



## Active Archive – Slow Institution: The Long Goodbye Some points of departure

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*Active Archive – Slow Institution* began with a series of questions – those in relation to the status of visual arts programming at Project, as well as those anchored to my own learning in relation to the wider cultural context into which I moved in spring 2017. Re-reading these chapters of institutional history (or rather histories) supports a nuanced understanding of professional trajectories, the emancipation of the arts in Ireland and the changing relationship of Project to wider institutional, political, social and urban contexts. We look at these preceding artistic, structural and operative configurations in order to seek advice on sustainable future models.<sup>1</sup>

When I first visited the National Irish Visual Arts Library (NIVAL) in summer 2017 to view documents on Project Arts Centre, I came across a condition report and feasibility study for a future archive at Project that had been researched and written by Brian Hand,<sup>2</sup> the former founding member of the artist collective Blue Funk.<sup>3</sup> Commissioned in March 1998 by the then director of Project, Fiach Mac Conghail, the study aimed to present to the board a report on the condition of the existing building as well as a plan for the establishment of an autonomous flood and fire-proof archive space within the new building (which was due to open in two years time). The assignment was based on Hand's archive-related practice as well as his long history with the organisation, a relationship that started when Blue Funk was invited to create work to 'close' the old building of Project in 1995.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Project's new vision document can be found here: [https://projectartscentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Project\\_2020.pdf](https://projectartscentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Project_2020.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 'Feasibility Study into the establishment of an archive for the Project Arts Centre' 1998, copies available both at NIVAL and the National Library of Ireland (NLI), Project Arts Centre Papers Collection List No.152.

<sup>3</sup> The artist collective Blue Funk was founded in 1989/1990 by Evelyn Byrne, Brian Cross, Tom Green, Jaki Irvine, Valerie Connor, Brian Hand and Kevin Kelly. It aimed at setting up a mixed media production studio (video, film, performance, sound) and facilitate technical support and networking of time-based arts as well as presentation of moving image works with planned government funding.

<sup>4</sup> *Interdisciplinary Collaboration Proposal – 1994/95*, Collection List No.152, Project Art Centre Papers, NLI, MS 46, 216 – 1 folder.

Blue Funk proposed 'Portacabin', an insulated, wired and heatable 4-person office space or "site office" to be brought and set up in front of the old Project with a solid door and grilled windows. This minimal space for shared activities and conversations aimed at becoming (similarly to previous projects) a discursive platform, a forum of debate that interrelate questions about art, the artist and contemporary society. The project did not happen mainly due to the postponement of the building

The group's proposal positioned Project Arts Centre as an 'exemplary case study especially as it undergoes transformation' the following year: <sup>5</sup>

*'This artwork is the result of a collaboration and dialogue between the artists and the phenomenon of the Project Arts Centre since its inception. The aim of this focus is to initiate/stimulate a creative inquiry into the concept, history and value of an 'arts centre'. The collaboration begins with research into Project's own archives and interviews with former personnel and investigates the questions of space/buildings and creativity; censorship and authorship; location and context; and examines the function of an avant-garde.'*

A related document adds that 'all parties involved are working through a process of transforming the "arts space" and the collaboration is ongoing and evolving'. <sup>6</sup>

Hand's report aimed to 'test the feasibility of a strategic archive plan for Project' and detailed the infrastructural and operational investments needed. He attached documentation of the state of the archive was in late 1997, and included a chapter comparing the operation of various State<sup>7</sup> and Arts Council supported archives. In this study, Hand speaks about the archive of Project Arts Centre as a valuable resource that should be made accessible to a wider readership. He writes:

*'There is at present a debilitating scenario within certain cultural practices, perhaps due to the fact that each new initiative, which seems to spring from somewhere and leap to nowhere imagines itself as reinventing the wheel all over. Project's archive is a repository of histories, occasions and lessons of success and failure which if made more widely available would definitely benefit the cultural sphere.'*<sup>8</sup>

Assessing the endangered collection of documents, Hand observes that much of the material that he had browsed with Blue Funk members only a few years previous had disappeared without a trace. The photos he attaches to the feasibility document show stacks of materials dumped and scattered in corners during the final days of the former building.

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development. Four of the members were invited to have solo exhibitions, including *Eye Lashes* by Jaki Irvine (1996), *Toothache Club* by Valerie Connor (1996), *Threefold Prediction* by Brian Hand (1997) and *Return From the Edge* by Kevin Kelly (1997).

