — August 2009. The aim of the award was to support the professional career development of disabled visual artists whose practice explores 'Disability Arts'. Upon evaluation of the partnership and the award in general we have changed the eligibility to a disabled artist with no specific emphasis on Disability Arts.

The Studio award consists of a rent free live and work studio for one year and a bursary of €5,000 and access grant of €2,000. In addition the artist has IT support, use of high end digital equipment and digital resource area as well as use of Sculpture Workshop facilities, technical and administration support. Since 2010 the artist had an additional opportunity of an exhibition in The LAB, Dublin City Council Arts Office and we introduced a mentoring element to the programme.

Anna Berndtson, a Swedish performance artist based in Germany, was the 2010 Studio Award recipient. Her very active and successful residency included a performance in The LAB, an exhibition and performance in Mill Street Studios with her mentee, Amanda Elena Conrad, and three targeted studio visits to her studio in Fire Station by Irish disabled visual artists during the residency. Other projects Anna participated in included a performance at the launch of the CONNECT mentoring programme at IMMA and a re-performing of Amanda Coogan's, 'Yellow', as part of the 2010 Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. In addition the artist worked with students in Pobalscoil Rosmini in Drumcondra culminating in 5 live durational performance pieces by 22 students. Anna engaged fully in every opportunity offered her and this added to the volume of work achieved in a mere ten months.

This year we introduced the pilot mentoring programme with support from the Arts Council and CONNECT and the success of this programme has ensured our commitment to developing a mentoring element to the award in the future. For the 2011 award we restructured it into two six month residencies and offered it to two Irish artists: Ruth Le Gear — a sculpture/installation artist based in Galway and Hugh O'Donnell — a performance artist based in Belfast.

This relationship between Fire Station and ADI came about because both organisations were attempting to raise the level and quality of support they were offering to visual artists with disabilities and their commitment to this sector. Fire Station supports professional visual artists and we have throughout our history encouraged and actively sought at least one board member with a deep understanding of the issues facing artists with disabilities. We programmed and supported artists with disabilities over the years but without a clear strategy until this partnership. Arts & Disability Ireland as a national arts development organisation is striving to promote the engagement of people with disabilities in the arts at the highest level and consequently sees its partnership with the Fire Station as a way of supporting and raising the profile of visual artists with disabilities.

Both Fire Station and ADI see this partnership and Studio Award as very strategic in terms of capacity building for disabled visual artists in Ireland and Northern Ireland. As the Fire Station has witnessed in previous years when advertising for this award, the pool of disabled professional visual artists in Ireland and Northern Ireland is very small and underdeveloped compared to the UK and this Studio Award is an opportunity to bridge that gap.

### Note:

The term 'Disability Arts' refers to art that is informed by the personal and/or collective experience of the 'disabled self'. That is, creative work across all art form that has as its core the influence upon the artist of, and responses to, a disabling world.

## Anna Berndtson

*'I have a hunting licence but I couldn't get a driving licence'*

This quote above sums up the interesting conundrum that is the performance artist and recipient of the 2010 Fire Station Artists Studios and Arts and Disability Ireland Studio award, Anna Berndtson. It both reflects the head-on approach Anna takes to her place in the world and the oddities in the ordinariness of life that performance art is best at highlighting.

I was invited to conduct an interview with Anna as a result (I suspect) of being spotted at Anna's four hour performance at the Lab in September last.<sup>1</sup> It was no accident that I attended the performance. Anna had been persistent in letting everyone in the arts know that she was in Dublin and was here for business. She introduced herself to me in her first week in Ireland as she seemingly visited every art event, opening, talk or performance seeking out contacts and future collaborators for her sojourn at Fire Station.

What follows is an edited interview I conducted with Anna in November. I was armed with some questions that I wanted to put to Anna as a result of visiting her *Monto* performance and exhibition. *Monto* included a compendium of Anna's previous performances in the mini gallery at the entrance to the LAB which felt like a waiting room in a doctor's surgery where one could admire the successful outcome of the physician's previous endeavours. The central gallery was taken over by Anna's performance while a small blackbox at the back of the gallery held *Dream Sky* (clouds & blue skies ).<sup>2</sup> I was already intrigued by the evident difference in the new work produced in Dublin and the work that she had previously made.

