



A Constructive Lack of Agenda

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Circa*, No. 89 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 19-20

Published by: [Circa Art Magazine](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25563462>

Accessed: 06/11/2012 15:56

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A constructive lack of agenda

A recent 'themeless' symposium in New York included a number of Irish artists. Maeve Connolly reports.

Five29Ninety9, a one-day symposium, took place at St. Ann's Church in Brooklyn, New York. The event consisted of 24 thirty-minute presentations, an exhibition of work by organisers, speakers and audience members and a performance by SoundLab. The organisers, seven New York-based artists and curators, did not specify a theme. Instead invited speakers were asked to discuss any project or idea of immediate special interest to them. By locating the event in a Brooklyn project space, rather than in a gallery or lecture hall, the organisers attempted to move away from the pedagogical model of the symposium.

Several speakers responded by parodying the conventions of the 'artist's talk'. Tim Maul and Fred Szynanski collaborated on a video/audio work which was synthesised from the recording of a lecture previously given by Maul. This approach produced one of most impressive and innovative presentations, although Maul and Szynanski could perhaps have given some time to a discussion of the synthesis

techniques used. The curatorial collective May Day Productions and the artist Ciara Finnegan also deviated from the familiar model of the artist's talk. May Day assembled a chaotic panel of participants, which continued to change throughout their presentation and Finnegan avoided live speech by showing a video-taped 'interview'. These performances did serve to foreground art-world pretensions but both seemed somewhat misplaced within the context of the symposium itself.

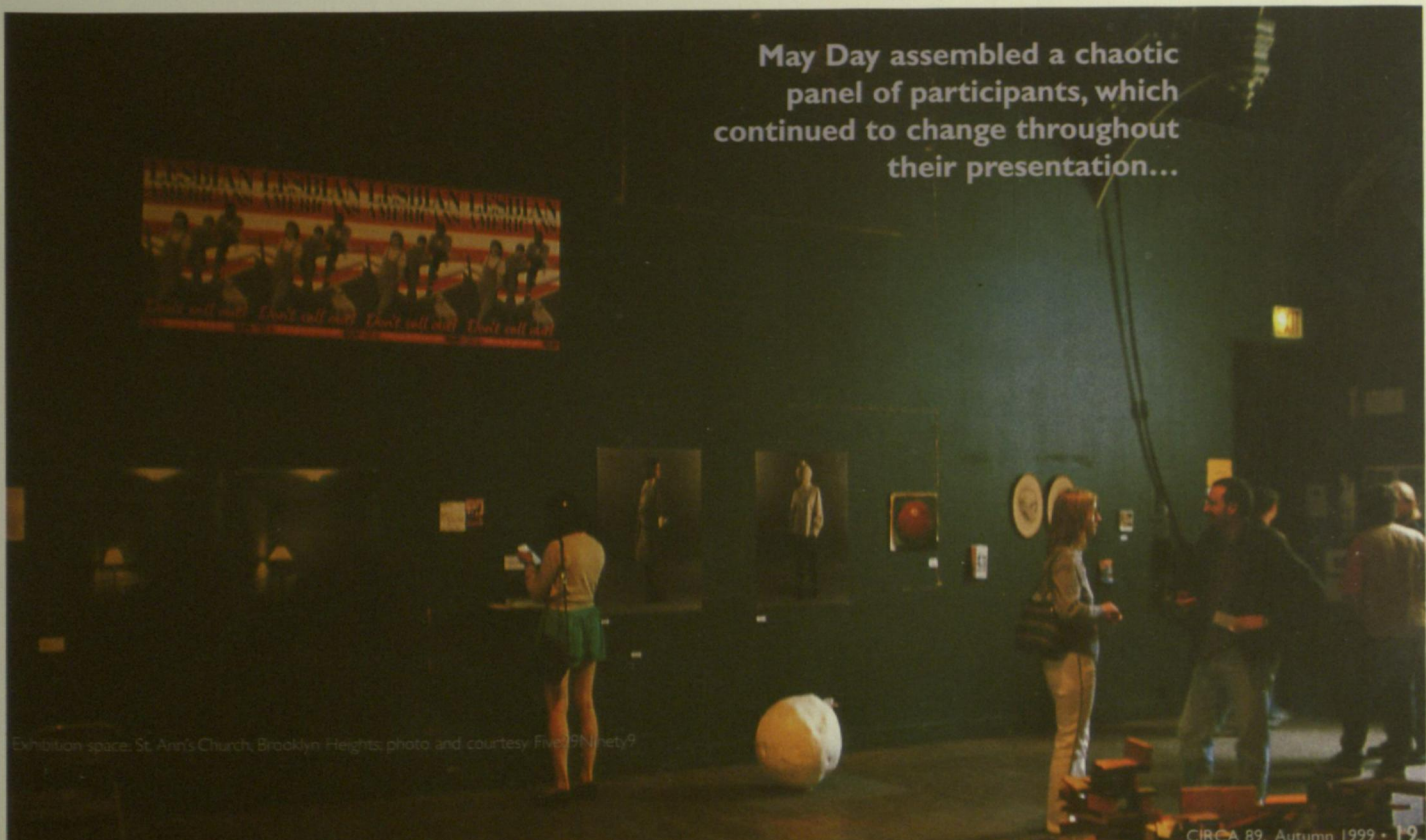
Several speakers used the lecture format to situate questions of audience and interpretation within a historical context. Florian Wust, a German artist working in New York, took advantage of the Gothic setting to outline a recent film project: an investigation of the religious iconography of war memorials entitled *Oh Muttererde, Vaterland*. Wust focused on the recurring use of the pietà; a symbol of universal suffering which, he argued, effectively eliminates historical specificity.

