

DIG WHERE YOU STAND

DIG WHERE YOU STAND

Ellis Lavelle, Sarah Lincoln & Rosie Lynch

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INTRODUCTION

South Tipperary County Council Arts Service initiated a curator in residence programme in 2011–2012. The selected curators, Eilís Lavelle, Rosie Lynch and Sarah Lincoln began the residency in early 2012. The brief was to engage imaginatively with the public and local communities, developing a new approach to the commissioning and presentation of visual arts within a local context while maintaining a critically challenging environment for a contemporary art exhibition of national and international status. In short, to initiate a ‘conversation’ which could include artists, curators and the general public, about the visual arts and current artistic practice and through that conversation dispel some of the assumptions that people can have about contemporary art exhibitions in a gallery context. *Dig where you stand* has been the result. *Dig where you stand* is a curatorial project and exhibition which works on the premise that “the visual arts can speak in strong and original ways to a locale, and can strengthen a sense that inspiration does not have to reside elsewhere, but exists in latent form under one’s feet”.¹

Weaving threads of narratives through a series of reading groups that have taken place throughout the year, the curators selected venues specifically for their historical or social significance and their relevance to the emerging discourse. The venues included the Workmen’s Boat Club, Clonmel, Bolton Library, Cashel and Tipperary Excel, Tipperary.

An intricate web of ideas; including historical narratives, locale, notions of past and future, science fiction, language and historical interpretations have been the common threads through the conversations at the readings. The methodology of the curators has clearly been an interesting one, a ‘slow-burn’ approach, with a gradual gathering of interested parties, a development of connectivity of different expressions and interpretations of the chosen texts and a catalyst of imagination and inspiration

for the artists involved in the project.

Just as the themes have a web-like structure, the project itself has worked on a multi-layered basis. The curators commissioned two local artists Bridget O’Gorman and Philippa Sutherland to explore the notions of *Dig Where You Stand* from a local perspective. Philippa has been exploring the Museum and by drawing objects of local interest from the collection and interweaving these with her own work, has created an intriguing intervention which includes personal histories and connections, creating a rich and fascinating tapestry of the objects selected. Bridget has been working at the Bolton Library in Cashel and through her video piece examines a universal theme which has recurred throughout the residency, that of notions of the varieties of ‘pasts’ and ‘futures’. Alongside this the curators have woven an international perspective into the mix—the ideas are at once macro and micro, the discourse within the exhibition is continued at a macro level by Susan Hiller exploration of 25 disappearing languages and Uriel Orlow’s work which shows not only how histories can have multiple interpretations but can also be expunged and made invisible.

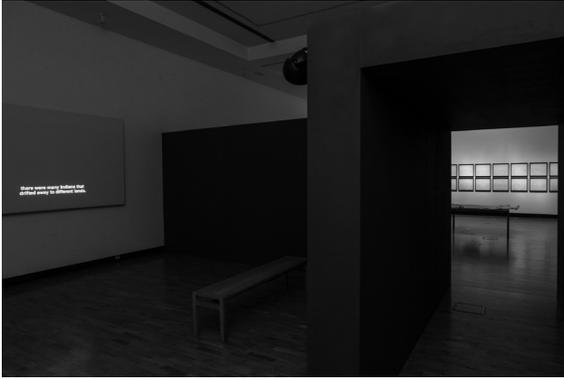
The residency and the associated exhibition has been a new venture for South Tipperary Arts Service, one that has invited collaborations and networks between artists and across differing groups in the community. Many of the connections and engagements are still to occur—the success of the project can only be evaluated at a future date—however an interesting model has been established by the curators and one that warrants further investigation. This project has been funded by South Tipperary County Council Arts Service, the Arts Council of Ireland and the department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, under the Percent for Art Scheme.

Sally O’Leary

Arts Officer

South Tipperary County Council

1. Eilís Lavelle, Sarah Lincoln, Rosie Lynch, *Dig where you stand* project statement, February 2012.



Susan Hiller, *The Last Silent Movie*, 2007, single channel projection with sound, 20 minutes, installation view.

Susan Hiller, *Plate 5 Manx*, 2007, etching, 37 x 42.5cm, detail. Image courtesy of British Council © Susan Hiller.



Still from Susan Hiller, *The Last Silent Movie*, 2007, single channel projection with sound, 20 minutes. Image courtesy of British Council © Susan Hiller.



Both: Bridget O'Gorman, *By the skin of your teeth*, 2011, calfskin, electrostatic flock, found object, blown glass form, installation view. Background: etchings by Susan Hiller.



Both: Bridget O'Gorman, *All places are different from heaven alike*, 2012, HD video with stereo sound, 4 min. film still.



Uriel Orlow, *Yellow Limbo* (from *The Short and the Long of It*), 2011, HD video with sound, 14min, film still, courtesy of Uriel Orlow and LUX, London.



Uriel Orlow, *Yellow Limbo* (from *The Short and the Long of It*), 2011, HD video with sound, 14min, film still, courtesy of Uriel Orlow and LUX, London.



Philippa Sutherland, *Artefactual*, 2012,
detail.



Philippa Sutherland, *Artefactual*, 2012,
detail.