*Jonathan Carroll*

JC: Lets get straight to the point of our meeting, the purpose of which is an exposition of any new work that came out of your time in Dublin. I know that you have moved around quite a bit in your life, Sweden, UK, Berlin and now Lübeck, where you are based, all places that I would imagine are more fertile grounds for performance art.

AB: Well I knew of Ireland and performance in Ireland through Amanda Coogan before I came here. She is someone who has contributed to the acceptance and knowledge of performance art. There are also some names now that have come out of Ireland. Despite what you think, in Sweden there is very little happening in performance art. Maybe in the 60's or the 70's for example the very small Fluxus movement (basically one person). Then it would almost disappear and now it is slowly coming back. But I find it challenging to go to places where performance is not necessarily accepted as fine art.

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<sup>1</sup> *Monto* a performance by Anna Berndtson 2/9/10 at the Lab, Dublin City Council Arts Office, Foley Street, Dublin. [www.thelab.ie](http://www.thelab.ie)

<sup>2</sup> *Dream Sky* (clouds & blue skies ) Video work, 7 min, 36 sec, 16:9 DVD- PAL, no sound 2010.

## Working Lactans

### *Live Performance*

Duration: 10 hours over 3 days

Location: Mill Street Studios,  
Dublin, Ireland, 2010

Photo: John Beattie

© Anna Berndtson

*Dressed in an office suit, I stand with my jacket and shirt unbuttoned, holding a baby doll. I put down the doll, button up the shirt and move over to an exercise bike. I cycle on the bike. After wiping the sweat from my brow, I move over to a shelf with a toaster, bread and butter. I toast and butter the bread and offer it to the public. I go back to the baby doll...*



JC: Yes, performance art seems to have a missionary zeal about it.

AB: Well you have to somehow, because it is still questioned by a lot of art practitioners from other areas and culture workers in general. I feel like you still have to defend it and explain it particularly to the common man on the street.

JC: So your experience of a Dublin audience was no different?

AB: Maybe I entered a performance scene here, because I have met a lot of people who are either practising or have a lot of interest in performance. I feel I may have landed in the right place here. I feel it is a good place to be for performance.

JC: When I was thinking of that question I was wondering about performance in general, why is it that performance seems to have more of a mentoring lineage. We know Amanda Coogan, like yourself, joined the performance class of Marina Abramovic. There is this sort of disciple-like way that you practice together.

AB: I don't know if that is true, is it true?

JC: Well you particularly advertise on your website that you are available to give workshops which is not something you would see on a painters or sculptors website. I am always coming across the Abramovic disciples like Coogan and in turn the followers of Coogan. Pioneers and a lineage.

AB: Well for me it is very important to pass on my knowledge to the next generation. I don't think it is particular to performance, because it is fresh and new, if you look at the roots they are only 100 years old (in the present understanding of performance art). It is so young but it is important not to forget that. I see how performance artists are struggling in Sweden, how they are not properly supported in art school because the teachers did not come from this area. Maybe they are supported in what they are doing but there were not people there to offer them a knowledge, and that is what I think is very important, to impart that knowledge. In fact here in Dublin I was invited to teach in a transition year art class. Here I was encouraging, if not future performance artists, then a potential audience. I could give them a knowledge of how they could read performance. How could they know if they didn't even know it exists. I think duration in performance is more important than ever, especially as we are in an era where instant gratification is sought and the edited version (short Tweets) lords it over the extended version. I think that performance can also have a right to be boring.

JC: Somebody too was appointed as your mentee while you were here.

