

# Active Archive - Slow Institution: The Long Goodbye

Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2019

With Active Archive – Slow Institution 2017-2020, I initiated a long-term research project. The initiative delved into Project Arts Centre's 50+ year history to look at what future proposals for transformation might be inscribed within the manifold history of one of the oldest multipurpose art centres in Ireland. Active Archive – Slow Institution temporarily transformed the gallery into a space for productive withdrawal, in a slow-down from its serial exhibition production. In late 2018, the gallery became a workspace, where documents relating to the Centre's archives and related privately collected materials were studied and shared, enabling new conversations and connections to emerge.

Organised into a series of interconnected exhibitions and events, the first presentation of Active Archive – Slow Institution was framed by the exhibition *The Long Goodbye* (2019), an installation of documents, moving image, sound, and photographic works. The exhibition included new commissions by artists revisiting their own archives, with a particular focus on the late 1990s, a decade that was seminal in the Centre's history. Participating artists included: Brian Hand; Fergus Kelly; Miriam O'Connor; Tanad Williams; and selections from the thematic archival researches of Dorothy Hunter and Hannah Tiernan.

The late 1990s marked a turning point in Project's operational model, and the finalisation of the decade-long negotiations to provide the arts centre with its current building. *The Long Goodbye* revisited the

Off Site visual arts programme from that time, which had been curated by Valerie Connor, Project's Visual Arts Director between 1998-2001. Connor was invited to reflect on Off Site, and its role as experiment at the heart of the visual arts programming while Project was in-between buildings.

Off Site ran for two years, in 1998 and 1999, while the current Project Arts Centre building was under construction. The artists who presented new work commissioned for Off Site were: Tony Patrickson; Dorothy Cross; Pete Smithson; Sandra Johnston; and work-seth/tallentire (all in 1998); Patrick (Paddy) Jolley (now deceased); Tina O'Connell; Fergus Kelly; Ronan McCrea; and Daniel Jewesbury (all in 1999). Off Site took place at various locations across Dublin, with the exception of: Dorothy Cross, whose project took place in Salthill, Galway; Tony Patrickson, who made an interactive CD-Rom; and Fergus Kelly, who made a CD. (These projects, however, were launched in Dublin at a city centre venue.)

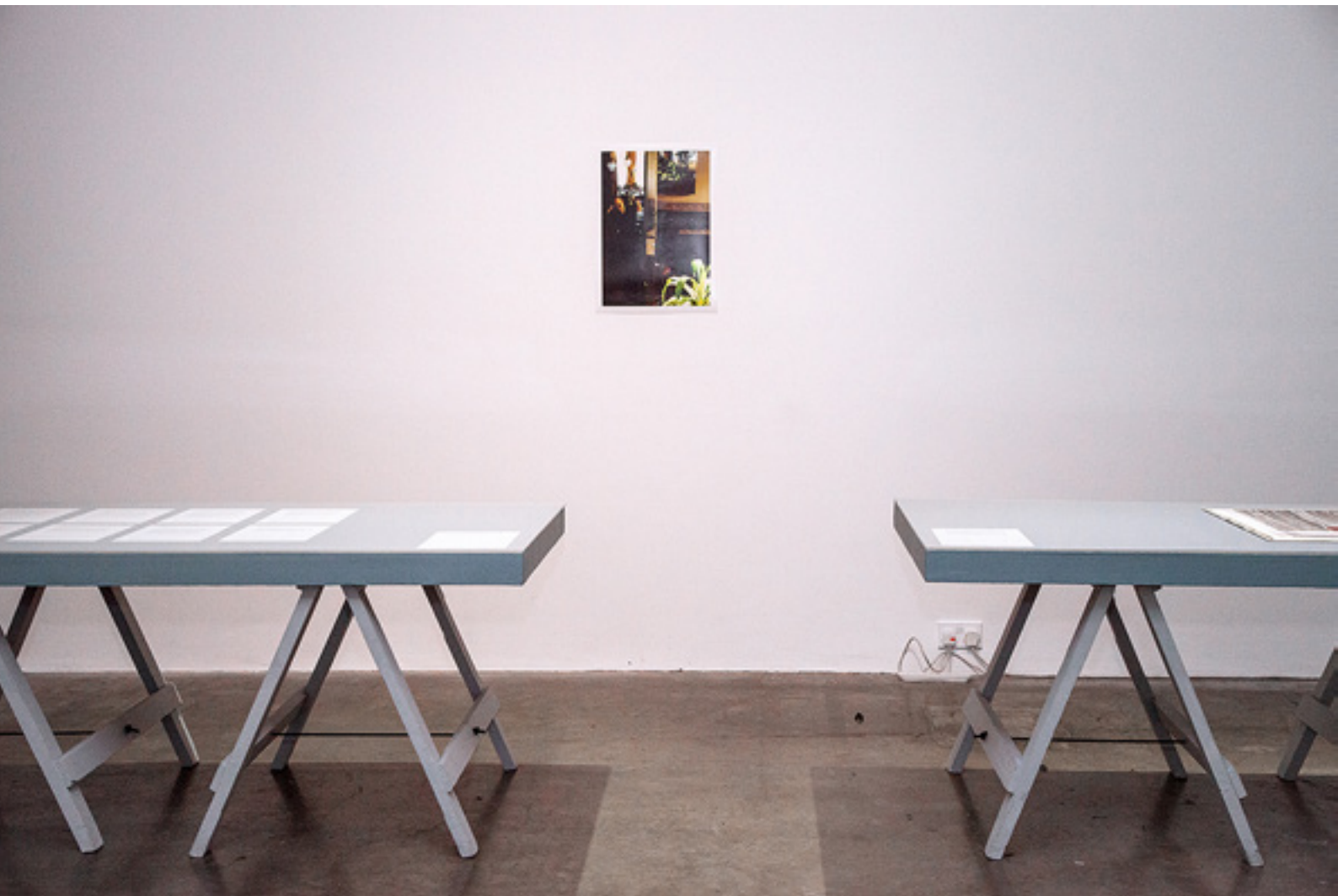
*Isla Blue* was commissioned for *The Long Goodbye* and devised by Valerie Connor. Artist Miriam O'Connor photographed the former sites where Project's various Dublin-based Off Site programming took place. For this PDF, O'Connor has put together a selection of these images she made for the 'Folios' exhibited at Project, with notes and reflections on her process of researching and making the photographic series *Isla Blue*.