Artist Brian Hand examined the related

issues of audience and translation through a discussion of his installations *Foam* and *The Thug's Ditty*. Hand referenced the work of James Clarence Mangan which has informed his own practice. Mangan's nineteenth-century 'translations' of oriental poems, which actually lack an original source text, direct attention to the claims which can be made for any original. Lana Lin explored similar issues in her presentation, acknowledging the 'crisis of authenticity' which is central to questions of ethnic identity. Her recent work, entitled *Taiwanese Video Club*, describes the economy of Asian videotape exchange amongst suburban immigrant women. It incorporates images from serialised Taiwanese operas, accompanied by subtitles which pause, rewind and fast-forward, foregrounding the artist's own manipulation and interpretation of these texts. Lin proposes that, in order to assert cultural difference, originals and translations should be conceived of as equal partners, each exerting influence on the other.

Several artists also outlined research into

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Exhibition space, St. Ann's Church, Brooklyn Heights, photo and courtesy Five29Ninety9

the urban landscape. Ania Corcilus, based in Hamburg, described an ongoing project: **SuperUmbau: The Newspaper for the Passionate Urbanist**. This trans-disciplinary publication incorporates architecture, philosophy, activism, sociology and literature. Artist Orla Ryan focused on the representation of Ballymun in Irish cinema, an area of research which informs her current work. Her presentation emphasised the significance of 'address' in productions such as *Into the West*, *The Commitments* and *Family* and it included a montage of voyeuristic aerial shots from the opening sequences of *Family*. These aerial journeys can be seen to lead the (middle-class) viewer towards the Towers, promising a glimpse of urban dystopia.

Each speaker at Five29Ninety9 was invited by one of the seven organisers. This group came together solely for the event and they do not subscribe to any set model of practice. The programme thus incorporated a welcome degree of diversity but was, inevitably, somewhat uneven. The ambitious schedule of twenty-four consecutive presentations was intended to communicate a huge volume of ideas in one day. However there were no panel discussions so the affinities, and the contradictions, between views expressed by different speakers were never formally addressed.

The event was however extremely well coordinated and there were few delays or technical hitches. Those who arrived late or missed a particular speaker could view tapes of each presentation in the exhibition space. The use of a signalling system on the podium (a worthwhile investment for Irish conference organisers) ensured that each speaker adhered to the thirty-minute time limit. It is possible that this tight scheduling, and the absence of a chaired panel, may have actually inhibited public discussion in the lecture space. But the exhibition, which continued to change throughout the day, did provide a less formal environment for the exchange of information and ideas.

The Five29Ninety9 symposium took place at St. Ann's Church in Brooklyn on 29/5/99 and was organised by Matthew Buckingham, Rike Frank, Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Kristin Lucas, Joe McKay and Andrea Ray.

Other speakers (not mentioned above) : Martin Conrads, Dyke Action Machine (DAM), Yolande Daniels, Katja Eydel, Jim Fleming, Leah Gilliam, Howard Goldkrand, Christian Haye, Sally McKay, Donna Minkovitz, Nils Norman, Walid Raad, Anna Rainer, Manuel Schilcher, Maria Troy and Reginald Cortez Woolery.

Maeve Connolly is an artist based in Dublin.

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presentation (Maria Troy) at Five29Ninety9; photo and courtesy Five29Ninety9

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Martina Corry is an artist based in
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