

Hugh O' Donnell Biography

Born in Dublin, Hugh O' Donnell studied art, design and mixed media at Ballyfermot Senior College before moving to Belfast where he specialised in sculpture and completed an MFA in University of Ulster (2006) with distinction. His work has been exhibited widely nationally and internationally in galleries/non-profit organisations, alternative and site-specific locations, including Platform Arts Belfast (2012), Trace: installation Artspace, Wales, Vertigo-ALO: Iowa, USA (2011), and FADO: Toronto Free Gallery, Canada (2010).

O' Donnell describes his work as performance/action art, which also incorporates installation, drawing and video, in which he explores themes around human rights, sexuality and gender. In 2011/2012 Hugh was awarded a 6 month residency in Fire Station Artists' Studios, Dublin, as part of the 'Fire Station and Arts & Disability Ireland Studio Award'. The main focus of O' Donnell's work for his residency was live performance (Exchange Gallery, Block T and the LAB) as well as drawing and video. He has an upcoming residency in Linz Austria in 2013. O' Donnell is also on the board of directors of Bbeyond in Belfast and is an audio describer for theatres and galleries for people who are visually impaired.

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www.platformartsbelfast.com





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After a long week in Fire Station, I used to love a G&T on a Sunday, looking out over the court yard and listening to 'Sunday Sun' by Beck



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Artefacts, Action, and the Affective

In theatre, the chair is a prop, secondary to the actor's activity. A relationship does not necessarily develop between actor and prop. In contrast, the chair appears in Hugh O'Donnell's performances as an artefact and there is an ongoing relationship between the artist and the chair. Although numerous chairs appear in O'Donnell's performances, there is one particular dining room style chair that returns and is singled out for Chair Action.

The way that the artist's body approaches the chair challenges its original function, and as the body negotiates all of the chair's surfaces, it takes on a presence of its own. The artist's body slides over and wraps around the chair, body and chair sometimes wrestling, sometimes embracing but always in close contact. Defying the hard edges, sharp angles and rigidity of the rendered wooden shape, the action of O'Donnell's pliable and adaptable body of bones, skin and muscle, imagines the chair as a live protagonist. The relationship between artist and protagonist ranges from violent to tender, the artist's actions imbuing the chair with a range of figurations; the emblem of authority, the father, a personification of the artist.

The Chair Action that I describe here was just one element of the durational performance *Aixelsyd doesn't harm your health* by Hugh O'Donnell, which took place at The LAB in Dublin on 11th May 2012. Over three hours O'Donnell engaged in a range of activities that involved the artefacts installed in the performance space.

The performance space itself was defined as encompassing the entire floor area of The LAB's ground floor gallery. O'Donnell identified his field of operation with a scattering of flour across the floor in the gaps between the artefacts. This wall-to-wall use of the floor area brought the audience directly into the site of the activity rather than allowing them to watch from outside or beyond an invisible boundary line. This proximity to the action created the potential for a more haptic viewing experience, where it is not only the viewer's visual sense that is activated. 'While the visual gives trajectories – sightlines – between the viewer and the surfaces of art, the haptic defines the affective charge – the felt dimensionality – of a spatial context.'¹ The viewer's body occupies the same field as the artist and his activity and as such the viewer's reading of the work can be somatosensory.

Artefacts such as the chair and Virgin Mary statuette evoked a visual sense, whilst the precarious balancing of the artist's body on a unstable tower of mattress, table and chair and the smell of the raw liver evoked other senses more associated with touch; the haptic. The tension created by the possibility of the artist falling and the stomach-churning aroma of too-warm dead flesh activates the haptic sense:

The haptic sense, comprising the tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses, describes aspects of engagement that are qualitatively distinct from the capabilities of the visual sense. Where the visual sense permits a transcendent, distant and arguably disconnected, point-of-view, the haptic sense functions by contiguity, contact and resonance.

The haptic sense renders the surfaces of the body porous, being perceived at once inside, on the skin's surface, and in external space. It enables the perception of weight, pressure, balance, temperature, vibration and presence.²

One painted blue foot, a yellow reflective jacket, rolls of masking tape, framed handwritten text, a single-bed mattress, a dark green rope. Colour, shape and material all are relevant and have significances, which we as viewers may or may not acquire knowledge of. Although we might be predisposed to attempt a reading of the collection of artefacts installed, those artefacts resisted any cohesive reading of narrative. It is the artist and his activity that supports us as readers.

A plastic bag stuffed with multiples of itself may be the detritus of domestic consumption, but O'Donnell takes this intangible, unauthoritative and undesirable object and ascribes experience to it. At first mundane, his action of extracting and spinning the bags one-by-one, fills them with air and they waft to the ground. He draws our attention to what was once in the bags and we become privy to an aspect of the artist's personal life. The contents of a receipt read out loud include cat food, eggs, pickled onions, candles and bread. Although, the artist himself may not have used the bags and so they could be anybody's, they could be ours.