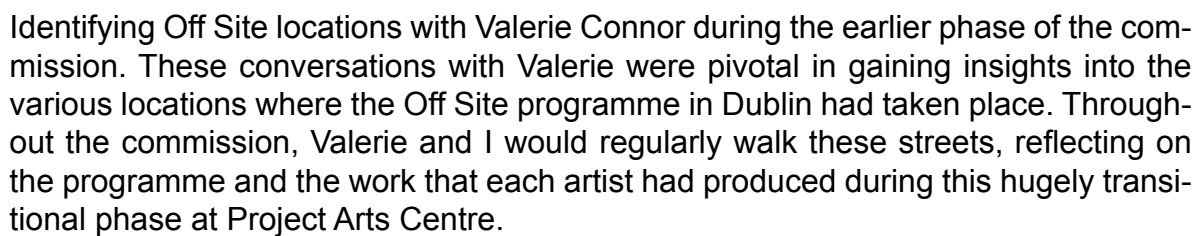
Livia Páldi, Curator of Visual Arts,  
Project Arts Centre, Dublin

## WHERE TO BEGIN - MAPPING ISLA BLUE

**MIRIAM O'CONNOR**

I was invited to visit the various locations in Dublin city centre where the Off Site programme had transpired, responding to those places as they are now. Inspired by the spirit of Off Site and its ability to unfold in both a nomadic and structured manner, I engaged with the places, events, their history, and the city through a contemporary lens.









As well as identifying the locations where the Off Site artists had undertaken their specific projects for the programme, the buildings that Project Arts Centre had occupied over its 50+ years history was also a focus of my research. These locations included: The Gate Theatre, Parnell Square; Tuck & Co, 31 Lower Abbey Street; YMCA basement premises under the Metropolitan Hall on 12 Lower Abbey Street; 6 Henry Place (Now a Snooker and Amusement Centre); an office space on Ashton Quay; and 15 South King Street, the former site of Dublin's infamous, Dandelion Market. In her extensive research for the project, Livia Páldi had secured a number of archival photographs that illustrated some of these previous locations, many of which proved useful in identifying them later on. Acting like visual cues from the past, they were a stark reminder too of the changes the city endured throughout that 50-year period.





19 November 2018, 11.11pm. The very first photograph I took for the commission. Thereafter, for one reason or another, I often worked in the evening or late at night on Isla Blue. The title/name *Isla Blue*, of course, had yet to be conjured up at this juncture.

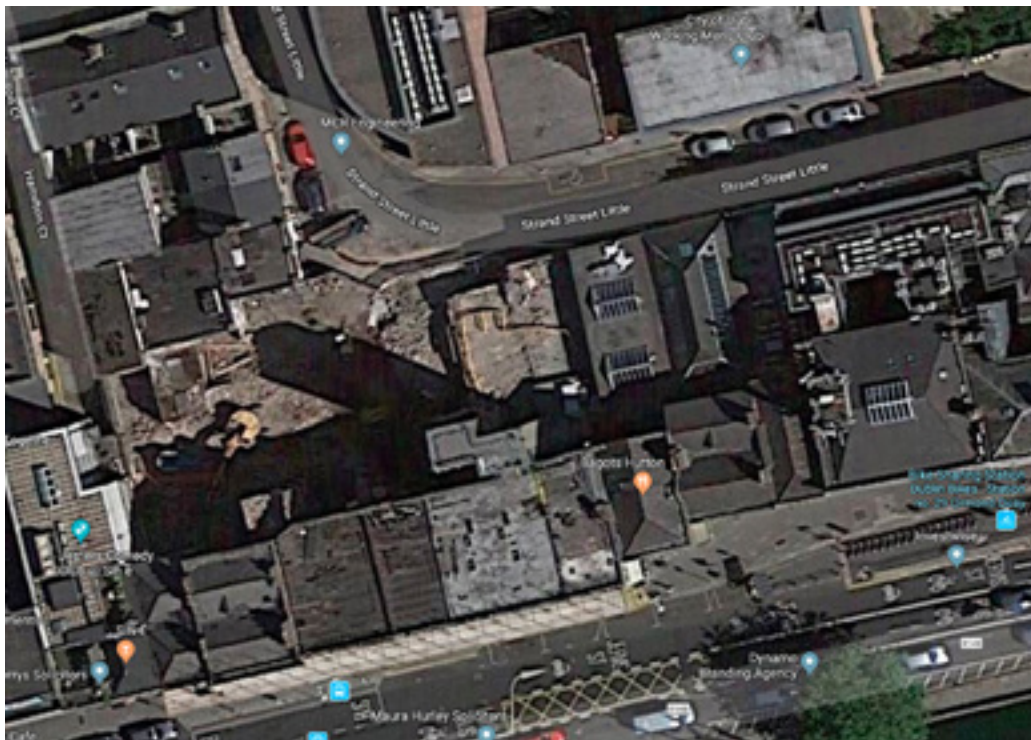
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Notebook used for *Isla Blue* throughout the commission. This notebook proved to be a trusty companion throughout the process, naturally for note-taking and project plotting, but equally, as a place where I gathered my thoughts and found my way.