AB: Yes, Amanda Elena Conrad, she wasn't really a performance artist in that sense, she did performance for camera, so we were concentrating on very different things about her art practise, talking about it and writing about it and so on. The Fire Station, who put us together had suggested that we don't treat it as a student teacher relationship but rather as a collaboration. In the end we had an exhibition in Mill Street Studios where I performed for the duration of the show and she had a video installation.<sup>3</sup>

## Body Frame

*Live Performance*

Duration: 30 min

Location: Connect Launch,  
Irish Museum of Modern Art,  
Dublin, Ireland, 2010

Photo: Declan Rooney

© Anna Berndtson

*I stand naked in the room framing a stretched printed canvas with my body. There is dried white acrylic paint, following the outline of my body.*

*The print is of "The Sistine Madonna".*





## Monto

*Live Performance*

Duration: 4 hours

Location: The LAB Gallery, Dublin,  
Ireland, 2010

Photo: mc kindsmüller

© Anna Berndtson

*I stretch a washing line in the space.  
Out of a washing basket I take out a  
damp skirt. I iron the skirt and hang it  
up on the washing line. There is a big pile  
of children's shoes in the space, I go to the  
pile and take out a pair. Next to the pile  
is also a bowl of soapy water and a brush.  
I clean some shoes and place them in  
relation to the skirt I just hung up. After I  
have placed the shoes at the skirt, I move  
to another part of the room, stretch out a  
new washing line and start over with a  
new skirt out of the washing basket.*



JC: One of the things you would impart to a trainee would be the courage to do and the idea that in performance you must be able to be vulnerable, to put yourself in vulnerable situations and espouse the necessity to act. Are these important to pass on?

AB: Well it is a knowledge of your limits and a decision how far you pass them (maybe as yet undecided before you start a performance). What is important is this knowledge of yourself and your own limits, courage to cross them and courage to stop before it is too late. I personally don't perform where I cut myself or something like that, I don't think that type of performance is important to me to do in 2010.

JC: Lets get back to what you were doing here and particularly *Monto* in the Lab. What was *Monto* about and does it, as I read it, reflect a certain isolation you felt in your time in Ireland? And the other work shown alongside *Monto*, *Dream Sky* is the first work of yours that I have seen, that does not feature yourself. Is this a new departure in your work?

AB: When I arrived in Dublin, I was struck by the female figure here. I'm talking about the iconic female body as exemplified in Mary holding the baby Jesus and so on but also the female figures on the streets near Fire Station, and how Ireland still has large Catholic families (compared to the other places I have lived). I knew about this before I arrived in Ireland but still I somehow was shocked by it. So I was interested in the time that the woman spends with the family, the development of the female figure, what role does she play in society, the nurturing role within the family but somehow excluded from a more inclusive involvement in a working social life. Obviously this is a stereotype not true to all but I thought it is a very much visible stereotype here than anywhere else I have noticed.

JC: In *Monto* we see you doing mundane tasks.

AB: Well I met a local historian Terry Fagan who told me about the area around Foley Street (formerly Montgomery Street) previously known as Monto (the red light district of its day) and the location of one of the infamous Magdalene laundries. At one point he said something about shoeless children and a rising of the people that could have been prevented if they had given out free shoes. I got caught up in this story and thought of families and therefore I wanted to create a room about the families in which the father figure is absent. A skirt represents the mother figure and the cleaned shoes placed by the skirts created the family. But importantly I also included some personal element in the work with the story of my great grandmother who used to wash people's clothes. It is important to have something relating to yourself in performance, not just what you garner from the local area. It would not be as potent without this personal history.