DIG WHERE YOU STAND

Eilís Lavelle & Rosie Lynch

...the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of a lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting.

— Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

The exhibition *Dig where you stand* proposes that unique viewpoints emerge with the convergence of a locale, its historical remnants and the visual arts. This exhibition takes place in a building which houses South Tipperary’s Museum Collection—we have responded to this context with a specific awareness of potential for connectivity between the county museum’s permanent collection and the gallery space, which adjoins it. Offering diverse perspectives the four exhibiting artists, Susan Hiller, Bridget O’Gorman, Uriel Orlow and Philippa Sutherland consider the slippages and ellipses which arise around the mapping of the past onto the present. The works in *Dig where you stand* move beyond a retroactive questioning and use our historical narratives as a means by which to ask questions of our present moment.

Philippa Sutherland has worked closely with the museum curator and conservator to produce a series of interventions into the South Tipperary Museum Collection. Sutherland places personal objects and artworks alongside selected artefacts from the collection which reposition and disrupt our typical reading of information through museum cabinets. A written guide accompanies these insertions, charting the artist’s open, playful, yet respectful approach.

The Workmen’s Boat Club on the banks of the River Suir in Clonmel hosted the first iteration of *Dig where you stand* in the form of a reading group in March 2012.

Activities around preserving the cultural heritage of the River Suir is a concern also shared by the county museum—perhaps made most evident through their permanent display of Maurice Davin’s boat, the Cruiskeen. Sutherland has expanded upon this shared interest in the river and has used local references to the Suir as a means by which to refer in a broad sense to the symbols and language around water navigation. Particular inclusions by Sutherland echo aspects of other artworks in the show. A receipt linked to the Suez Canal from 1918 has been sourced from the county archives and links back to Uriel Orlow’s work. Sutherland’s research strands vary in tone; on occasions her approach is oblique, for instance through her reference to the religious and mythical iconography of the Ancient Order of Foresters in the form of a hand painted framed poster, and later through the placement of a small golden statuette of a stag in amongst a cabinet of bronze age axe heads.

On June 5th, 1967 fourteen international cargo vessels were unable to access a route through the Suez Canal—a result of the Six-Day war between between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

Swiss artist **Uriel Orlow**’s *Yellow Limbo* (2011) and *Anatopism* (2011) explore multiple readings of this little known incident. The canal was reopened in 1975 and in the eight intervening years a fluctuating group of crew members remained working on the fleet of marooned boats. In *Yellow Limbo*, Uriel Orlow presents two perspectives - archival Super-8 material reveals glimpses of life on the boats contrasted with video footage from a visit the artist made to the location. The lapses and differences of time juxtaposed in these works is described by art critic Sally O’Reilly as “giving rise to a sense that time is pleated, causality radiating and that this rippling expanse of saltwater communicates diagonally through time”.¹ Uriel Orlow presents moments which zigzag across time, reflecting the multiplicity and complexity of histories and their retelling.

Susan Hiller trained as an anthropologist before embarking on an artistic practice in the 1970s. *The Last Silent Movie* (2007) is based upon archival recordings of some of the last remaining speakers of twenty-five extinct or endangered languages. In the video work these voice recordings are translated into English, with subtitles appearing on a darkened projection screen. The languages include K’ora from South Africa, recorded in 1938 by its last speaker; Manx from the Isle of Man, captured in 1948 and now extinct; and Blackfoot from North America, recorded in the 1990s and is today seriously endangered. The voices in the recordings tell individual stories as well as tales of clan and family, recounted through song, chanting and storytelling.

This work is accompanied by a series of 24 etchings of selected phrases fed through an oscilloscope to reveal a picture of the voice, with the translations beneath. If language can be understood as a continuum, a connection to a past; through *The Last Silent Movie* these languages are suspended in time as spectres of lost culture.

Bridget O’Gorman’s video work *All places are distant from heaven alike* (2012) was filmed around the interior and surrounds of the Bolton Library building at Cashel—suggesting a dichotomy between historical preservation and the irrepressible passing of time. The library houses a unique collection of antiquarian books, which were collected by Archbishop of Cashel, Theophilis Bolton, from 1730–1744. The collection contains a wide range of subjects including 12th Century manuscripts, the Nuremberg Chronicle and works by Dante, Swift, Calvin, Erasmus, Machiavelli and Robert Burton. *All places are distant from heaven alike* is a metaphorical excavation of the words and ideas preserved as artifacts under glass at the Bolton Library. Medieval manuscripts entombed in this silent space are presented next to exterior views of open skies over earthy tombstones, dewy foliage, insects and images of crumbling vaults at dawn. The chatter of birdsong is interspersed with the sound of generators, machinery starting up for a new day of construction, movement and industrious endeavour. Bridget O’Gorman’s research at Bolton Library will be extended through an exhibition in November 2012 as part of Cashel Arts Festival. “Precari Unitevi contro i Padroni”, is an old Italian phrase used in recent anti-austerity protests as a call for workers to unite. In the installation work *By the skin of your teeth* (2011), these words are flocked onto a calfskin hide. O’Gorman’s installation is imbued with a sense of potential around standing still, ‘taking stock’ and unearthing the past in order to find a way forward.