## SEARCHING FOR CLUES



Source: Google Maps

In addition to conversations with Valerie, at the beginning of the commission, I often spent some time navigating the city via Google Maps, identifying key locations where many of the Off Site projects had taken place. I remember being especially happy to find images of what the former Ormond Hotel site on Dublin's Liffey quays looked like, prior to its redevelopment which had got well underway when I was working on *Isla Blue*, as illustrated below.

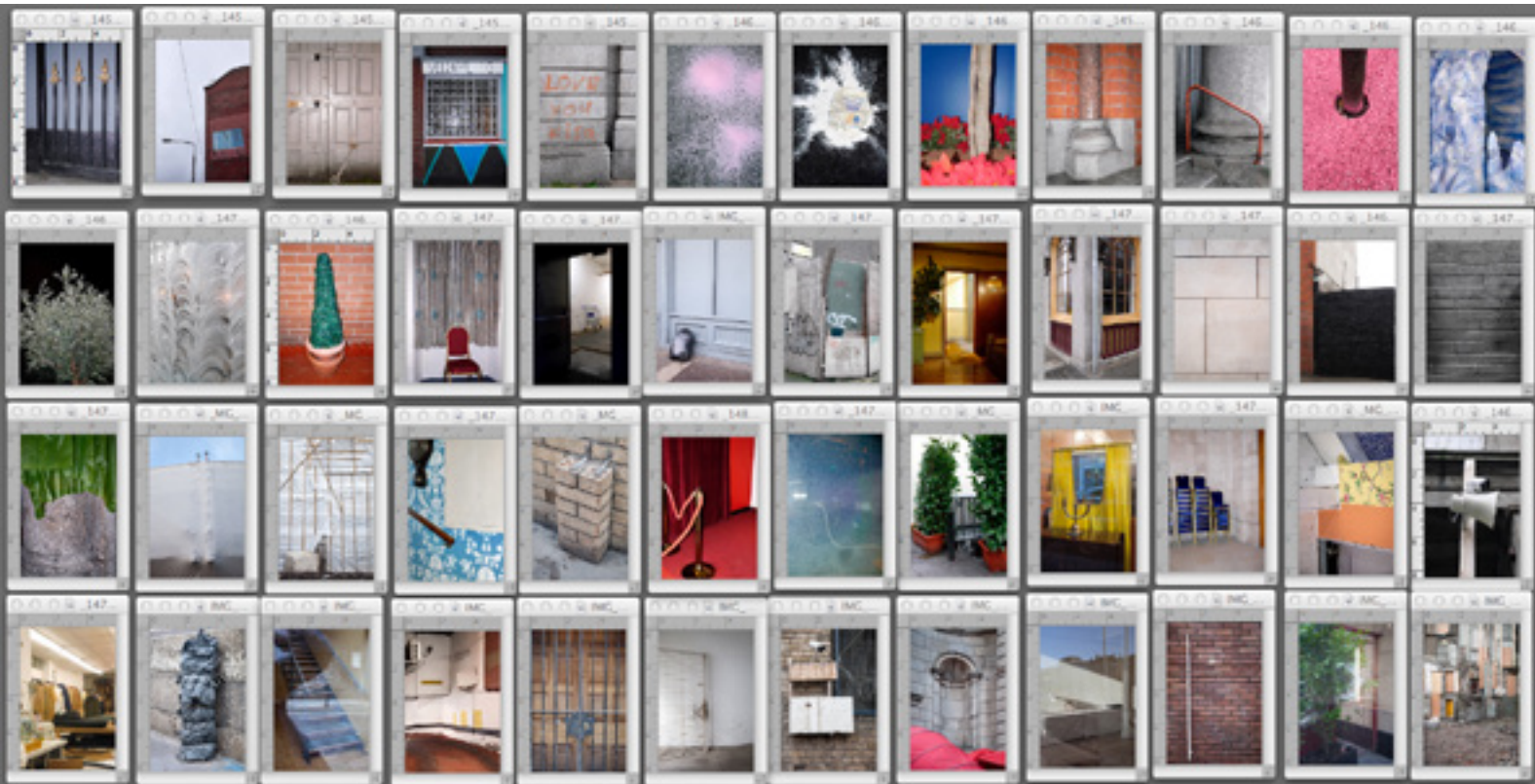


## MAKING YOUR OWN CONNECTIONS

In total, *Isla Blue* consisted of 42 photographs which were included in five separate folios and presented at three different release dates throughout the duration of Active Archive – Slow Institution: *The Long Goodbye*. In adding the photographs at different stages throughout the show's duration, the idea of an archive as something active and evolving was pertinent. Equally, there was a desire too that viewers coming to this work would exhibit agency of their own in that looking process, by touching the photographs, sifting through them, ordering or reordering them at will. By engaging with the work in this fluid manner, viewers had the capacity to make new kinds of connections, reflect on the city then, its social and cultural fabric, and consider the city now through this contemporary lens.



