

Turn About and Within

Maeve Connolly

The Sparrow, a science-fiction novel by Mary Doria Russell written in 1996 and set partly in 2019, includes a scene of first contact between humans and non-humans. The central figure in this scene is a Jesuit chosen for the mission because of his uncanny ability to acquire new languages. Prior to departure, various attempts are made to capture his technique so that it might somehow be technologically reproduced and shared. But, even though the missionary cooperates with the artificial-intelligence training system, some elements of his method elude analysis. It is only fully revealed at the precise moment of first contact on a far-flung world when he greets a group of approaching non-humans with a visual trick. Using sleight of hand to conjure a small object from nowhere, he lures them closer, drawing the most curious of them into his immediate orbit. Establishing a space of relative intimacy, he begins to weave gesture with sound, learning the names for unfamiliar entities.

I am reminded of this scene when I try to reconstruct my experience of *Preliminary Remarks on the Study of What Is Not There* at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, in January 2020. The association is not obvious since Irina Gheorghe's performance would not be recognized by any scientist, or science fiction writer, as a moment of first contact. For a start, the performance was conducted in English, a language highly accessible to most if not all of the audience. In addition, many of those gathered at Project Arts Centre were clearly adept at navigating the physical environment of the gallery, a space rendered only mildly strange by the exhibition. Nonetheless, I remember *Preliminary Remarks on the Study of What Is Not There* as a journey into a complex and alien architecture of knowledge. In this work, Gheorghe both defines and circumscribes the

boundaries of a succession of things that are “not there.” Like the missionary at the center of *The Sparrow*, she is a virtuoso, skilled in communication through gesture and speech. Operating simultaneously in the roles of explorer, cartographer, and tour guide, she sets out to identify, map, and describe the characteristics of a vast—even potentially endless—succession of entities not present.

To be suspended within this performance is to be lightly yet firmly held within a structure made from words and gestures, governed by a logic both strange and internally coherent. The universe that unfolds in *Preliminary Remarks on the Study of What Is Not There* is not constrained by the laws of everyday physics. Space is continually divided and subdivided in ways that suggest a proliferation of possible dimensions, which might be temporal as much as spatial. Gheorghe’s “preliminary remarks” suggest a point of departure without any promise of a destination, and there are no obvious edges to the map she is creating. Instead, there is a suggestion that this map might contain within its form an infinite array of folds.

Gheorghe’s practice is, in her own words, concerned with “tensions which appear when speaking about things which are beyond our possibilities of observation, from extraterrestrial life to hypothetical planets.” Reflecting upon this statement, I wonder if it is somehow different to speak *about* things rather than speak *of* them. The phrase to “speak about” hints at circularity or circuitousness, and the word “about” is etymologically associated with turning, referring to “a rotating or spinning motion.” Turning is an action performed many times in *Preliminary Remarks on the Study of What Is Not There*. Gheorghe stands at a slight remove from all other occupants, and with her arms often outstretched, she turns repeatedly through various axes as she systematically measures and marks the multiple boundaries and categories of what is not there.

Other bodies gathered in the gallery also turn from time to time as they orient and reorient themselves in relation to her words and gestures.

I can half-recall fragments of nineteenth-century novels that feature protagonists, often but not always women, who invite each other to take “a turn about the room.” Separating themselves from the other occupants of large interior spaces, they typically promenaded in pairs, usually in full view of their peers or elders. As they perform these promenades within large and well-appointed interiors, they seek to create a temporary space for a more intimate conversation. The miniature worlds created in this way are marginally separated from an already isolated and privileged social realm. But the rules of the larger world rarely disappear in such interactions—instead, these turns about the room are often occasions for the assertion of social power. What is the role of the gallery as the setting for Gheorghe’s actions of marking and measuring, through her words, bodily turns, and gestures? How is the architecture she constructs connected to the cultural history of this particular place?

Perhaps the gallery, as a space that typically hosts temporary exhibitions, might provide special resources or support for the study of what is not there. Some of those experiencing *Preliminary Remarks on the Study of What Is Not There* at Project Arts Centre will be able to recall previous encounters with the gallery program, half-remembering specific things that are not there. Some might even be able to imaginatively orient themselves in relation to earlier versions of Project’s building, located on the same site. The list of things no longer there includes James Coleman’s *Box (ahhareturnabout)* (1977), which was installed in Project’s Cube space as part of a multi-venue exhibition in 2009. The title of Coleman’s work refers both to a famous 1927 boxing match—or bout—and also to the hare, a creature of transformation in Irish mythology. Hares have been known to stand on their hind legs in order “box” or punch their

rivals and also possess a more widely-proven ability to make sudden turns while evading aggressors. More importantly, with respect to the study of what is not there, *Box (ahhareturnabout)* evades documentation. In fact, it is difficult to precisely determine where exactly Coleman's work is located, even when it is being exhibited. This is because, as Dorothea von Hantelmann has observed, the experiential dimension¹ of his work is integral to its form and structure. This is especially true in the case of *Box (ahhareturnabout)*, which incorporates flashing lights that produce an afterimage and visceral audio so intensely amplified that it resonates in the body of the beholder.

Coleman's *Box (ahhareturnabout)* is just one of multiple artworks that are simultaneously "not there" and "there" within this place since they form part of Project Arts Centre's history of exhibitions. Some of the works that belong to this category are explicitly concerned with the architecture of memory and methods for its organization and access. Here I am referring specifically to Aurélien Froment's *Théâtre de poche* (2007), a video shown in the gallery as part of his solo exhibition *Calling the Elephant*. This video, which is accompanied by a publication, features an expert conjuror who assembles and manipulates an oblique collection of images drawn from multiple contexts and sources within a darkened space. In *Théâtre de poche* and other projects, Froment alludes to the relationship between theatrical performance, early cinema, and archaic mnemonic practices and techniques, such as those analyzed by Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory*.²

Yates traces a rich history of mnemonic techniques, including the architectural method often deployed in the classical era. The practitioner of this method would memorize the spatial form of a familiar building, typically using the interior to "place" images. They functioned as visual prompts for the recollection of specific concepts or ideas, often providing a support for

public speaking. Perhaps, given her virtuoso delivery, a somewhat similar process is actually being used by Gheorghe as she performs *Preliminary Remarks on the Study of What Is Not There*. Maybe, as she stands in the gallery, she also (mentally) inhabits the architecture of an entirely different place—or perhaps she is using the works arranged around her in the gallery to guide her words and gestures.

Yet, even if there is an architecture of memory hidden within her performance, the scope of Gheorghe's project extends far beyond the activity of mere recollection. Unlike the practitioner of classical architectural mnemonics who relies upon the embodied experience of a familiar place, her study is a journey into the vastness of all things that can and could exist beyond observation, including methods that might arise within the process of the study itself as it unfolds. Consequently, as she operates in the roles of explorer, cartographer, and tour guide, Gheorghe does not speak from within the memory of a place once inhabited. Instead, as she turns and turns about, she enacts a purposeful unfolding, entering—and leading those around her—into resolutely unknown dimensions.

¹ Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art: What Performativity Means in Art* (Zurich and Dijon: JRP Ringier and Les Presses du Réel, 2010) 38.

² Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992).