



Nina Canell, 'Half the Pace of a Given Place', Reel-to-reel player with extended tape-loop, plastic bottles, 2005. From *We Woke Up With Energy* at Mother's Tankstation, Dublin, 24 November 2005 - 28 January 2006

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MOTHER'S TANKSTATION AND FOUR

Declan Long on two new Dublin-based galleries, and the relationship between artist-led spaces in Ireland and the UK.

Towards the end of November 2005, an exhibition with the admirably upbeat title of *We Woke Up With Energy* opened in Dublin at a new artist-run space called Mother's Tankstation. This exhibition was the debut solo outing by young Swedish artist Nina Canell and it offered her a valuable and arguably rare local opportunity to quickly build on the promise of a celebrated degree show presentation earlier in the year. *We Woke Up With Energy* showed off Canell's singular ability to create subtle-but-startling audio-visual installations from all manner of ostensibly obsolete electrical odds and ends, the peculiar charm of her revitalised techno-junk demonstrating (among other things) a fascination with remaking and re-modelling the material elements of a recognisable everyday reality.

As such, of course, *We Woke Up With Energy* made perfect sense (in its own whimsically nonsensical way) as the opening exhibition for a new gallery; especially, perhaps, one that has among its founding objectives the wish to "fracture the expected mould of the Irish commercial art gallery"¹. Dublin has only a small number of commercial galleries that seek to seriously engage with ambitious contemporary practices, so a chief aspiration for husband and wife artists David Godbold and Finola Jones in setting up Mother's Tankstation is to "fill an important gap in the art scene in Dublin, which commonly overlooks works of complexity in the commercial context". In entering into this realm, these artists have therefore pledged to place "integrity and quality before commercial viability", aiming to support and represent fellow artists who are making "difficult-to-collect" work. Jones in particular considers this venture to be an extension of her own practice. Yet if there are only a few noteworthy commercial spaces in the city – the most adventurous and consistently interesting undoubtedly being the Kerlin, Green on Red and Rubicon galleries – there are even fewer artist-run spaces. In part, this is of course a result of more than a decade's worth of spiralling rents and soaring property prices (as with many other cities of similar size, little possibility is left for artists to develop sustainable independent initiatives), so it is both understandable and appropriate that the converted warehouse where Godbold and Jones live is now also the location of their elegant new gallery space.

Given the rare appearances of such artist-run initiatives in Dublin – they might at this stage be categorised as endangered spaces – it is all the more remarkable that in the same month that Mother's Tankstation opened its doors, a second fledgling venture of this kind launched its exhibition programme. Set up



Robert Carr, 'Untitled', Paper, 54x4x39cm. from 'Borderline', curated by Mark Garry, featuring Paul McKinley, Robert Carr and Sufjan Stephens. At Four 15 December - 30 January 2006



Sufjan Stevens, 'Borderline', 7" single. from 'Borderline', curated by Mark Garry, featuring Paul McKinley, Robert Carr and Sufjan Stephens. At Four 15 December - 30 January 2006



Xylor Jane, 'Leg and Arm (Chapter 100)', Ink and graphite wall drawing. From 'The Doubloon' at Four, 17 November - 8 December 2005



by artists Lee Welch and Linda Quinlan this further addition to Dublin's short-list of artist-run spaces is Four, a smartly spruced-up but modestly-sized gallery situated on the third floor of a riverside Georgian terrace, which nevertheless manages to create sufficient room to accommodate expansive interests and audacious aims: "Four is devoted to the development of an uninhibited artistic exploration of ideas, discourses and new trends in contemporary art."² The key word here may well be 'uninhibited' – consciously or not, it appears to imply that Four's approach to working with artists involves a freedom from constraints potentially encountered elsewhere. Perhaps also, then, a perception of dysfunction in the current relationship between local art-world systems and practising artists has led both Four and Mother's Tankstation to invoke the intimate notion of 'nurturing' in their respective manifestos: the former, for instance, "endeavours to inspire creativity, nurture relationships and stimulate discourse", while the latter "jointly nurtures, along with its engaged artists, the delicate and often awkward offspring of 'new art'". Certainly thus far the approach taken by these artist-run spaces appears to have stimulated strong interest, especially among artists. The programme at Four, for example, has already had contributions from Mark Garry and Isabel Nolan, two artists who featured as part of Ireland's group representation at the 51st Venice Biennale, and next-up in the gallery is an exhibition of new video work by widely praised London-based Dubliner Declan Clarke.

'From Garret Phelan, 'Now:here' at Pallas Heights, May 2003'.

However as Susannah Thompson has argued in relation to the artist-led scene in Scotland, the historical connotations of artist-run initiatives (especially their image as centres of cultural and political dissidence), can lead to a tendency to discuss *any* such practice in positive terms – the idea that "by virtue of simply being artist-run, organisations and projects should be celebrated and encouraged"³. In the Irish context this is also an undoubted hazard. Moreover, it seems also reasonable to ask if the specific local lack of artist-run spaces over recent years has contributed to the early popularity of Mother's Tankstation and Four. Quizzing a class of art students some weeks ago about their attitudes to local galleries, I was struck by the large number who nominated these low-key new venues as the most impressive and interesting places to view contemporary art in Dublin – the other major vote-winner being Pallas Heights, an intrepid artist-run exhibition and project space located in a derelict social housing block. Quite apart from the particular qualities and characteristics of each of these art spaces, such preferences seem to indicate (however inadequate the survey sample) at least some degree of more general enthusiasm for apparently 'independent' schemes, these cases of artist-led activity feasibly suggesting varied but vibrant alternatives to the systems and hierarchies of the local art 'establishment'.