1. Sally O’Reilly, *The Short and the Long of it*, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.urielorlow.net/2010/10/sally-oreilly-the-short-and-the-long-of-it-2010/>

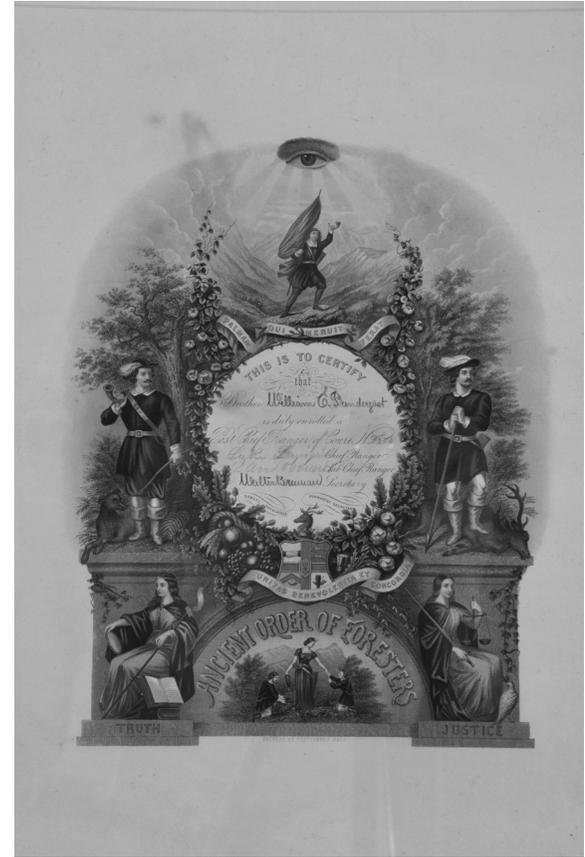
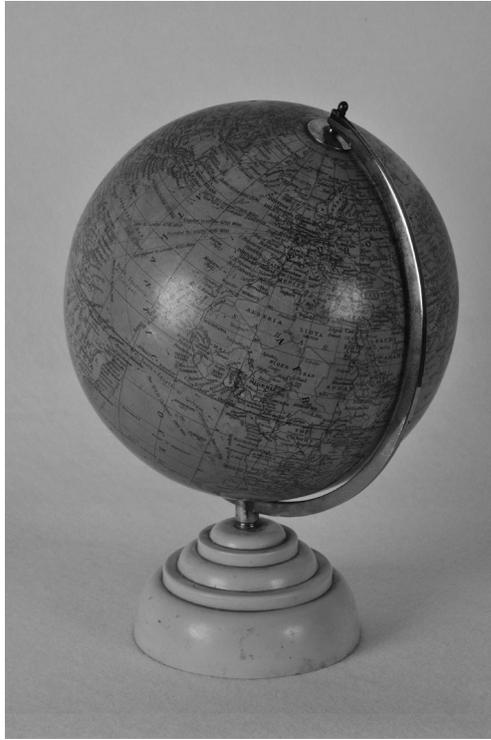
ARTEFACTUAL

Philippa Sutherland

- 19 A medium sized drum, painted in brown, orange, cream and red with Clonmel Boys Club painted on one side. [1992.42]
- 20 Engraving black and white, by P. Sandby, showing Carrick-on-Suir castle across the River Suir with bridge and Carrickbeg Abbey to left. A shepherd under a tree at left looks across the river, with two goats and a cow. Below "Castle and Town of Carrick and Abbey of Carrickbeg". At top right of engraving, in white margin, is the figure "29" inset in brown card, broken at bottom, inside cream frame with black and yellow trim. [1994.331]
- 21 A postcard, colour tinted, showing a man standing pensively in a field with a stile and trees behind, with a four line verse entitled "The Irish Emigrant" below. Reverse is printed in brown for postage but not completed. The edges are rounded. [1996.302]
- 22 A globe mounted on a cream-coloured plastic [maybe Bakelite] circular stand. Probably mid 20th century. The countries are differentiated by muted colours. Bought at a market stall on Portobello Road, London early one Friday morning before work by my then boyfriend.
- 23 An ornate, monochrome certificate, certifying that William Prendergast was enrolled as a past Chief ranger of Court No. 5254, A.O. of Foresters, Luke Lanigan, Chief Ranger, David O'Connor, Sub-Chief ranger and Walter Brennon secretary. It is not dated. [1992.10]
- 24 A framed print of fighting between police and men, with text below "attack on the police by the insurgents under Smith O'Brien" and the date Saturday 29th July 1848 written underneath.
- 25 Large framed poster for a performance by Mick Delahunty and his Orchestra in The County Ballroom, Cashel on Thursday, May 1st. The poster is signed by Mick Delahunty, August 1st 1991. In the top right hand corner written on the cover of the frame in green ink is County Ballroom, Cashel, 1949. Further down the poster beside the date is written 1949 again. Glued to the frame are two tickets for Balls in the Courthouse in Clonmel. See also 2003.27 [2003.28]









COUNTY BALLROOM, CASHEL
PRESENTS
THE SENSATIONAL

*Best links
to Cashel Maria
from Mick Delahanty
1933*

MICK DELAHUNTY
AND HIS ORCHESTRA

★ Featuring Star Vocalists **EDDIE ROBERTS** and **MARY MULLINS** ★

THURSDAY, MAY 1st¹⁹³³
DANCING 10 - 3 ADMISSION 5/- (inc. tax)
Hall Fully Licensed. Admission Rights Reserved. Running Buffet.

