

Constant Resurrection

DOROTHY HUNTER OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO 'ACTIVE ARCHIVE – SLOW INSTITUTION: THE LONG GOODBYE' AT PROJECT ARTS CENTRE.



IN A PERTINENT (and prescient) flyer for a 1972 auction fundraiser, Project Arts Centre is named as “The Persistent Corpse”. With the crises that would echo throughout the years, the centre had formed an early habit of not dying. Amid repeated moments of almost-ending and being between-spaces – when priorities and capabilities were frequently weighed alongside what any future existence might look like – Project reflected the temporal and retrospective nature of an archive most closely. This is woven into the conceptual strands of Project’s ongoing research project and exhibition series, titled ‘Active Archive – Slow Institution’.

Archives are having another moment in art. With a constant foundational presence, they are never far away, functioning as either creative subject or reflexive device. Contemporary archiving and its revisitation – with pronounced implicit selectivity, value judgements and nostalgia – goes hand-in-hand with the unsteady knowledge and collective-making pertinent to contemporary political discourse. Working with past culture, so it cannot get lost or sanitised to suit political agendas, is part of Project Arts Centre Curator Livia Paldi’s working ethos. Yet concurrently, one must work with the fact that archival content resembles evidence but can never shake off its ‘overwritten’ nature.

The Project archive is formed through collective and individual encounters in a public space that is conditional, expanding and constantly moving. What was once important to present within a particular moment, time and space, becomes compressed and often obscured amidst wider ephemera – fragments of recurring and shifting communities, relating to artists, audiences and the institution. The ‘institution’ moves in all the realms that this term evokes. In the case of Project Arts Centre, the institution is also complicit in its spatial transition from a single event (Project 67 in November 1966), to an artist-led collective, to a purpose-built, multi-disciplinary arts space (from 2000 onward).

The first exhibition in this series, titled ‘Active Archive – Slow Institution: The Long Goodbye’ (31 January – 30 March), was conceived through conversation between Paldi and Valerie Connor, who was Visual Arts Director of Project Arts Centre from 1998 to 2001 and curator of the ‘Off Site’ visual arts programme (1998–99). The exhibition draws from material in the Project archive, while making visible these processes of making and extraction. To speak of “an archive” conceals its fractured and incomplete nature: surviving material is split between the National Library of Ireland, NIVAL and various personal collections, each with very different conditions of access. As such, Project has only a certain amount of agency over its own history. Working within these forms and tensions – and in particular with Connor’s own extensive archive – the gallery was turned into a semi-private space for exploring these materials over a four-month period. During this time, artworks such as Christopher Mahon’s *Couched* – a printed sofa with small ceramic casts – co-existed with changeable overlapping lines of documents, workbenches and montaged gig posters. Such elements were expressly activated with events like Sebastian Cichocki’s experimental think-tank, whereby participants created an improvised ‘score’ for a new institution that might be performed, and so played with art’s position within ‘non-art’ surroundings.

Taking up gallery space makes the archive a dysfunctional presence, as well as a lynchpin; the process itself is on display and distances ‘Active Archive’ from the idea of final objects. It is utilising the awkward, peripheral nature of such material. Events and pieces recorded within the archive are not artworks but residual of them – they cannot ape a factual or survey presentation. However, this work still has immanence and the ability to be formed by other forces. The artists contributing to the different phases of the exhibition are also in this state of flux, as none of the work is autonomous. Brian Hand’s 60mm film, for example, moves from a single-channel in the ‘workspace’ chapter, to a more elaborate form in the second

phase, when five CRT screens showed footage of Project Arts Centre, taken by Hand in 1998, just before the ‘Off Site’ programme was launched. The footage echoes the work that Blue Funk – a collective of six artists including Connor and Hand – were doing with the archive in 1993. This includes footage of Maurice O’Connell’s *Demolishing Project* – a festival-like farewell to Project’s old building in February 1998 – shown in fragmented details, with audio of gigs and performances coming together in montage and non-linear ways.

Throughout the two-month duration of ‘The Long Goodbye’, the gallery expanded with additional work, again embodying the living nature of the archive. For example, artist Miriam O’Connor revisited sites originally used during the ‘Off Site’ programme, with O’Connor’s small, rather esoteric prints shown at the opening giving way to folders of large table-based prints at a later stage, loosely recalling a disparate photo essay. Approaching the archive without prior engagement, O’Connor came to be the “eleventh Off Site artist” through this photographic intervention. The ‘Off Site’ programme information – sometimes corresponding to images, sometimes not – was separated from this work under the Perspex table top. These images were interspersed with details collected by O’Connor, in the more personal and peripheral aspects of making the work, thus ‘contaminating’ it beyond straightforward documentation. This project dovetailed with Hand’s film assemblages and Fergus Kelly’s sound work, taken from recordings of Dublin’s changing urban and cultural landscapes. Kelly reworked these recordings for the exhibition and during the artist’s talk, he referred to the constant demolition work happening around Dublin as a “tooth extraction in the landscape”.

Whilst the tactility of O’Connor’s photos allowed the viewer to go through the work, it sat as a foil to the physically inaccessible information stored beneath. It also sat alongside (in this “exhibition of tables”, to quote a joke by Paldi) various clusters of literature, maps and images displayed under a huge sheet of Perspex of the main table, as well as on Tanad Williams’s display structure, *Understudy/Untitled (assignment)*. Made from packaging material, this high, minimal black table provided a bulbous and almost breathing lightbox surface. Williams alluded to the material and three-dimensional qualities of the archive by delicately resting documents on this luminous surface to expose their texture. He later revealed (during a closing talk) that a piece of work had been hidden on the reverse, as a means of toying with its functional, referential existence.

Throughout its 50-year history, Project Arts Centre has been symptomatic of change, particularly regarding its place within the redevelopment of Temple Bar and its regular relocation by necessity in the early years. At the same time, Project would push back, and its activity would shape its resources, as shown in Hannah Tiernan’s research into the queer plays staged at the centre. Various newspaper articles attested to an overspill of moral outrage, loaded headlines, funding cuts and resignations. The presence of this historic media coverage showed Project’s contentious and symbiotic relationship with the general public, funders and artists. The institution’s inability to exist unformed by others is imperative within the exhibition.

Rather than venerate the past or re-canonise through this activity, this reworking and enveloping of documents make things more multiple and complex. What are esoteric and unrelated archival documents to one person, may offer visible connections and coherent trajectories to another. Scrutability is not something that is fought against but sits in symbiosis with the events. Compressing time and space produces awkward, nebulous compounds and microcosms of the archive. Subject to the layering impulses of the archival format, the trajectories of art and the spaces it occupies are reactivated with potential.

Dorothy Hunter is an artist and writer based in Belfast, who worked as a researcher for ‘Active Archive – Slow Institution: The Long Goodbye’.



Top: Tanad Williams, *Understudy/Untitled (assignment)*

Middle: Brian Hand, *Project ‘98*, 5-channel video installation (loop, sound)

Bottom: Miriam O’Connor, *Isla Blue Folio 1* and *Folio 4*, pigment inkjet prints, 552.6 × 370 mm; all photographs by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy of Project Arts Centre