Universal and domestic also apply to the Virgin Mary statuette. As instantly recognisable as the plastic bags but with iconographic significance, the statuette enjoys a somewhat different cultural status to the plastic bag. Paradoxically, O'Donnell affords the Virgin Mary much less reverence than he does the plastic bags.

O'Donnell cuts open a vacuum packed bag of hearts. Like us, he doesn't want to touch them and uses the scissors as a tool to avoid the blood. A heart that once beat, is kicked and slides around the floor picking up a dusting of flour as though on the way to the frying pan. The Virgin's plastic head is thrust into one of the hearts. The strong visual juxtaposition of the animal flesh with the image of a saint connotes the Sacred Heart of Catholic tradition, but the irreverent placement of the heart on the Virgin's head warns us not to expect a devotional monologue. What we hear is a revised rendition of the prayer Hail Mary, which replaces 'grace' with an expletive and 'thee' with 'gee'. O'Donnell plays with language by altering the words of the Hail Mary, ensuring that we understand the subversive slang.³ Affording the prayer the same irreverence as the iconic Virgin, we might read these actions as a demonstration of contempt for the Catholic Church. However, the tone of O'Donnell's irreverence is not solemn but rather somewhat farcical. He derides the Catholic Church or at least its icons and traditions, exposing them as mere symbols.

O'Donnell communicates with the audience verbally asking how 'precarious' is spelt and asking for the time. He needs to know how long he has left to work: time becomes the field of operation as much as the physical space. We can see the physical effort required by the durational performance, understand hesitation as him thinking about the next activity and understand he is taking risks by deciding upon some actions spontaneously.

We are able to read and may strive for narrative, but the actions are only one aspect of the performance. Sounds, smells, temperature, the weather outside and our sense of the position of our own bodies (proprioception) all contribute to the haptic qualities of the performance: visual perception is not achieved in isolation from a resonance with the body. It becomes more difficult to read and master what we see purely intellectually because we are affectively involved.

The nature of our experience as haptic and our ability to identify with the work that he is carrying out encourages us to invest our time on the full duration of the performance, not unlike our commitment to identifying with and following the main protagonist of a film whilst they complete their journey, defeat the villain or reach their goal.

Installed in a separate room to the main performance space was the video Chair Action, which as the title suggests documents the chair action that we also see, live in the performance. However, the video does not take the form of a document in the context of performance documentation, but rather what we see is the action performed to the camera alone. Although as audience we were absent from the live event, the video compensates by allowing us a more voyeuristic look at the action that took place. We are able to see in more detail how the artist's body negotiates the chair: a foot finds a wooden support; the hands test possible positions for getting a satisfactory grip, whilst what determines a contact as satisfactory is not clear. The body rolls with the chair in answer only to gravity and momentum, the movements not forced or choreographed. The video is shown as a projection in a dark space and directly in front of the projected image is the chair from the video. It lies upside down as if it and the artist have just tumbled out of the video image onto the floor and the artist has carried on into the next room. The chair remains still, but not discarded and with the expectation that at any time, the Chair Action may begin again.

In reading O'Donnell's performance, as in reading any text, a structure begins to become apparent. Rather than linear, the performance is plotted as a montage of actions that may take place at any point within the spatial and temporal scene. This structure is reflected in the performance map hand drawn and stuck to the floor. O'Donnell's use of visual language, written text and spoken word contributed to a performance that was multi-faceted and required of us a multiplex reading.

Dr Angela Halliday is a visual artist and writer and is currently the manager of the Digital Arts Studios in Belfast.

¹ Jennifer Fisher, 'Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetic', Parachute, Vol. 87, 1997, p. 6, (pp. 4-11).

² Jennifer Fisher, 'Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetic', Parachute, Vol. 87, 1997, p. 6, (pp. 4-11).

³ O'Donnell asks one of the audience members if they understand what 'gee' means; the audience member does not so O'Donnell states that it is slang for vagina.

To quote Sean Hamil, 'If you are convinced of something, you are half way there to making it happen.'



