



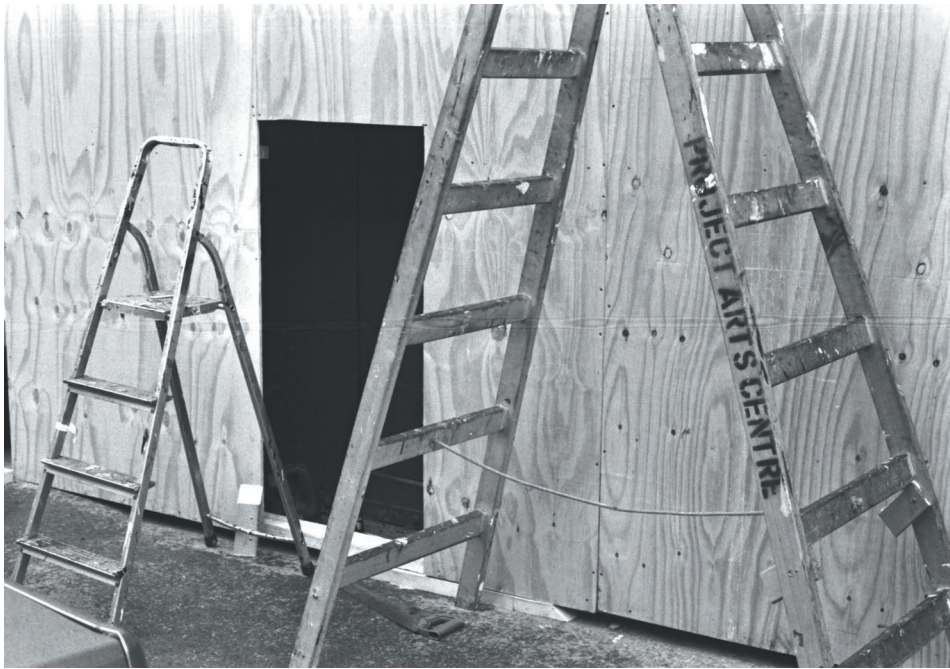
Henry setting up, Wood Quay Amphitheatre, trailer by work-seth/tallentire, Project Arts Centre Off Site, Dublin, 1998; all photographs courtesy of Valerie Connor

How sweet it is to murmur together¹

VALERIE CONNOR OUTLINES THE OFF SITE PROGRAMME (1998–99) SHE CURATED FOR PROJECT ARTS CENTRE.

IN 1998, I started work on the development and delivery of what we would we would decide to call the Off Site visual arts programme at Project Arts Centre. Comprising ten projects and involving eleven artists, the programme was produced between 1998 and 1999, while Project's building was under construction. While this was happening, we were also working on the opening programme and the first exhibitions for what would be our new building. As a curatorial project, the Off Site programme represented an opportunity to work differently and to think practically about how Project could approach programming in the new building. Out and about, we would learn, on the ground, about the neighbourhood and the surrounding city. We were well aware of the office-based alternatives to the operation and function of public galleries as art spaces and more peripatetic programming. Previously marginal practices, established in distinction from the mainstream, were now at the centre of critical and curatorial attention, as the legacy of political thinking in art and about culture in the previous decades. Independent curators were on the loose and at large. Not only were the spatial attributes of the gallery idea up in the air, but the temporal characteristics of exhibitions were too. It was a slow-newness, in fairness, as almost a century of such disturbance preceded the 1990s relationality mic-drop. Rolling through the European avant-gardes, the anti-establishment artist-led studio-galleries and the emergence of situated practices, lingered the idea of the 'project' – a revolutionary love of the experimental, the everyday, chance and habit.

