



Making & Momentum

BRENDAN EARLEY DISCUSSES THE IDEA OF AN 'ART CAREER'

Jason Oakley: Would you say your career is in a good place? I was really struck by the opening lines of your text for your exhibition at Mother's Tankstation: "Walking along a dusty road in New Mexico ... my walking companion was Lucy Lippard."¹ I also had in mind your 2013 residency in Beijing, the 2012 solo RHA show and the fact that you were selected for the 2008 DHG / VOID Curated Visual Arts Award ...

Brendan Earley: That's a tricky question. I've built up a significant body of work, so a certain momentum has come out of that. Whether I'm in a good place in terms of 'success' doesn't interest me. I've never actually thought of being an artist as a career or in terms of strategic professional development. I have always seen making art as work rather than a job, and most definitely not as a career – whatever that is.

JO: So avoiding the word 'career', when would you say that you began to take being an artist seriously?

BE: I'd pinpoint 1997, when I applied for and received a Fulbright Scholarship to do an MFA in Combined Media at Hunter College in New York. I'd graduated from NCAD in 1995 and, like most people, I left art college without a plan.

The teaching at Hunter College was completely different from what I'd previously experienced. It wasn't a matter of playing around with masking tape and sticks, it was serious – you were made to feel as if you were part of and connected to a greater discourse about art. Robert Morris, an artist I admired a lot, was one of my tutors. After graduating I did a residency at the Centre for Experimental Video in upstate New York. It was an amazing facility, set up pioneers like Gary Hill, in an isolated farmhouse set in woodlands and filled with analogue audio-visual equipment, including modular synthesisers and sequencers. But, ironically enough, it was where I actually started drawing again. Video had started to become too ethereal; I was looking for a more hands-on medium at that point.

JO: I'd imagine the New York art world was pretty inspiring and affirming ...

BE: Yes. I came back to Ireland in 1999. In New York I'd seen artists set up galleries in their living rooms, but back here there was still a mentality of not doing things without funding, or waiting for opportunities to arise. Things were changing though: Pallas Projects / Studios (set up in 1996) and Lee Welch's 'FOUR' (2005 – 2009) would be a couple of examples.

JO: How did you go about making things happen?

BE: Things have always happened to me or have 'come up' on the strength of the work I've made. If people ask me for advice on how to get exhibitions or signed with a gallery, I have to say frankly that I've no idea, other than to say: make good work and the interest will come to you. I've never methodically sought out opportunities. The fact that I now work with a gallery obviously helps a lot. Over the years I've applied for and been awarded Arts Council Awards – project grants, travel bursaries etc. They provide me with dates, targets to keep in mind. When a deadline comes up, I'll sit down and consider if I have anything relevant on the go.

JO: I'd imagine that encountering and working with leading figures such as Robert Morris, Lucy Lippard, Brian O'Doherty and Mike Nelson (who was a mentor for the DHG / VOID Curated Artist Award) has been an important factor in your practice?

BE: Yes, I've learnt so much from them all. Mike Nelson was very generous with his time and we had an affinity in terms of our interest in objects and working processes. And I've had a connection to Brian O'Doherty for some time. He was the external examiner at NCAD at the time of my degree show and liked the work. He later supported my Fulbright application. At this stage we are friends, but there was certainly a period of courting, of sussing me out. Brian put me in contact with Lucy Lippard.² My first conversation with Lucy was interesting. She asked me why I was so interested in conceptual art. That was 40 years ago. I replied that, as an artist, I was very conscious that there were too many things in the world, yet I still felt compelled to connect with the world through making; for me, conceptual art suggested ways to deal with this paradox.

JO: How did last year's residency in Beijing come about?

BE: The Swiss gallerist Urs Meile bought my work at Liste in Basel when Mother's Tankstation were there. Meile has spaces in Lucerne, Switzerland and Beijing, China. We started a conversation, which resulted in a generous invitation to do a three-month residency at his gallery in Beijing. It was an amazing opportunity, not least because of the growing importance of Chinese art and its art world, in terms of collectors and institutions.

JO: Have sales meant that you can make a living

being an artist?

BE: Recently I've done well, but in terms of income it's been just enough to survive and get by, nothing more. If I believed in the idea of an art career, I'd have to say that there are easier ways to make money than by being an artist.

Times are tough now; before the crash, I had more ways to support myself: installation work, teaching – but that's scarce now. So I'm very fortunate to be represented by a gallery who go to international art fairs and meet buyers.

JO: You undertook PhD research at NCAD from 2006 – 2010; how did this impact on your practice?

BE: It was a chance to get my work supported by an institution for a length of time, but it sometimes felt like doing open-heart surgery on myself. To my mind, the academic approach of working back from a research proposition is the reverse of how I work. My process is to work out what I'm doing as I go along. Like most artists, once I've made something, it ceases to be interest to me; I'm on to the next thing.

It did help to develop the writing aspect of my work. I'm now confident and determined to articulate very clearly what my work is about or what's behind it. I have a big problem with the opacity of a lot of current art writing. Another consequence is that narrative has become important – not just in text form – but in the objects, drawings and installations I've been making. I'm interested in an ongoing diaristic approach, both visual and textual.

JO: What about research informing your practice?

BE: I've been thinking lately that the idea of 'research' is a bit overplayed in terms of art making. I'm honestly still thinking about books and ideas I encountered when I was a teenager. For the residency in China I just brought 10 or 12 books I'd first read when I was 16 and it was really interesting to read them again – to see my new work as part of something I began some time ago.

JO: Back to the business of making then. What's your studio setup like?

BE: My studio is in a former sweet factory in Inchicore. I've been working there since 2007. I found the space myself. It is now under NAMA ownership, so for very little rent I've got something like 2,000 square feet to play with. I share the building with one other artist, Finbar Kelly. I'm attracted to working on my own and enjoy the level of concentration it gives me. I don't like the idea of someone knocking on my door, asking me if I'd like a cup of tea. When I'm working I operate on a nine to five, Monday to Friday routine.

It's great to have the space to make a mess and to try things out. In essence, you could say that my work comes about from 'tidying up' – putting the materials and objects that I've accumulated in order. It all starts with objects for me; I'm a collector of stuff, so the space is important for that as well.

I'm terrible at 'archiving'. Things are in shoeboxes: DVDs, DAT and VHS tapes. And, as I work with technology, it's inevitable that things will become outmoded and redundant – but of course that's not a reason to not to work with technology.

JO: A big art / life balance question to close with: As the father of three young children, has parenthood had any particular impact on your practice?

BE: Well yes, of course. Having children totally changes your life, whether you are conscious of it or not. One thing I can articulate is that I started to take my work even more seriously; consequently things started to happen for me. I started with Mother's Tankstation around the time that my first child was born. Practically, I might spend less time in the studio, but I'm focused and secure about art-making as my work – OK, career.

Notes

1. 'Before the Close of the Day' (19 Feb – 12 April 2014) Mother's Tankstation, Dublin.
2. The artist recorded Lucy Lippard reading Arthur C Clarke's *The Sentinels* (1948), which later became the basis Clarke's 1968 novel 2001: A Space Odyssey, developed concurrently with the famous Stanley Kubrick film. The artist's introductory text for 'Before the Close of the Day' notes, "With Lucy as narrator, an otherwise dull and generic story opens up and builds a certain imperative through the narration. Her spoken words engendering a wish for better things to come, driven by a lifetime of activism. This project is a companion piece to a work I made in 2009 with Brian O'Doherty titled 9 Reports. Their presence, either through the timbre of their voices or the connections made to the writing, envelopes the text and gives the fantastical structures of the fiction a very real foundation".