What manner of 'independent' or 'alternative' curatorial practice is in fact important to such artist-run spaces? Mother's Tankstation, of course, has self-consciously sought to offer innovation in the commercial context, explicitly undertaking to engage the interest of the market. Though altruistically aiming to re-direct all profits from sales back into the continuing promotion of artists' work, its directors acknowledge that it is "in the strictest sense³ a commercial gallery." Quite possibly, then, notions of 'independence' are irrelevant considerations. Yet in its ambition to represent artists who make "works of complexity", promoting practitioners who may not appear to provide appropriate fiscal potential for dealers or who may not yet have caught the attention of curators at public institutions

(therefore offering additional support to recent graduates such as Nina Canell), there is evidence of an effort to think differently – to offer a form of ‘alternative’. Problems for some, of course, may be the priority given to entering the existing international system over the need to subject it to critique and, by extension, the implied sense of the market as benign. But in a city without a substantial recent history of self-determinist artists’ ‘enterprise’, a city in which ‘radical’ practices are most often supported by public institutions (such as former artist-led initiatives Project Arts Centre and Temple Bar Gallery and Studios) or through various forms of government funding, it might be worth asking if commercial enterprise necessarily disqualifies an artist-run initiative from ‘independent’ credibility. In her discussion of “changing aspirations of artist-led spaces” in a-n’s *Shifting Practice* study, Ruth Claxton quotes Becky Shaw of Static in Liverpool who advocates a certain level of commercial activity as a survival strategy, justifiably arguing for a critical position to be adopted towards “the art world’s over-reliance on public funding” and challenging the widespread presumption that “public funding is somehow ‘cleaner’ than commercial money”⁴.

Though hardly coming from the same direction, the point brings to mind Dave Hickey’s antagonism towards the network of dominant liberal institutions in the US – “that massive civil service of PhD’s and MFA’s who administered a monolithic system of interlocking patronage” – which, he argues, maintains a hegemonic hold over the discourses of contemporary art in a way that is not possible in the context of the more ‘democratic’ market-place.⁵ As many artist-run spaces (including Static) have creatively demonstrated, of course, the choice need not simply be between Hickey-style enthusiastic endorsement of market ‘freedoms’ and a passive attitude towards the paternalistic endowments of public funding. One relevant UK example here might be Cell Project Space in London, run by artists Milika Muritu and Richard Priestley: this is a gallery and studios organisation which aims to be self-financing, using studio rental income to fund its well-received programme of curatorial projects. Here a core policy is to create “lack of necessity for the project space to sell work and operate as a commercial gallery”, allowing for a freedom from financial concerns that “underpins the curatorial direction for much of Cell’s programming”⁶. Despite inevitable financial pressures, Cell Project Space is part of a thriving scene of artists’ initiatives in London – a group of “shoestring-budget spaces” which are, as Martin Herbert observed in *Artforum*, “firing on all cylinders”⁷. While recent additions have added some energy, this is a dynamism that is not especially evident in Dublin.

It should go without saying that quite aside from their positioning in relation to a commercial scene, there are ways in which artist-run spaces might function as distinctive or even defiant presences. ‘Independence’ is an obvious potential benefit of being ‘artist-run’, but as Dave Beech has cautioned in an essay for *Variant*, achieving it ought to “entail some substantial divergence from business as usual”. Spaces which fail to deliver in this way are, he warns, “not artist-run spaces at all; the artists involved are agents for those that they address”⁸. Essential here is a commitment to contesting normative modes of cultural practice. It is interesting in this respect to note that both Mother’s Tankstation and Four have articulated a desire to introduce a strand of discursiveness into their programmes (something also valued highly by Becky Shaw at Static), each stressing the importance of establishing a

critical forum. The provision of a discursive framework is of course a more or less routine aspect of mainstream contemporary art programming today, so if this strategy is to be meaningful in an artist-led context, it presumably needs to be about more than added value. Dave Beech has proposed that artist-run spaces can “contest the established role of the artist³ as well as clearing intellectual space for occupying culture differently”. These are vital opportunities and challenges for critically reflexive artist-run spaces in Ireland and elsewhere – and as Edward Said once asked: “What is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?”⁹

¹ From the Mother’s Tankstation ‘Manifesto’. Available at www.motherstankstation.com/mission.htm. (All further quotations relating to this gallery are from this source).

² From the website for ‘Four’ gallery:

fourdublin.com/info.htm (All further quotations relating to Four are from this site).

³ Susannah Thompson, ‘Show Some Initiative’ in John Beagles and Paul Stone eds. *a-n Collections: Shifting Practice* (Newcastle: a-n The Artists Information Company, 2005) p. 10.

⁴ Becky Shaw quoted in Ruth Claxton, ‘Trading Places’ in Beagles & Stone eds. *a-n Collections: Shifting Practice*.

⁵ Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Foundation for Advanced Critical Studies, 1993) p.13.

⁶ From the ‘Cell Project Space’ website:

www.cell.org.uk/info/aboutus

⁷ Martin Herbert ‘On the Ground: London’, *Artforum*, December 2004

⁸ Dave Beech, ‘Independent Collaborative Hospitality’, *Variant*, Issue 22.

⁹ Edward Said, ‘Traveling Theory’ in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 247.

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