# FOLIO 1



## Editing files for *Isla Blue*

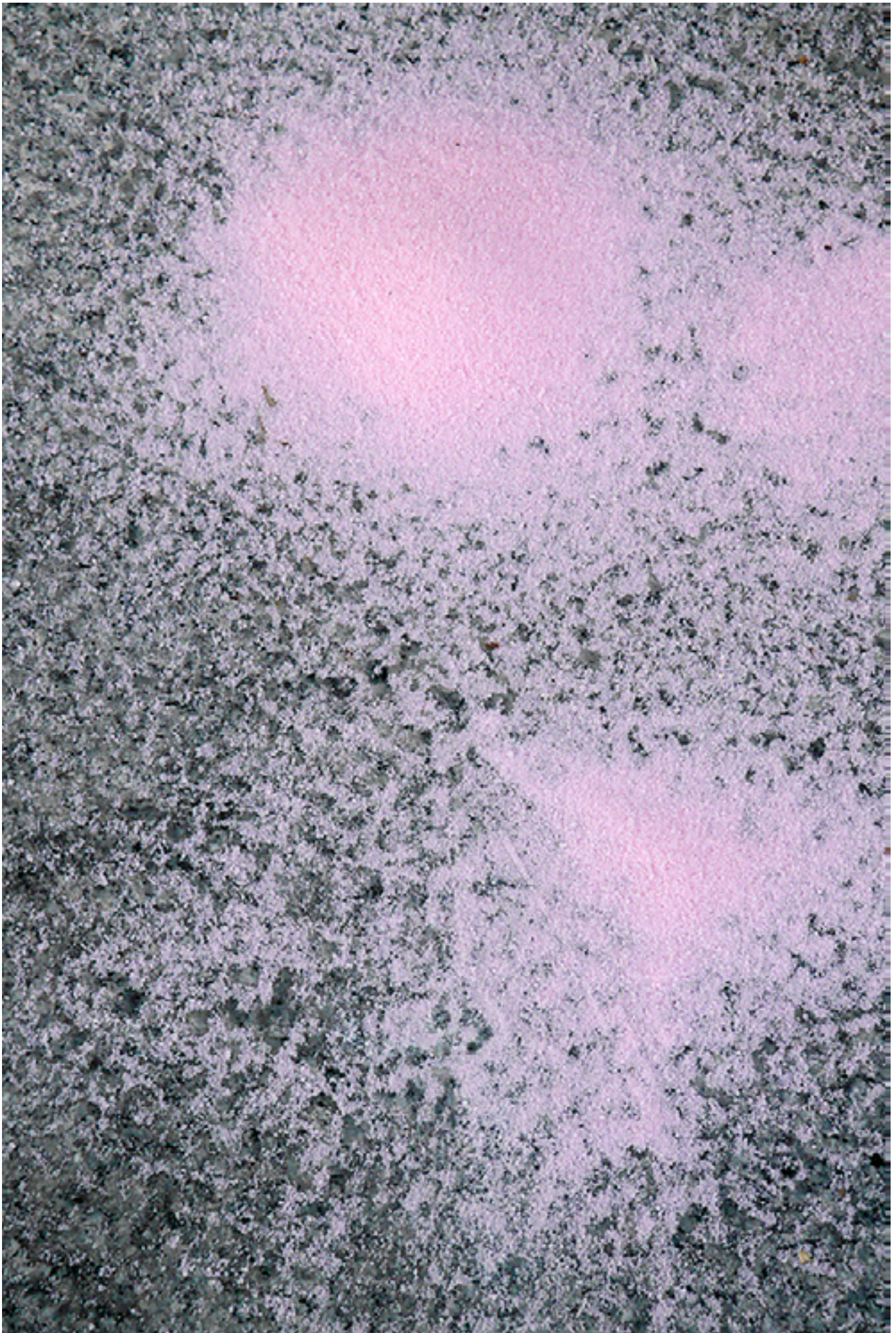
It is important to acknowledge that, by the time I completed image production for *Isla Blue*, many images had accumulated. While settling on a presentational strategy had taken time, so too did the editing process. In editing for that first folio, released on 14 February 2019, the focus hovered around those places in which the Off Site projects had transpired, but equally, was preoccupied with ideas of serendipity and chance. While the relocation of Projects Arts Centre gave cause for a new way to engage with the visual arts programme during that time, the Off Site artists used these unusual circumstances as decisive opportunities. It often struck me that the locations where their projects transpired were much more than just that. They were carefully identified, akin to the process of image editing itself. These seemingly unsystematic locations weren't just where the work took place, they were integral in how the work was read and, in some cases, these very locations became part of the work itself.











