

Maeve Connolly

Writing After the Exhibition: In Absentia



The Atlas Group, *Extrait d'Archives*, 2002. Courtesy of Centre d'Art Passerelle à Brest

WHAT is the difference between absence and emptiness in contemporary art practice? The recent exhibition 'Voids: A Retrospective' at the Centre Pompidou, selected by a group of seven invited artists, writers and curators, brought together a number of works involving the staging of empty (or close to empty) spaces within the gallery. For some reviewers, however, the show highlighted the aesthetic significance of these works without fully addressing the institutional and political significance of the void within contemporary art.⁽¹⁾ If the concept of emptiness in exhibition-making seems to point away from context and towards form, then 'absence' might lead in the opposite direction, simply because it is more difficult to untangle this notion from explorations of loss, memory, and even nostalgia. This tendency is suggested by 'In Absentia', an exhibition curated by Stephen Wright at Centre D'Art Passerelle in Brest in 2005, which explored (amongst other issues) the peripatetic movements of artists and the possible connections that might exist between film and video, the form of the archive and aspects of drawing.

In 2005, I visited 'In Absentia' while on the way from Paris to somewhere else, after two weeks of French classes during which I acquired only a basic grasp of French, but somehow managed to lose my grip on English grammar. As the exhibition included a number of artists (Pierre Huyghe, Matthew Buckingham, Anri Sala) working with film and video, I was expecting a dark space with multiple 'black box' installations. Instead I encountered a large industrial building filled with natural light and a great deal of open space. Several works alluded quite directly to gaps or elisions in time, space and information and these ideas cohered in a video entitled *If Only I Could Weep*, 2001, presented by The Atlas Group. This work, part of which can be viewed at <http://www.theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeFD.html>, consists of fragments of sped-up footage of people on a seaside promenade, many of them young couples, watching the setting sun in an area of Beirut identified as the 'Corniche'. Reportedly submitted by a Beirut security employee (known as Operator # 17) who used the surveillance camera to record sunsets, it is one of a number of 'documents' gathered by The Atlas Group over a period of several years. As is now well known, The Atlas Group is substantially a creation of the artist Walid Raad, informed by the ideas of others (such as Jalal Toufic). Alluding to multiple processes of viewing, recording, archiving and forgetting, Raad's project asserts the institutional and political significance of absence in relation to both the archive and the figure of the author.

Initially favouring the persona of historian or archivist, Raad has recently adopted a more curatorial perspective. His 2009 exhibition at REDCAT in Los Angeles focused specifically on the problem of the museum retrospective and his own role in the reconfiguration of the Arab world as a site and context for contemporary art production. Entitled 'Scratching On Things I Could Disavow: A History Of Modern And Contemporary Art In The Arab World / Part I_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992-2005)', the exhibition included a three dimensional architectural model of an imagined retrospective of works by The Atlas Group, complete with miniature versions of video pieces such as *If Only I Could Weep*, playing on a tiny LCD screen set into the wall. Like the exhibition as a whole, the model alluded to the institutional strategies that circumscribe the limits of any self-consciously 'political' art practice. But within the context of 'Scratching On Things I Could Disavow', it also offered a space in which meaning could be generated as well as contained, calling to mind all previous experiences of the works of The Atlas Group and powerfully asserting the significance of context in their ongoing interpretation.

Note
(1) See reviews by Anna Dezeuze in *Art Monthly* May 2009: 24-26 and Vivian Rehberg in *Frieze*, May 2009: 119.

Previous events at PS2 include 'Printed Politics' an exhibition of Polish political graphics; (6 May – 17 May); 'Aged Portraits' a solo show by Lyndsey MacDougall (20 – 25 Apr) and 'The Handbag Project', an outreach project involving A Level Art and Design students from Strathearn Grammar School in East Belfast (2 Apr – 18 Apr).

www.pssquared.org

DUENDE



Beatrice O'Connell – work from 'Duende'

Following on from Beatrice O'Connell's first solo exhibition with the gallery in 2006, the Talbot Gallery, Dublin presented 'Duende', the artist's show of new paintings (11 Jun – 4 Jul). As press release explained "the paintings in this show emerge from her own experience of both childhood and parenthood. In broad terms, she sees this body of work as a kind of love song to life and living – and it has been remarked that all the best love songs are marked by this feeling of 'duende', the celebration of life and happiness, being heightened and seasoned by an acknowledgement of its opposite of mortality and misery."

www.talbotgallery.com

360° OF THE REEK



Breda Burns – work from '360 degrees of the Reek' installation view.