## Yellow RePerformed

### *Live Performance*

Location: Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival,

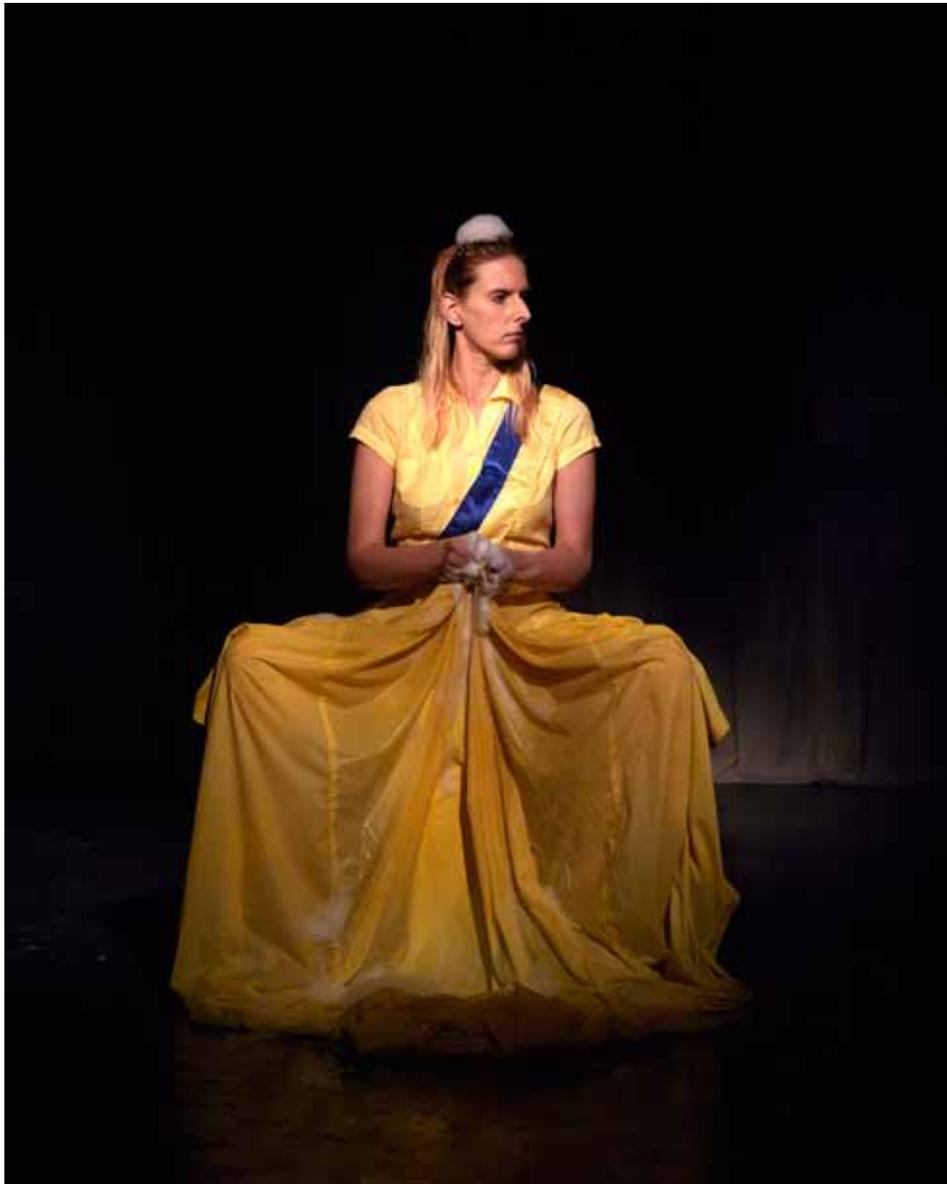
St. Mary' Abbey, Dublin, Ireland, 2010

Original idea: Amanda Coogan

Photo: Angel Luis Gonzalez

© Anna Berndtson

*Dressed in a large yellow dress,  
I continuously wash my enormous  
skirt in a bucket of soapy water.*



JC: I am reminded of what Abramovic says about the function of the artist being that of the servant but also that the performer must give the audience an important role in the work via clear instructions. I didn't feel I had any part in your work in this instance, yet you were acting as a servant or a servile character. This is much different from your other work which uses the female sex in a provocative way. You seemed happy to be ignored in this performance.

AB: I am really wondering what happened a bit because yes *Monto* is very different from my other works. I think I got caught up in the authenticity. I was caught up in the processes I was going through, I ended up with this "authentic" performance but realizing during it that this is not where I am comfortable (you can not predict this). What happened? Why is this now not working? You know it was all so clear in my head and it was all so authentic (if there is that in performance).

JC: So what was the desired outcome of this performance then? Authenticity?

AB: Maybe to be just working. I was removed from the performance but why was I feeling uncomfortable in it?, what was "the mistake"?, the problem, I don't know, I think it has to do with the fact that I was acting! and I was acting because I was pretending that I had no problem. The problem I have is that I don't see very well, and I was pretending that I didn't have this problem. This is the point I have ended up. If I do a performance where I have to pretend or where I am pretending that I have no visual problem then it is not authentic at all. This is a problem particular to myself (my disability). On the other hand when I reperformed Amanda Coogan's performance *Yellow* ( after *Monto*) I felt this is what I am good at, this is it!, why have I moved away from this more and more, to find this "authentic" performance?, when I ended up going somewhere where I was acting completely, by pretending to see perfectly when I can't.