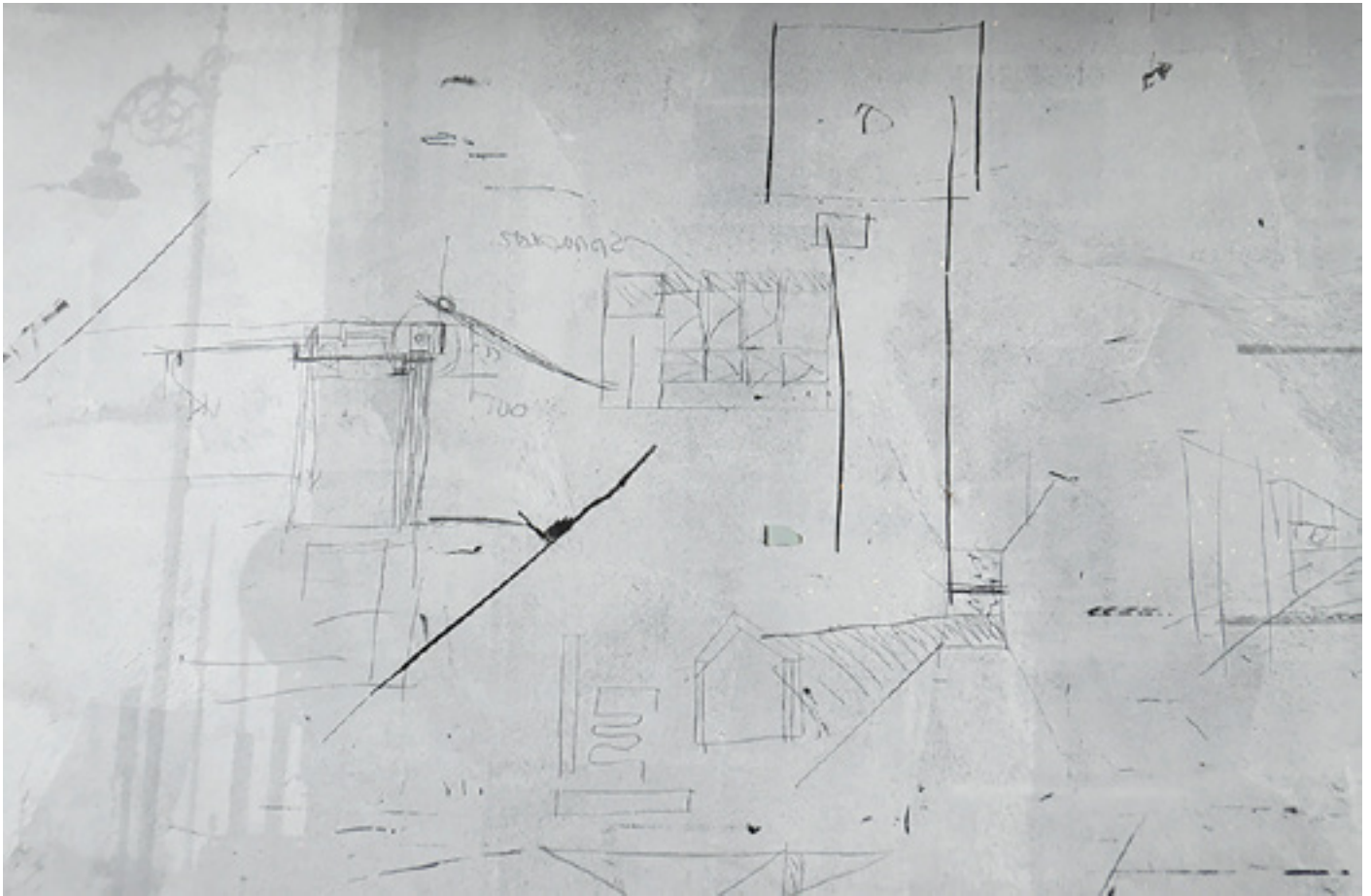


## FOLIO 2

FOLIO 2, which contained five images, was preoccupied with the version of city I so often witnessed throughout my time working on the commission, a city which seemed so terribly uneasy in its old skin, constantly in search of something new. Every time I saw bitumen, I couldn't help but reflect on Tina O'Connell's [\*In Dublin\*](#) which she produced for the Off Site programme, a project that was very much concerned with the phenomenal wave of redevelopment sweeping across Dublin city in the late 1990s.