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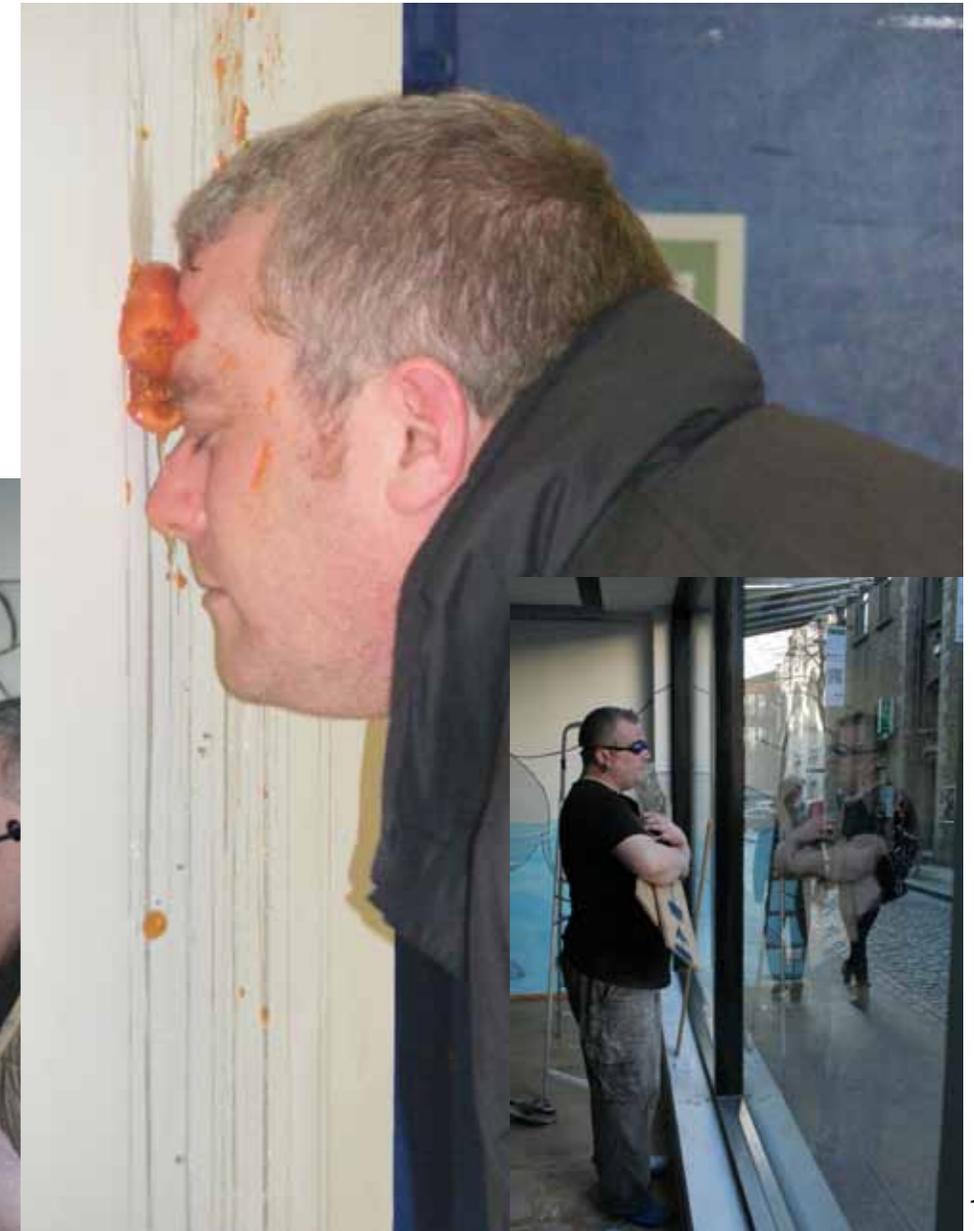
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I felt like Madonna on residency, even got the Evening Herald delivered to me by Christy every night without fail.



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Hugh O' Donnell images list

1. REMO 1. Platform Arts Gallery, Belfast 2011

2. REMO II –Exchange Gallery, Dublin 2012 (UNIT One)

Photo: Ciara Mc Keon

3-8 'Aixelsyd doesn't harm your health' the LAB, Dublin. 2012

Photo: Leo Devlin

9. WORK, Exchange Gallery, Dublin 2012

Photo: Ciara Mc Keon

10-11 'Sexy Lawn Mower' 2012

12. LYCOPENE: Dublin Artists' Forum , Tallaght,2012

Photo: Elizabeth Archibald

13-15 WORK, Exchange Gallery, Dublin 2012

Photo: Ciara Mc Keon

Cover image 'Sexy Lawn Mower' 2012

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.

Recent projects include 'Troubling Ireland' (2010-11) – a think tank for artists with the Danish curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion. Past projects include Two Monuments (2009) with Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, 12 Angry Films(2006) Jesse Jones, 100 Flowers to Bloom (2006) David Jacques, Moore Street Lending Library (2005). Since 2007 Fire Station in partnership with Arts & Disability Ireland, has run a studio award for visual artists with disabilities. Past award recipients are Noemi Lakmaier, (2008-9) Anna Berndtson (2010), Ruth Le Gear (2011) and Hugh O' Donnell (2011-12).

www.firestation.ie

Design: language.ie

Published by Fire Station Artists' Studios 2013

ISBN: 978-0-9565417-1-0

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