ANNUAL BALL
The Cashel, Clonmel
WEDNESDAY, 21 NOV. 1933
★ Tickets 5/- in advance
★ Refreshments 1/-

CLONMEL
A.R.P. BALL
In Ballroom, Cashel
Wednesday, Nov. 11th
1933

AWKWARD POSITIONS AND THE STIRRING EARTH

Sarah Lincoln

Restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instabilities, its flaws; it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.

— Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

As a child my grandmother spent many years trying to uncover the route of an old road which ran through Southern Tipperary. She enlisted me in the task, and I remember summers spent beating our way through overgrown boreens around Clogheen and Ardfinnan, seeking out ‘St. Declan’s Way’.¹ We spent her eightieth birthday, lost in the mist, trying to trace a route over the Knockmealdown Mountains. Unassuming things in the vicinity—like mossy rocks—transported her into imaginings of people who must have passed by that same spot: St. Declan, Henry II, Cromwell, the Countess of Desmond. As we negotiated briars and nettles, she would interject with stories of sieged castles, rebellions and half forgotten myths. We traipsed through a forest which is supposedly haunted by 17th Century soldiers, who had camped there on the evening before laying siege to Ardmore castle. My grandmother’s processes of excavation were a bit haphazard, but beautifully immersive. She relied on all the maps she could get her hands on, scraps of historical records, lots of walking and an awful lot of fanciful conjecture. It took a long time, but from the depths of soggy lane ways and disjointed records, she managed to piece together, what she believed to be a complete route of the old road.

I lived in Dublin for many years and reading groups became very important to me. The intention of these gatherings was simply to gain a collective foothold on a writer’s ideas. The texts we typically worked with were academic and philosophical—often using instances from the field of culture to open out a text. While the activity of gathering to discuss words accurately describes these reading groups, so much

else was set in motion around these get-togethers. On one level it helped to develop a sense of community amongst our small group of mainly cultural workers. Setting out to read and think together underlined the importance we placed in uncovering complex ideas. The groups nurtured a faith in our collective ability to maneuver through with openness and humour the unpredictable tangents which emerge out of difficult pieces of writing. There were strangely synergetic moments when the content of the text charged against what was happening on the street outside. In one instance I made my way to a reading group through a riot over the Queen’s visit with a copy of Michel Foucault’s *Of Other Spaces* in my bag. It was a warm night and the street below my studio was full of tension while we picked through Foucault’s ideas around identifying particular places, or ways of being, which we need to preserve as reserves for our imagination. More than anything, gathering in this manner formed the crystallisation of both my pleasure in the process of collectively grappling with unwieldy words and also a sense that certain texts would remain as stubbornly slow, yet ultimately generous companions throughout my life.

I was enthusiastic at the prospect of helping to establish a reading group in South Tipperary through the *Dig where you stand* project. I had moved back to the area and missed these sporadic gatherings around text which I had come to rely on in Dublin. I was excited thinking about how the space in which we gathered to read could activate the texts and how the presence of an artwork in amongst all these words could open-out in particular and energising ways. In researching this residency, I was on a parallel trajectory: one involved meeting people and visiting spaces around South Tipperary and the other was thinking about the textual content for these gatherings. Maybe it was my early memories of this landscape—steeped in trying to recall an earlier time—or maybe it was a sense of urgency around the particular texts I stumbled upon? What did transpire was a symbiotic development: as I explored more deeply the terrain and sites of South Tipperary, I also read in an increasingly focused and inquisitive manner texts which grappled with gaining productive historical perspectives. The meaning of the word ‘dig’ in relation to the texts I was circling around, increasingly formed into questions around the worth of ‘digging’? Anxieties around how this long look backwards could be unfixed from notions of closed-off nostalgia and wondering how we can begin to turn with our ‘historical burden’ to face our future optimistically? Having experienced my grandmother’s work processes, I knew that with a fair amount of belief and perseverance, one can emerge from confusing thickets with something resembling a map. Laying down the following thoughts is a way of staking a personal

claim in the worth of diving into a metaphorical boreen of brambles!