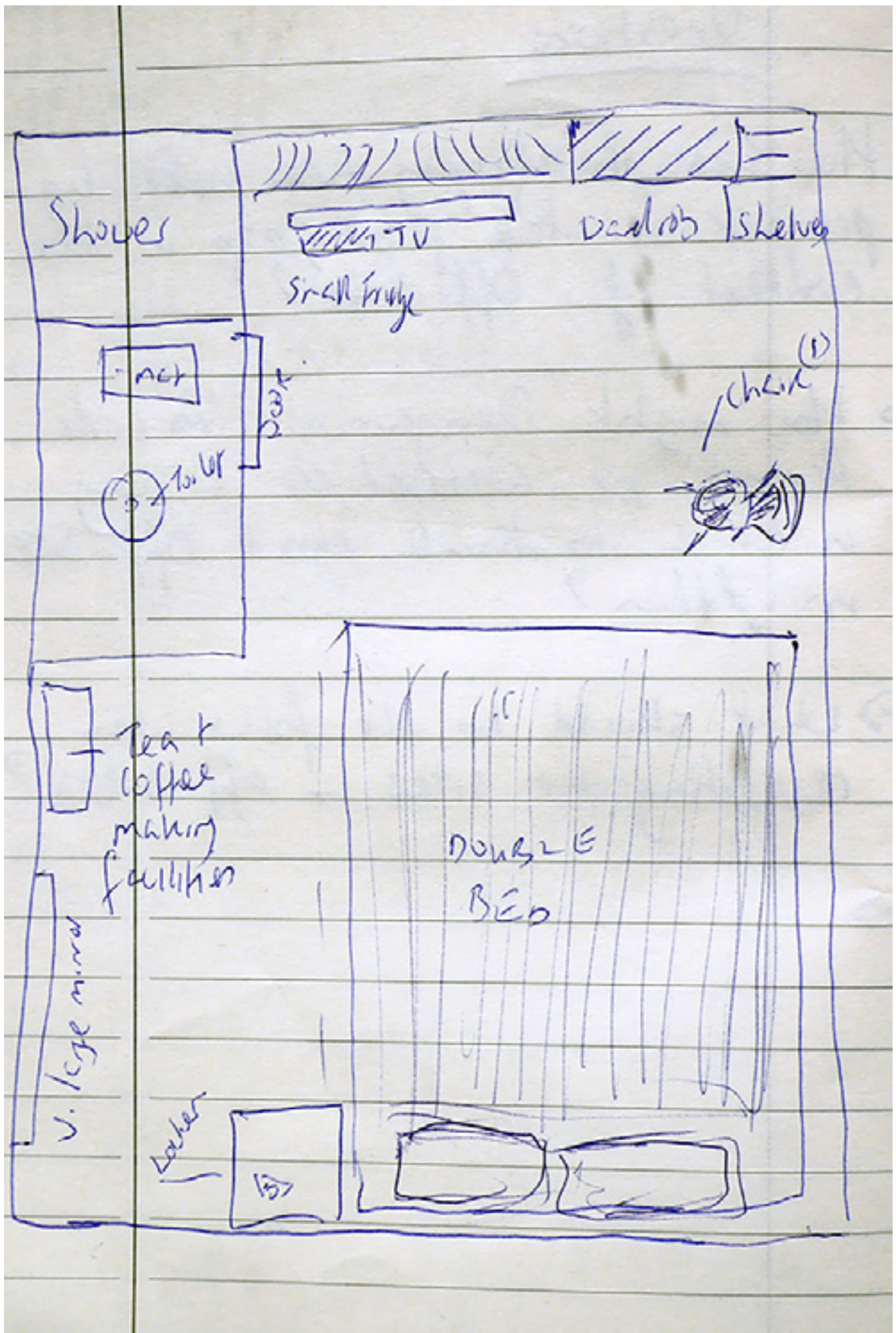


## FOLIO 3

On one occasion, as Valerie and I walked along Ormond Quay, discussing Pete Smithson's work, considering Anne Tallentire and John Seth's approaches undertaken during Off Site, or reflecting on Sandra Johnston's practice, we came across a B+B called the Inn on the Liffey. Not long after that, inspired in particular by Sandra's performance-based work *Reserved* which took place in the Ormond Hotel, I checked in to the Inn on the Liffey as part of my work for the commission. Inn on the Liffey not only became a place I stayed from time to time during the commission, it also became a place of work, and my stays there provided much of the image content for FOLIO 3, released on the 28 February 2019. The architecture of this space, the use of particular furniture and soft furnishings, that language, together with its proximity to the quays, really resonated with me during that time. Not unlike some of the others, FOLIO 3 contained 12 images, and in many ways acted like a link between all the other folios. Set in the present and the time I spent at the Inn of the Liffey, the images in this folio harped back to a different Dublin, one from the 80s and 90s, before the development waves took a firm hold across the city.



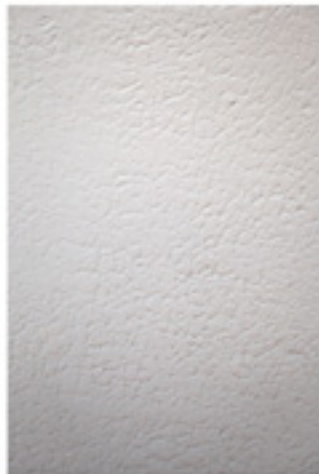
Room 23, Inn on the Liffey





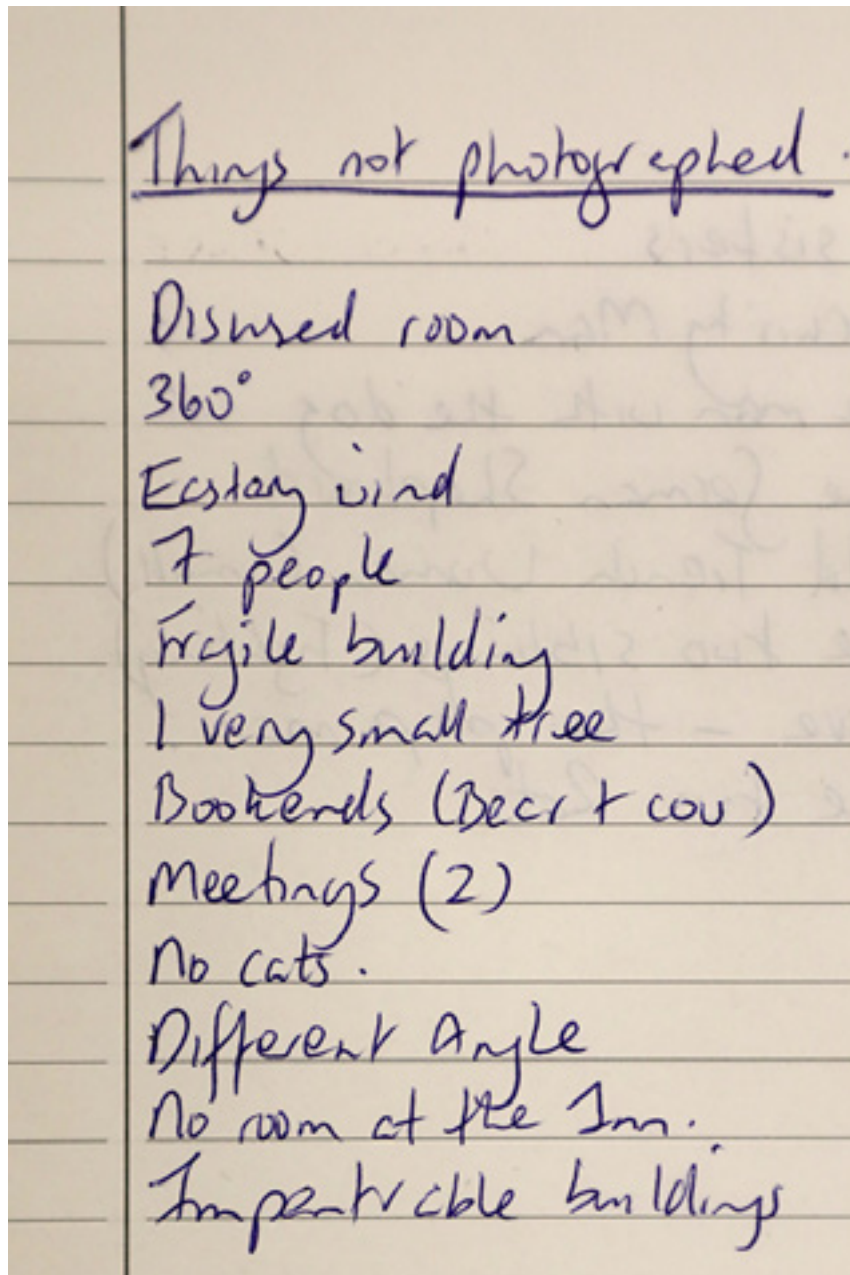








## THINGS NOT PHOTOGRAPHED



My trusty notebook, like all good notebooks, contained plans and project progress. It contained notes about things I had seen, photographs I had taken or even impossible photographs like some of those noted above. What might an 'Easterly Wind' look like or who were those 'Seven People' that drifted in and out of my mind during that time? I imagine now that those 'Things Not Photographed' were as much about the complex nature of photographic representation, as they were about the scenes that I witnessed when navigating my way around the city. Over those many conversations and walks with Valerie, I fondly remember some of the characters outlined below, and the ways in which their presence had coloured the Off Site experience for her, and now, 20 years later, for me too.