At Project Arts Centre, by the late 1980s, certain customs and practices had settled into the use of space at the old building on East Essex Street. For one thing, the amount of basic usable space had reduced over the years, lost to the effects of fire and water. At the time of writing, news of an exhibition of new paintings by Charles Tyrell at Dublin's Taylor Galleries caught my eye, so I watched an interview with him from 1975 when he was still an art student. A video clip on RTÉ Archives includes a conversation with him in Project's East Essex Street venue. With an art centre, he says, the artist does not have to look at the gallery as just a "distribution centre for art made in the studio" – he liked producing work for the gallery in the gallery. Project's chairman, Michael Bulfin, later outlines how the building would have three galleries: a main gallery for exhibitions like Tyrell's; a side gallery to showcase the arts centre's artist members; and another featuring prints and photographs incorporating a cafe on the first floor. A dream, after a decade operating in buildings due for redevelopment on short-term leases.



Outside Brendan's on Benburb Street, Off Site by Pete Smithson, Project Arts Centre Off Site, Dublin 1998



Debbie Behan, production manager, location recce, Project Arts Centre Off Site, Dublin, 1998

Scan forward 20 years, what remained of the building in the clip has been demolished, the site cleared and the famously flooding River Poddle that runs beneath Project to this day is finally contained by a new culvert, to end to its depredations above. Theatre, dance and live art programming continued as project@themint – in a temporarily adapted building off Dublin's Henry Street – and the Off Site programme began. The first Off Site project was launched in August 1998. Of the ten projects, six were produced in Dublin city centre, one in Galway, one online, one on audio CD, and one on CD-Rom. *Skeye* by Tony Patrickson was an interactive CD-Rom, released by Project Press.² The Off Site projects were accompanied by new critical writing – either by me or another writer invited by the artist. Some were published or archived by a third party and this printed information remains as ephemera. At the time, Project's first website (designed by Fever ID as per a very ambitious brief) contained an extensive record of the programming, a searchable database and archive. The website was also the location for the last Off Site project, *mirage.htm* by Daniel Jewesbury, launched online in September 1999.

Check the ephemera and you will see that the Off Site programme was described as 'research-driven', not only because this reflected the approach and attitude of the artists, but also Project's aim to play to the organisational and multidisciplinary strengths of an arts centre and Project's cultural interests, in particular. In 1992, Fiach MacConghail had been appointed Project's director following Tim O'Neill. Following much work already done on the redevelopment, the closure of the old building appeared to be imminent. He began conversations with artists soon after, but it would be almost five years before Project would actually start to produce projects with the first of those artists. I was part of an artists' group at that time that was also in discussions with Project about a commission. Time passed; things changed. Delays over boundaries, ownership, and so on, in the mid 1990s even led the arts centre to make practical investigations into what benefits might come from relocating to Smithfield, over the river, instead of redeveloping the East Essex Street site. This did not ultimately happen but in 1998, when Sandra Johnston was exploring the city and making video recordings as part of her Off Site project *Reserved*, it so happened that she spent considerable time in Smithfield, often adjacent to spots where men habitually gathered to sit and drink and some to sleep.

Anne Tallentire and John Seth launched a new chapter in their collaborative work with *trailer* by work-seth/tallentire. Among the city centre locations where they held screenings each evening over a two-week period, was the Iveagh Markets on Francis Street. At the other end of the same street in 1999, Tina O'Connell made *In Dublin* at the Barley Mow pub. Both market and pub had ceased trading and are now in stages of dereliction. These three artists had exhibited in Project's gallery space in 1994 and 1995. Some of the responses to O'Connell's work at that time made it clear how contested the primary purpose of the gallery-cum-foyer had become. As with all the Off Site projects, these artists would make their new works in an atmosphere where the contradistinctions between strands of the arts centre's programming began to fade in the absence of the building. The harmonious tempo of the busy project@the mint performance schedule and the Off Site programme was thanks to core management, crew, press and front of house staff, who were accustomed to working with variations in the scale and duration of production. These are completely routine in performance programmes for myriad reasons. It was completely imaginable that the knowhow attached to working with such variable timeframes – the same as associated with project-based or site-specific artworks – could, should, and would align in distinctive ways with the operational habits of an arts centre on the loose and at large.