An exhibition of new works by Breda Burns, entitled '360° of the Reek', was presented at Custom House Studios, Mayo (4 Apr – 10 May). As the press release described it, the show "is the culmination of a process of self-discovery, a topographical exploration of two landscapes - that of the mountain and of her body - in 360 paintings. These detailed renderings of the physical presences of human form and landscape observe and question, and finally mature into expressions of acceptance."

www.customhousestudios.ie

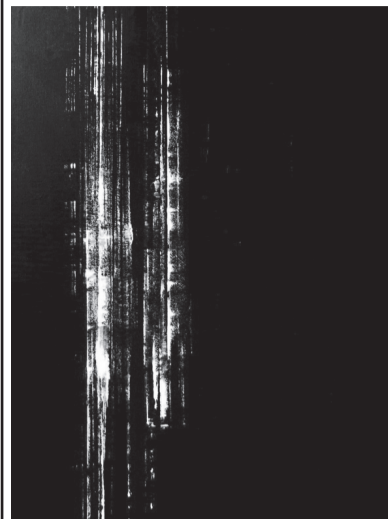
COMPOUND

'Compound' at DELAWAB was a gathering of work by five artists who work through the medium of moving image – Anthony Kelly and David Stalling, Phil Hession, Michael John Whelan and TS Beall (8 May – 5 Jun). As the press release noted "Each disparate piece of work creates a dialogue with the room it has been allocated; implying and imparting new

narratives, wisdom's and dimensions to the house. The images and sounds of the pieces filter through the house to pull together the work as one entity."

<http://delawab.wordpress.com>

GONDWANALAND VIBRATIONS



Caption

Maurice Orr's exhibition 'Gondwanaland Vibrations' recently took place at the Arts & Disability Forum Gallery, Belfast (2 Apr – 6 May). The exhibition featured a collection of paintings, which the press release states, "echoes the sounds of the didgeridoo and Cicada beetle". They go on to explain, "Through abstraction, Maurice has developed intense depictions that engage the viewer on a visual level whilst creating a sensory spectre of the Australian soundscape".

www.adf.ie

OPPOSITIONS & DIALOGUES



Mark Clare – 'Oppositions & Dialogues'

'Oppositions & Dialogues' was presented at the Kunstverein Hannover, Germany recently (30 May – 9 Aug) and was curated in cooperation with Matthew Packer of the Glucksman Gallery, Cork. The show featured a diverse group of artists including several Irish artists. Exhibiting artists included Francis Alÿs, Nina Beier & Marie Lund, Rolf Bier, Mark Clare, Nathan Coley, Jeremiah Day, Öyvind Fahlström, Claire Fontaine, Lotte Lindner & Till Steinbrenner, Alex Morrison, Garrett Phelan, Ulay & Marina Abramovic, Bettina Pousttchi, Jens Ullrich, Stephen Willats and Arthur Zmijewski.

www.kunstverein-hannover.de

179TH RHA ANNUAL EXHIBITION

The 179th RHA Annual Exhibition opened recently at the RHA, Dublin (26 May – 25 Jul). The exhibition features recent work by Academicians, invited artists and emerging artists in the disciplines of painting, print, photography, sculpture, drawing and architecture. Invited artists this year included Martin Healy, Nevan Lahart, William McKeown, Isabel Nolan, Mark O'Kelly, Paul Seawright, Ulrich Vogl and Margaret Corcoran.

www.royalhibernianacademy.ie

MISSING LINK

As part of the exhibition entitled 'Missing Link', by German artist Arne Witt, at Wexford Arts Centre, a screening of the artist's video works from 2005 to 2008 was held (11 May – 15 May). The press release explains, "This exhibition extends the artist's preoccupation with the notion of 'missing links' to explore and expose relationships between intention and action, memory and experience, knowing and the unexpected. The exhibition includes a number of drawings created out of gaffa tape and glue foil and directly applied to the surface of the wall."

www.wexfordartscentre.ie

DANCE & REVOLUTION

'If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution' is a rolling curatorial platform for performative practices in visual art. Project Arts Centre, Dublin recently presented a programme of live performances, readings, discussions and screenings (8 May – 20 Jun) for this instalment, entitled 'Edition III – Masquerade', utilising the Gallery, the Cube and the Space Upstairs, offering the public unorthodox approaches to, and experiences of, the 'black box' and the 'white cube' space.

www.projectartscentre.ie

THE GUN EMPLACEMENT



Paul Winstanley, *Sanatorium*, 2009, oil on linen, 155 x 155

Kerlin Gallery, Dublin presented a new body of work by British painter Paul Winstanley (1 May – 30 May). The press release explains that for this exhibition "Winstanley confronts an aspect of nature that has intrigued him since childhood, that most minimal and transient of visual phenomena, the sea. The resulting body of work emphasizes Winstanley's obsession with the surface of painting, with its immaculate suspension between actuality and illusion and finds a ready echo in the shifting and dissolving surfaces of the sea and sky."

www.kerlin.ie

THE PREHISTORY OF THE CRISIS II

Project Arts Centre, Dublin (2 Jul – 15 Aug) and Belfast Exposed (1 Jul – 7 Aug) invited four artists with a common interest in the complexities of multicultural living to make new work for 'The Prehistory of the Crisis (II)'. The exhibition brought Susanne Bosch, Anthony Haughey, Daniel Jewesbury and Sinéad McCann together at a time in history when economic recession underscores every cultural and artistic event taking place in Ireland, North and South.

www.projectartscentre.ie
www.belfastexposed.org