The spirit of a text like the artist Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* fired my enthusiasm with its openness—meandering through epochs and allowing the quotidian lever you into the metaphysical. We met Shay Hurley through the Workmen's Boat Club in Clonmel and hearing him describe what the river Suir has meant to him reminded me of the deep and complicated pleasure Smithson took in allowing his home landscape open-out to him in profound ways. On the 1st March, Shay hosted the first *Dig where you stand* reading group in the Boat Club in Clonmel. Our gathering of readers worked through this piece of writing, exploring through osmosis Smithson's monumentalisation of the landscape around Passaic, in which a rotating bridge "suggested the limited movements of an outmoded world".² Sleepy suburban remnants triggered in Smithson a reflection on uncanny confluences of time. Passaic seems full of 'holes' compared to New York City, "which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures".³ The creative freedom Smithson felt in meandering through this familiar landscape did not result in a state of contented reflection. Rather, it up-ends a sense of certainty around familiar spaces and objects—"my feet were apt to fall through the cardboard ground".⁴

While Smithson's journey through Passaic was a solitary meander, over that evening in early March, we consciously foregrounded our sense of collective adventure in gathering through reading groups. Having worked our way through Smithson's visions of Passaic, we then moved down stairs to the oar room in the Boat club, where we watched a film by the Swedish artist Johanna Billing called *This is how we walk on the Moon*, while sitting on Jennie Moran's *Hot Furniture*. In Billing's film a group of musicians are issued an invitation to be brought to sea and taught how to sail. One of the things which struck Billing about the coastal area of Scotland, in which the piece was filmed, was the lack of contact local people had with the ocean. Tracts of the twenty seven minute film are patient studies of gestures made by individual members of the group, working to familiarise themselves with new materials and tasks around being at sea. Though the mood of the film is quite pensive, the challenge set by Billing is obviously founded in an optimistic belief in their collective capacities. A different type of hopefulness runs through Jennie Moran's *Hot Furniture* and makes itself manifest through the juxtaposition of materials and the provision of unexpected heat. Her work consists of a series of about fifteen low timber stools, the tops of which

are made of smooth, cast cement, each containing a hidden heatable element. While the seating looks like a harsh option—the warm cement comes as a welcome surprise, amongst the otherwise chilly surrounds of the oar room.

Walter Benjamin paints a poetic, yet tragic picture of a figure, whom he calls the 'angel of history' in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*—which we read as part of our second reading group in the Bolton Library, Cashel. Benjamin goes on to describe this figure caught in a storm, unable to close his wings and with his "face turned toward the past... he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet".⁵ Benjamin suggests in a typically oblique manner strategies which might lessen the sense of inevitability outlined through the 'angel of history', when he writes about 'brushing history against the grain'.⁶ This approach is founded on challenging the rationale behind some of our grand narratives of history.

Jan Verwoert suggests approaches to re-visiting historical moments in creative, yet rigorous ways in *The Crisis of History*—which we read alongside Benjamin's text. Verwoert argues for the urgency in finding alternative ways to articulate our past. He believes that by attending to this approach we have the potential to diversify our perspectives, complicate our language and ultimately give voice to a plurality of directions as to how we can proceed into the future. He writes that "the first thing that is jettisoned in the moment of historical transformation is precisely the vocabulary to describe history, a speechlessness in the face of the experience of history".⁷ Verwoert outlines how being scrupulous in relation to history and in doing so, uncovering historical details, could supply "a counter-narrative to the big epic narratives". Another approach is one which emphasises the potentially transformative impact of imagination upon our forms of articulation. Verwoert calls this "speculative histories" and describes it as the attempt to "do justice to the victims of history", through "a theatrical gesture of staging a history that never happened but ought to have".⁸ As a means to illustrate this Verwoert cites the work of artists Lucy MacKenzie and Paulina Ołowska, who reinvent the history of the future modern woman. The artists base their scenarios on historical data, yet construct a fiction around the "modernist woman artist who was deprived of having a history".⁹

Having explored these two texts, we climbed upstairs into the library proper, and experienced Bridget O'Gorman's temporary installation *By the Skin of Your Teeth*. Having spoken previously in abstract terms about periods of historical change, it was powerful to be met with an artwork confronting the precise moment of antagonistic change we are living through. *By the Skin of Your Teeth* comprises a calfskin which has

text ‘flocked’ onto it. The opulently smooth and organic surface of the calfskin has had synthetic fabric letters painstakingly fused onto the surface of the skin—strand by strand. The effect is subtle, yet insistent, in articulating an alternative ‘naturalness’ to the expensively begotten skin. The text reflects a piece of graffiti recently sprayed onto an Italian wall in which a call is made for those experiencing precariousness to come together against those in positions of power. Verwoert’s insistence on imagination serving as a key with which to open out a diversity of ways of being seems particularly apt in relation to a work like this.

In May we gathered in a cinema space to read a section from Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future*. This text focuses on the potential utopias and the genre of science fiction hold in helping to re-vivify our imaginings of the future. Apart from cinema’s strong connection with creating dreams, it also seemed apt to challenge in a physical sense the conventions around how we have come to gather in such spaces. While the scale of the Excel cinema was in contrast to the neat and compact Bolton Library, the manner in which we could gather was also in sharp contrast. The library offered itself to us in a hospitable manner; allowing us to shift and meld ourselves in fluid ways around its artefacts and vitrines. The immovable chairs of the Excel proved more challenging. While these chairs forced us into quite awkward and stiff positions in relation to one another, it also reminded us of a time when the manner in which we experienced cinema was not so ‘fixed’.¹⁰ Early cinema displayed great inventiveness in how it organised both its audience and its projected film.