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The Two Sisters  
The German Shepherd Dog  
The Security Man

The Two Rats

The Old French Woman  
Two Siblings (Brother and Sister)  
Dave the Prop Man

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## SUB PLOTS

There's always a subplot, and mine centred around a pothole, located at the rear of the Ormond Hotel site, a place I visited on so many occasions throughout my time working on *Isla Blue*. As noted, during my earlier research phase, I had navigated the city using Google Maps. Later on, I visited many of the places with my camera. When I did finally make it to the Ormond Hotel site, I was suddenly confronted with that pothole in reality, the one I had seen on Google Maps. It reminded me of Roland Barthes' concept of the 'punctum' in *Camera Lucida*, the thing that pierces you in a photograph. Slightly alarmed that it still existed, that I had finally come face-to-face with this pothole in reality, albeit in a new shape and form, it felt important to photograph – it felt like the right thing to do.



Above Image Source: Google Maps





## FOLIO 4



The rear of Ormond Hotel occupies 7-13 Ormond Quay Upper, Dublin. This, the location for Sandra Johnston's Off Site project *Reserved*, had been on my mind. I had already met with the pot hole, and during my time working on *Isla Blue*, that whole area became one of my regular haunts as I often I passed it by on my way back to my temporary city home, Inn on the Liffey. One day, while walking by, I noticed that builders had accidentally left the site entrance gate opened. For what felt like forever, I had tried to see what was happening inside that hoarding, and on that day, I took my chance gaining access for a brief spell until I was escorted off site again by a builder who seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was another pivotal moment in the project and this photograph formed part of FOLIO 4, another set of 12 photographs, released on 14 March 2019.