<sup>5</sup> The planning and development of Project's current building started in the late 1980s under the directorship of Tim O'Neill and continued with Fiach Mac Conghail who was director between end of 1992 and 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Fiach Mac Conghail to Tom Green letting him and the group know that the building's closing was postponed. Date: 17 February, 1995. Collection List No.152, Project Art Centre Papers, NLI, MS 46, 216 – 1 folder.

<sup>7</sup> The National Theatre Archive at the Abbey; The Irish Traditional Music Archive; The Irish Theatre Archive; and NIVAL.

<sup>8</sup> Collection List No.152, Project Art Centre Papers, NLI, MS 46,232 /6 folder.

Hand documents a longer history of precarity, lack of space and unsuitable conditions. Groundwater, leaks, mould, and a 1982 fire that gutted part of the building contributed majorly to the decimation of documents.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, a paper<sup>10</sup> mentions the transfer of print material from the temporary (since demolished) premises of Pan Pan Theatre Company in Dún Laoghaire to 5 Ashton Quay (the temporary office of Project at the time). It also outlines the intention to employ an archivist for 18 months commencing in July 2000, in order to ‘set a culture of ongoing archival activity within the organisation and set-up a structured approach to the collection, recording and conservation of material.’ There is a reference to Hand’s report, and an acknowledgment that it would ‘bring the collection of dead material to useful life.’<sup>11</sup> In the new building, the archive was organised on metal shelves along corridors and on landings.

The 400 sq ft archive room and some other functional spaces proposed in previous construction plans were abandoned in the very final stages of the building design. Coming to work each day I look up and think about the airspace above the disused second-floor terrace at the front of the building which could possibly have housed the archive. A document<sup>12</sup> refers to this balcony as a social space intended to be open to the public but, apart from on a very few number of occasions, it has almost never served the ‘public’.<sup>13</sup> The terrace is thus a reminder of that ‘stolen’ space, but is also a beacon for a potential future space – bringing into focus both Blue Funk’s ‘Portacabin’ proposal and the site office for the building company that was located in a portacabin on the mezzanine.<sup>14</sup>

Project Arts Centre’s archives (those that survived the 90s and times pre-demolition) were selected and donated to the National Library of Ireland (NLI) in 2006. Parts of the material can also be accessed at NIVAL, and there are still many boxes at Project – many containing histories between 1967 and 2000 have been recently unpacked and digitally catalogued.<sup>15</sup> We have also begun to approach people who are likely to have materials in their private archives and who might be interested in sharing them. It is a slow process.

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<sup>9</sup> Hand approximated that the archive could contain 10,000 documents.

<sup>10</sup> Strategic Plan for Completion, Occupation and Opening of new Project Arts Centre Building. Collection List No.152, Project Art Centre Papers, NLI, [MS 46,253](#).

<sup>11</sup> Quotes from ‘The preparation for *Strategic Plan* towards the completion, occupation and opening of the new building’. Collection List No.152, Project Art Centre Papers, NLI, [MS 46,253 / 1](#) folder.

<sup>12</sup> Project Arts Centre: managing Growth 2000-2002, p.5. From the collection of Valerie Connor.

<sup>13</sup> Most recent use of the terrace was *COLONY* presented by Any Productions within *A Day of Testimonies #ArtistsRepeal*, 26 August 2017

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Valerie Connor to bring this to attention.

<sup>15</sup> Though the timeline runs until 2000, several later exhibitions in Project informed the current research (including *The Meaning of Greatness*, 2006 and *An Artwork in a Third Person*, 2009 by Sarah Pierce, the latter featuring selected items from the Project Arts Centre Archive 1974-1979).

The *Active Archive – Slow Institution* project makes an attempt to temporarily rehabilitate the ‘absent’ archive in the gallery and transform it into a place for questioning, hesitation, suspension and refueling. ‘The Long Goodbye’ (a changing installation of timeline documents, moving image, sound and photographic works) frames the continuing enquiry. With specific focus on the *Demolishing Project* by the late Maurice O’Connell (3–14 February, 1998) and the following Off Site series (1998-1999) curated by Valerie Connor, the exhibition brings together various perspectives on the conditionalities and competencies of enquiry, as well as the possible role of the subjective and the fictitious in reflecting on historic images and documentation. The exhibition zooms in on often overlooked details, revisits material memory of the sites Project once occupied, and sketches the various trajectories of one of Ireland’s oldest art centres. It explores the journey from its 1966 inception as a migrating artist-run initiative, to the hopeful end of ‘the regime of leaking roofs,’ to the ‘coming home’ moment in June 2000 when *Somewhere Near Vada* curated by Jaki Irvine occupied the entire new building and the first gallery exhibition featured *Untitled (Disaster)* by John Frankland.

*The text was written with the best intention to recover dates and events. In cases error, the author is happy to correct.*