In the excerpted text we explored in Excel, Jameson writes about “the need to develop an anxiety about losing the future”.¹¹ Foremost here is the belief that we have reduced the depth of possibility to dream of alternative futures. While realising that popular tropes of science fiction, such as time-travel, alien visitations and so on, are firmly planted in the realm of fiction, what emerges through the writings of both Verwoert and Jameson is the sense that our powers of imagination have the potential to trigger real effects. The form that these ‘actual’ effects could take are not physical and real, in the sense of what we would previously have associated with attempted concrete utopias. Instead these are changes to the shape of our desires. Like cinema space, Jameson identifies “utopian space as an imaginary enclave within a real social space”.¹² Though these spaces are separate from everyday life, Jameson stakes his claim in arguing that much is to be gained by attending to these spaces and imbuing them with creative freedom in which to dream our futures together.

For the most part Jameson builds his arguments from within the clear parameters

of a genre within fiction, the actual physical fall-out of attempted utopias are unyielding and difficult. Towards the end of our gathering in the Excel, Eilis Lavelle introduced a video called *Remnants of the Future* made by the artist Uriel Orlow in 2010. The dominant ‘subject’ of the video is a ghost housing project, in northern Armenia, with its vast, unfinished cement skeleton. The historic fact of the break up of the Soviet Union after 1991 accounts for both the scale and stasis of the project. Orlow uses the ruin’s uncanny presence in the expansive and beautiful landscape to powerful effect—suggesting the weight of previous histories and instilling in the viewer a disquieting sense of having lost a grip on our place in time. The ruined building dominates the video; however, we slowly learn details of the people who move around it. We observe ordinary things like people drying their clothes in amongst the ruin. We watch children play and we learn how people have been recycling materials slowly and patiently from the building. While the looped nature of the video could be speaking to our unfortunate human tendency to repeat mistakes, it also represents the natural repetitions within our lives, our resilience and adaptability.

As we spoke into the darkness of the Excel, I felt overwhelmed in many ways by the seeming impossibility of many of the texts we had approached to date. Texts making difficult calls to prise open conventions, which have long become sealed shut through the compacting effects of time. Texts which call not only on the digging back into historic moments, but also a digging back and questioning of how we have personally been implicated in the build up of such conditions within ourselves. This long look backwards has the potential to be a subjective, as well as an objective excavation. As we shifted in our seats in the dark of the Excel, craning to see each other as we spoke, I thought about how simple activities carried out with a spirit of openness and creativity, such as Smithson’s walk, serve as examples in how to constructively grapple with such notions. It’s inspiring to observe the results of people committing to a collective intention—as expressed so simply and poetically through artworks such as Johanna Billing’s *This is how we walk on the Moon*.

It took my grandmother decades to piece the route of an old road together and I’m still grappling with some of the ideas introduced to me through the Dublin reading group, which I first attended almost a decade ago. Initially the forms that things and ideas take can be awkward and unnervingly nebulous—it seems to me that what’s most important is that a concentrated effort is made to state an intention and to make a concurrent leap of imagination. At this point it’s hard to quantify the long-term worth of pursuing the stream of thought opened out through the *Dig where you stand* reading

group. We don't know what will come of having instigated these eccentric gatherings in cinemas or boat clubs throughout South Tipperary. Perhaps the reading group form will settle back into the ground, quietly metamorphosing for another time? Or perhaps the intent at the heart of these gatherings—to think through difficult ideas together—will form a different shape? I think that a modest, but important start has been made by choosing to sit together in awkward positions: being open to the placing of incongruous things and places side-by-side, and investing in the worth of thinking together creatively.

1. A 60 mile long-distance walk, linking Cashel to Ardmore in Co. Waterford. The road has been dated back to pre-Christian times.

2. Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' in *Ruins* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011) 48.

3. Smithson, 49.

4. Smithson, 50.

5. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999) 249.

6. Benjamin, 248.

7. Jan Verwoert, 'The Crisis of History', in *Cork Caucus: on art, possibility and democracy* (Germany: National Sculpture Factory and Revolver, 2006) 333.

8. Verwoert, 335.

9. Verwoert, 335.

10. There are many examples from early cinema which demonstrate the diversity of methods by which film is presented to an audience, for example Thomas Edison's 'Kinetoscope' required audience members to peep into a timber box to experience the moving images. The 'Hale's Tour', developed around 1905 'heightened' the viewing experience by rocking, or vibrating the space in which the film was projected.

11. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2007) 233.

12. Jameson, 15.



A screening of Johanna Billing's film *This is how we walk on the moon* in the Boat Club's lower floors. The viewers are seated on Jennie Moran's *Hot Furniture*, 2011.

Still of Johanna Billing, *This is how we walk on the moon*, 2007. DVD, 27.20 min/loop.

The reading group in the top floor of the Workmen's Boat Club, Clonmel, 1 March 2012.

The reading room at Bolton Library, Cashel, 19 April 2012. Also that evening: Bridget O'Gorman, *By the skin of your teeth*, 2011.

The reading group at Excel Arts Centre, Tipperary Town, 9 May 2012. Also that evening: Uriel Orlow, *Remnants of the Future*, 2010.