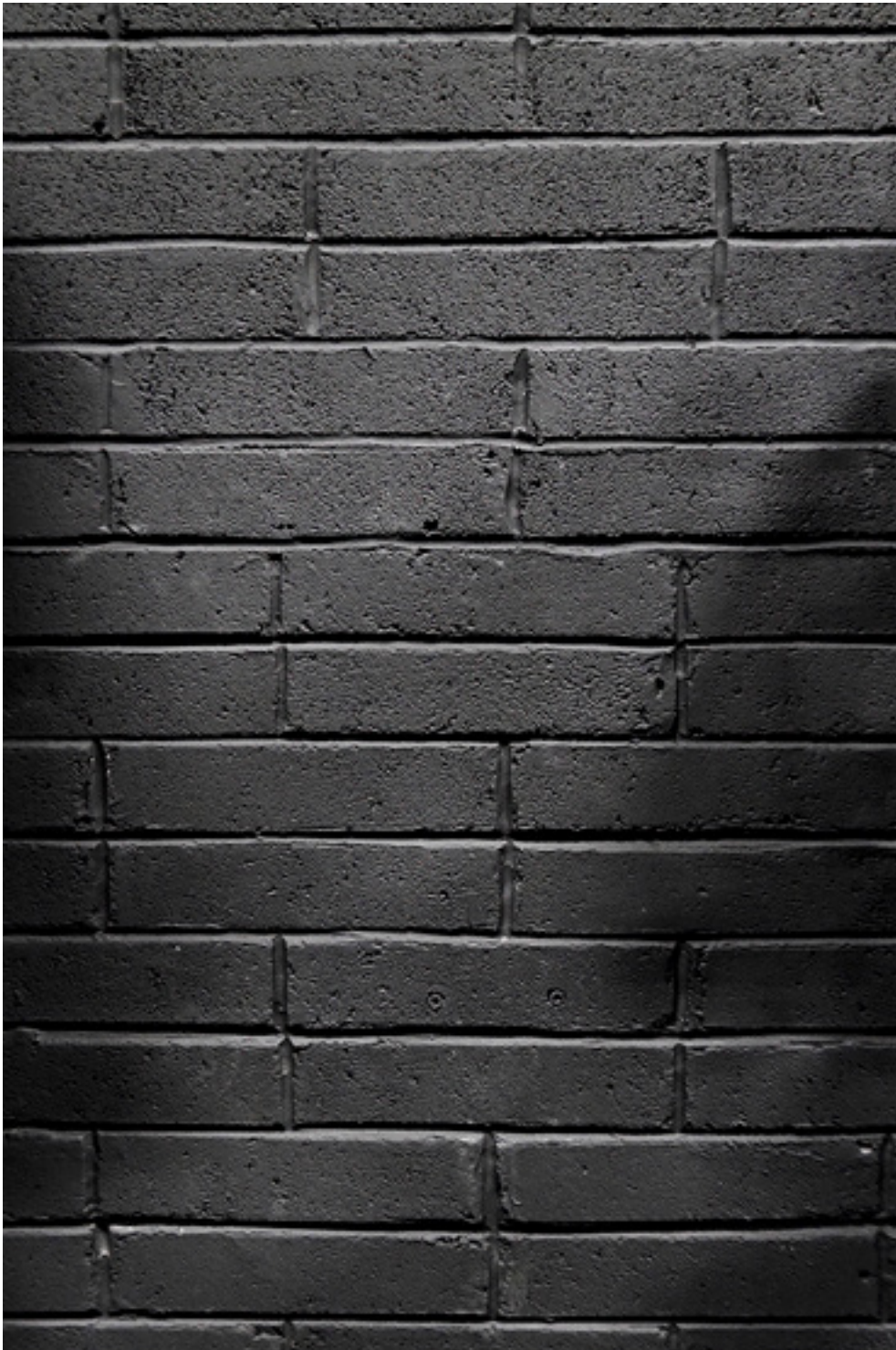


Another image from FOLIO 4, worthy to note because in the few months that I worked on this commission, that entire wall more or less disappeared (or at least refashioned itself), as illustrated in the image below. The speed at which the city seemed to change during that time was phenomenal. Yet, working on *Isla Blue* gave me the opportunity to look again at many areas of Dublin that I was already rather familiar with. Within the parameters of Off Site however, the city seemed different, it looked different, and I certainly felt that during that period of time, I noticed little changes transpiring before my eyes that normally would have fallen outside my field of vision.





## FOLIO 5



The only photograph that informed FOLIO 5 was released on the 14 March 2019. This, a photograph of a wall from Project Arts Centre's space upstairs that continues, to this day, to testify how the current building had come about. Upon careful investigation, it is evident that at certain height the brickwork becomes slightly wobbly and exhibits signs of some structural flaws, of poor or rushed construction perhaps. This wall acted like a metaphor in ways, representative of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland's boom years, where attention to detail was sometimes compromised in favour of a heady desire to forge hurriedly and unreservedly ahead.

## NAMING ISLA BLUE

The title *Isla Blue* came about through the many walks I undertook in and around the Benburb Street area. Here, I was struck by the presence of Bargaintown, a furniture store which had managed to survive the numerous redevelopment phases that had taken hold from the 1980s onwards and throughout the Celtic Tiger era. So many areas within this small stretch of Dublin city centre were demolished and redeveloped during that time, including the Ormond Hotel. In thinking about that particular space, and the Inn on the Liffey, I often imagined that much of that hotel's furniture might well have been purchased in Bargaintown. Bargaintown, a furniture store which belongs to Dublin's past and, against all the odds, remains firmly rooted in both the physical and psychological landscape of the city today.

It seemed fitting that here at Bargaintown, the project title was conceptualised and that the name *Isla Blue* emerged from a carpet range, one which was for sale in their store at that time. In choosing this approach, I was also interested in the functional idea of carpet, providing this kind of comfort solution on one level, but at the same time, through its deeply textured cut-piles, concealing something else that might lurk underneath.





## PRESENTATION OF ISLA BLUE



Maquettes of the five FOLIOS containing collectively 42 images. The maquettes were handmade in preparation for the presentation at Project Arts Centre, Dublin.

FOLIO 1: 14/02/2019 contained 12 photographs

FOLIO 2: 28/02/2019 contained 5 photographs

FOLIO 3: 28/02/2019 contained 12 photographs

FOLIO 4: 14/03/2019 contained 12 photographs

FOLIO 5: 14/03/2019 contained 1 photograph

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions: 552.6mm x 370mm - Paper Type: Pigment Inkjet Prints on Canon Luster 310gsm

Photographs printed by David Monahan



Above Image Source: Valerie Connor













## RAG PICKING

Throughout the commission production period, I regularly collected items from the street that caught my eye, inspired by Walter Benjamin's [Rag Picking](#) in The Arcades Project. On one such walk with Valerie around the city, we happened upon a charity shop on Francis Street. On impulse, I purchased an old photo album that day, not quite sure why, or what I might do with it. Later, during a talk about *Isla Blue* given during the exhibition run at Projects Arts Centre, I presented all of these items in that photo album. Much like that pothole photograph at the Ormond Hotel site, it felt like the right thing to do.



## ISLA BLUE – MOVING THE ARCHIVE

While Active Archive – Slow Institution: *The Long Goodbye* has come to a close, the importance of that living/breathing archive and the themes that this show addressed continues to resonate with me. Currently, the work produced for this commission finds itself in a new home, in my personal archive, located in my studio here in Cork, carefully packed away, waiting patiently until the time transpires for it to be called upon again. On reflection, there's something about that cardboard structure that I constructed as a means in which to house those precious images and folios. It exhibits some signs or structural flaws that remind me of that wall at Project Arts Centre. It feels like a metaphor for the precarious nature of any archive, something that exists and often persists, and only through careful engagement and investigation can a renewed purpose and focus be found for its contents once again.

Miriam O'Connor, November–December 2020







## BIO

Miriam O'Connor is from Ireland and was educated at Technological University, Dublin and completed a Research Masters at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dublin (2011). In her practice she draws inspiration from the language, sights, and sounds of the everyday. She is curious about the multifaceted roles photography occupies in culture, and the manner in which this persuasive medium permeates the way we engage with the world around us. Rather than providing answers, O'Connor positions photography as a tool for posing questions, a playful medium that commands its own attention and analysis. Following her relocation to her family farm in recent years, O'Connor now occupies a dual role of farmer and photographer, where she is interested in engaging with the elasticity of this medium throughout everyday agricultural life.

In recent times Miriam O'Connor was awarded the Visual Artists Ireland, Experiment! Award (2020) and her long-term body of work, *Tomorrow is Sunday* was published in conjunction with *A Woman's Work* by the Gallery of Photography Ireland (2020). A solo show of this work will take place at The Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin in Spring 2021. In addition to her art practice, and farming, O'Connor also lectures part-time at Griffith College Dublin. Her work is part of FUTURES, a photography platform that pools the resources and talent programmes of leading photography institutions across Europe, and *A Woman's Work*, a project that uses photography and digital media to challenge the dominant view of gender and industry in Europe.

All photographs by Miriam O'Connor, unless otherwise stated.