But inversely in *Yellow* while I am moving in unnatural slow motion I am still very authentic when I am doing it. All this is like a big balloon over my head at the moment.<sup>4</sup>

JC: Would all these problems have something to do with your entry into visual arts via a drama background?, would you be more conscious of this divide between performance and acting?

AB: I was asked this question only a few weeks ago, but I don't think so, no.

JC: Damn I thought I was original!

AB: Obviously I don't know because I only know I can't remove that experience. I think it is the same with my colleagues who do not come from the same background.

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<sup>4</sup> *Yellow*, Re-performed, live performance. Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival, St Mary' Abbey 3rd October 2010.

**Dream Sky** (clouds & blue skies)

*Video Loop* – 7 min 36 sec

16:9 – PAL

no Sound

2010

Video Stills

© Anna Berndtson

*To the left of the picture a tap is seen against a blue background. White clouds emerge out of the tap, filling up the entire frame. The tap is now seen against a white background. Blue sky emerges out of the tap, filling up the entire frame. The tap is now seen against a blue background...*



JC: Is it not something particular to performance that there is the chance the work will not succeed and the judgment of this comes pretty quickly according to the reaction of the audience? This must give you a certain nervous adrenalin rush.

AB: I don't think the adrenalin comes from the worry whether the work succeeds or not. You should be prepared that whatever you do is a success. What I am saying is that the flaws in *Monto* are my own more theoretical problems and I am hoping this does not impinge on the audiences experience of the work.

JC: In the Lab you also showed a video work, *Dream Sky*.

AB: *Dream Sky* was actually a dream I had in 2009 and I brought it with me. As you rightly pointed out, this is the first piece where it is my mind and not my body that is involved. I found it fascinating, something that is inside my body trying to get out. So I chose video, I could have made an animation which would have been closer to my dream. I don't yet know what this work means to me.

JC: *Dream Sky* therefore is important as it deals with an area where we all have a disability, it's the common struggle of trying to interpret what you are seeing in your mind. Very interesting territory you have started on in Dublin.

AB: Yeah, it is there but as yet I don't know what to do with it, it is a very exciting point in the development of an artwork.

JC: Pina Bausch spoke of collecting characters from real-life for her dance theatre, for you how much of your interaction with the city makes it into your performances, what is the exchange?

AB: I think when I came to Dublin I blossomed again, coming from a small town in Germany I felt I had wool on my brain, I was really not getting anywhere and also what I discovered more and more is Germany doesn't have very good street lights, but here in Dublin I found I could really get around at night. And so I thought I need to make the most of my time at this residency. In Dublin I get input, I feel the vibrancy of the city which rubs off on me and I get more energy. I am hoping to carry this back home with me.

JC: Well that is the opposite of what I thought, I thought you were trying to shake us up!



## Take a bow!

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## Arts & Disability Ireland

Arts & Disability Ireland (ADI) is the national arts development organisation promoting cultural equality for people with disabilities in the arts. ADI has a lead role in creating opportunities for connection and engagement for those involved in the arts and disability sector. ADI exists to promote the involvement and engagement in the arts by people with disabilities in Ireland at the highest level, as practitioners, employees, arts managers, cultural leaders, board members, advisors, participants and audiences. ADI works across all art-forms including; film, music, visual arts, dance, architecture, literature, theatre, traditional arts and circus.

ADI seeks to help create the conditions for people with disabilities and the disability community, in all its diversity, to connect with mainstream arts rather than creating a separatist parallel disability arts culture. It is for this reason ADI's vision is of an Ireland where people with disabilities can fully contribute to and experience the arts and be an integral part of Irish cultural life. ADI works with the arts sector nationally in a variety of roles providing advice, information, training, services and artistic programme to advocate and promote an mainstream arts and disability agenda and in partnership with others to create innovative arts practice opportunities