THE NEW WILDERNESS

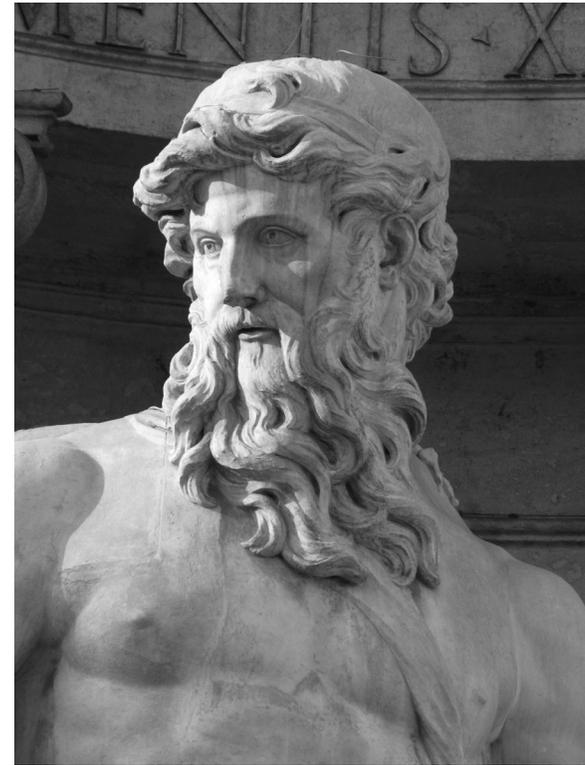
Seán O Sullivan

“In this book you will learn ... what an infinity transmitter is.”¹

In 1968, Robert Smithson published a written tour of the monuments of Passaic, New Jersey in the winter edition of *Artforum*. The magazine’s readers took a daylong trip through the concrete sprawl of his native city, learning about the modern monuments that had recently risen from the earth. Smithson complemented the journey with six grey photographs that he had captured on his Instamatic, as well as a small triangular map of the area surrounding the Passaic River. He wrote about signposts, derricks and pipes, about Howard Johnson’s Motor Lodge and a 1968 wide track Pontiac. He wrote about as many things as he could see, and gave each the status of a New Jersey monument that would be recognised across the ages.

These monuments are entirely different to those of Rome’s eternal city; in the olden days, sculptors and architects captured representations of Pax Romana that tried to quantify the spirit of the country, or even the spirit of the age. The marble mediums were then handed off to the caretaker of history and transmitted through the centuries, for all of us to see on our holidays. Roman architecture is quickly recognised, and the era’s statues are instantly identifiable; their tendency to sculpt eyeballs without pupils lends a certain otherworldliness to even the lowliest Caesar. Consequent to all of this, the long-dead empire carries a pungent air of survival.

According to Smithson, Passaic holds no such ambitions; its senators are too humble to imagine themselves in marble. New Jerseyans have generously furnished their countryside with concrete smokestacks, regurgitating pools of wastewater, and place names as well considered as “River Drive”. Smithson takes great care in describing each detail of these future-bound monuments: the smokestack is no mere utilitarian assembly; it is a spectacular sceptre that challenges the sky. It was easiest



that I imagine the city as a place of extraordinary humility, carrying no airs of being historically permanent, and fully resigned to its own stammering place in the world’s cultural architecture. Why else would it so purposely adapt its landscape to the insipid trappings of modernist sludge?

I had Smithson in mind while travelling down the M7. It was the first day of the project, and the artist’s estate had just granted us permission to publicly read and disseminate his monumental tour. I remember thinking that it was a shame that he thought his city had built nothing that was worth carrying into the future. I was carrying a stack of his ‘tours’ in my lap, so I suppose Passaic can at least be congratulated for building Robert Smithson.

The first *Dig where you stand* reading event took place in the Workmen’s Boat Club, Clonmel. The boat club has the feeling of a farmhouse about it, albeit one in the middle of town. There’s sheds on the lower floors stacked with one-man vessels,

and a workshop on the main floor with most of its space devoted to the restoration of a wooden canoe. The top floor overlooks the Suir, and a few rough hills on its far side that decorate the skyline. The club was built along the water's edge, close enough that you could singlehandedly lift a craft from the shed and carry it out to the river for launch. From the top floor, and looking east down the river, the water gives way to a slight passage of muddiness, with spots of rushes wherever the riverbed comes close to the air.

Towns and cities tend to be particularly finite at the core, they can grow outwards and upwards, but can rarely squeeze more habitable spaces into their already populous stomachs. In Newark, near to where Smithson grew up, the Passaic River's central embankments tempted a group of developers during the early twentieth century. The men designed concrete foundations to buttress an enamelware factory, and then a collection of factories wherever the water allowed. It was possible to achieve an effect where the buildings would stand up, but less considered was the impact of burying concrete into the city's flood plains. The Atlantic's rainy freshets broke the river's banks in due course, almost causing the factories to capitulate to their landscape. Newark's local government financed a set of ramparts to stifle the problem, putting a thin veil of concrete between the land and the length of its riverside. The ramparts were assembled from pre-fabricated blocks, and seemed twice their twelve feet where they divided the harbour from the water. Visiting New Jersey these days, it might seem incongruous to have a concrete barrier separating a harbour from its water. Or, difficult to put the flatulent appendage out of mind when admiring the way the floodplain factories so deftly encapsulate man's contempt for nature. But there it is, circling off Passaic like a stupid-looking girdle. It would be too trite to call it a shame, and too sarcastic to say it 'revitalised' the area. I will merely say, "it is an example of an American monument".