The very public part of Sandra Johnston's Off Site project *Reserved* included performances on the roof of the Ormond Hotel on the quays of the River Liffey. Photographs and video recorded at that time show planning application timber structures for a proposed new roofline. Permission for an additional floor was repeatedly denied. Later, af-

ter the building was acquired by NAMA and sold, it was demolished in 2018. Ground works are currently underway for a building. The timber outlines echoed the temporary so-called 'catwalk' hoardings, built by Pete Smithson as part of his eponymous project *Off Site*. These covered walkways are typical in urban places where building work is carried out above street level. These were pasted with paper printed with jumbled sequences of words from compass points. One located where the James Joyce bridge is now, picked up some graffiti from the crew of the cargo ship Hudsongracht. Now the Deniz S, the ship operates in the Black Sea and is currently berthed on the Danube, south of Bucharest. Prior to his Off Site project, Ronan McCrea had made similar builders' walkways. For *View*, he mixed an image from the suburbs into the standard street level advertising on dilapidated structures beside early boom new-builds. He drove around and photographed as many as he could find. While Fergus Kelly was recording audio for his *Invisible City* CD, he was also taking photographs of sites in the city on verge of redevelopment. In each case, the city has leaked into the document and is inscribed in the artists' archives.

Stairwell by Jolley (and Reynold Reynolds) screened from dusk until dawn in the car park to a courthouse a few doors from Project Arts Centre. CCTV captured an epic pratfall by a solitary viewer, the audience, mesmerised by this projection of a falling figure. Apocryphal? We knew anecdotes and strangers were important in creating a kind of 'allegorical Project' that would sustain us in the move back home. We did have fun and we needed our friends. If you were on Francis Street in a bar that was not a bar, with a lot of tar, late on a Spring night in 1998, you will remember that at the centre of some of the wildest fun was Jason Oakley. Legend.

Valerie Connor was Project Arts Centre's visual arts director from 1998 until 2001 and curated the Off Site visual arts programme (1998-1999).

Off Site Programme³

Tony Patrickson, *Skeye* (31 Aug 1998). CD-Rom.

Pete Smithson, *Off Site* (19 Oct – 26 Nov 1998). Structures and text at four locations in Dublin City.

Sandra Johnston, *Reserved* (11 – 12 Nov 1998). Performance at Ormond Hotel, Dublin 1. work-seth/tallentire, *trailer* (30 Nov – 4 Dec/7–11 Dec, 1998). Screenings at 10 locations in Dublin City.

Paddy Jolley, *Stairwell* (24 Feb – 9 Mar 1999). Video projection at Dolphin House, Dublin 2. Tina O'Connell, *In Dublin* (26 Mar – 3 Apr 1999). Sculpture and CCTV at Barley Mow Pub, Dublin 8.

Dorothy Cross, *Chiasm* (1 – 2 May 1999). Opera at Handball Alleys, St. Enda's School, Salthill, Galway.

Fergus Kelly, *Invisible Cities*, (12 Jul 1999). Audio CD.

Ronan McCrea, *View* (30 Aug – 12 Sept 1999). 200 posters at Irish Poster Advertising sites in Dublin City.

Daniel Jewesbury, *mirage.htm* (24 Sept 1999). Online.

Notes

¹ 'How sweet it is to murmur together' is from the opera *L'Orfeo* (1607) by Monteverdi, sung during the performance of *Chiasm* by Dorothy Cross, an Off Site project at St. Enda's handball alleys, Galway.

² The Project Press publishing imprint was established at the start of the decade, initially for artists' catalogues and monographs, and later included the 'Project' in-house pamphlets of criticism 'Project Papers' (1998) on performance.

³ Archive Information: In 2009, Project Arts Centre donated archival documents to the National Library of Ireland. These include materials associated with the Off Site programme. The catalogue, available online, was prepared by Barry Houlihan, assisted by Máire Ní Chonalláin and Luke Kirwan, as The Project Arts Centre Papers, Collection List No. 152.