Smithson ended his tour on a short explanation of entropy. He described a sandbox bisected by an invisible line; with one half of its sand turned white and the other turned black. A child runs in circles through the border many hundreds of times, complicating the sand into a grey heap. Running an equal number of times in the opposite direction will not return the border to its former separation. Any attempted reversal only intensifies the disorder.²

The natural world ignores our notion of reversibility, it tends to trundle on no matter how cleanly we hew dysfunction from perfection. Five years ago, I spent a long train journey reading Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us*. It keeps to a



fine tradition of speculative fiction, asking that we accept a resounding lie in service of haphazardly tripping into a few new truths. Weisman imagines that one morning, for no reason worth concretising, mankind simply ceased to be. This isn't due to the onset of a virus, an asteroid or the bomb. It is simply a proposition that for no reason in particular, tomorrow's people are simply *not*. That is our resounding lie, and having taken it to heart, Weisman asks what will happen in the world that day, and then the next. He moves on to the following three years: the growing disuse and dilapidation of our prized smokestacks, and of Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge. Soon, we have read of their state after twenty years, two hundred, and an order of magnitude more. We know who will prevail in the survival contest between Pax Romana and the M7.

We read Weisman's text in the Excel Arts Centre in Tipperary town. This was an earlier and concise article he had written, rather than excerpts from his eventual book. The reading took place in the Excel's cinema, which screened Uriel Orlow's *Remnants*

of the Future at the end of the evening. Orlow's film shows the spine of an unfinished building sitting alone in the middle of an endless desert. It is a real place: the sort of enormous concrete plateau that occasions its way into my most mundane nightmares. A few bored pilgrims sit in the building's shade, tapping at the copper they've managed to strip out of the walls. It was helpful to think about Weisman's stolid future while watching them. His world captures the consequences of today's constructive fervour, and he hands those consequences over to a timeline that preserves nothing—a world left to its own devices. Not the moping sphere of ill tidings that comes preloaded with any use of the word 'environment', but a way of thinking about ourselves in relation to the things we make. A way of seeing pumps, pylons and pesticides without imagining that those very things might yet make our lives unliveable.

In Cashel, the Bolton Library's ground floor has a set of vitrines containing books by Dante and Machiavelli that date from the sixteenth Century. A similarly aged map of the Virginia territories caught my attention, it had an etching of the commonwealth's governor on its right side and tentative place names filled in across an astoundingly broad spread of forest. It seemed improbable that places like Cape Charles, Cape Henry or Jamestown are still so named. Weisman explained that the Manhattan of the day was home to forty variously converging rivers and streams.

We sat in the library reading a short paragraph where Walter Benjamin explained a painting called *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee—its title translates into 'the angel of history'. The spirit of the evening asked that we maintain our fidelity to Benjamin's descriptions, even if this meant not imagining what Klee's angel might look like; we had no reproduction to hand. Truthfully, it only occurred to me later that the 'painting' Benjamin described was actually a physical thing, rather than an allegorical linchpin. He composed an utterly striking account of this angel, claiming that it had been awoken from a slumberous concentration, but wished to stay lodged in the past and make alive what had been shattered by time. However, the angel cannot stay in the past, reversibility is no friend to the vague ramblings of the ages. *Angelus Novus* is beaten by the skyward climb of historical debris, which he is responsible for, but did not cause. Benjamin elaborated: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."³ The angel pronounces the simplicity of entropic progress: its reductive, unlovable, chaotic glee. Its unlimited possibility. I couldn't imagine what to expect from the real painting.

It is somewhat concerning to imagine that history is constantly touching off the

present. As time advances, we become more and more culpable for the parsing of our past. Not merely responsible for smothering our ancestors' mistakes, but less able to manoeuvre their old maxims into a form fit for the stormy present. Today is on the hook for a yesterday whose voice is permanently becoming more amplified. This immovable communication is an infinity transmitter.

For its part, the written word lives on a downward slope; a constantly live phonenumber from the era of Benjamin and Smithson, which leads to here but cannot lead back to them. After the line arrives, it captures what it can and is irresistibly propelled into the future in a "storm we call progress".⁴ Presumably it will travel far, perhaps reaching the point that Alan Weisman claims is definitive: a glacier runs through Manhattan, grinding up the tire yards, and readying the ground for forty new streams and rivers. They'll stretch their limbs and serve as the new monuments, or the new wilderness.

1. Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *Artforum* December 1967, vol. 6, no. 4, 48.

2. Smithson, 51.

3. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999) 257.

4. Benjamin, 257.

AN EXCERPT FROM
'THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY'

arranged by Bridget O'Gorman

FUTURA EXPECTANS PRAESENTIBUS ANGOR
while waiting for the future, I am tortured by the present

THE BONES ARE DRY AND HARD ... TO STRENGTHEN AND SUSTAIN OTHER PARTS: SOME SAY THERE MAY BE 304, SOME 307, OR 313 IN MAN'S BODY: THEY HAVE NO NERVES IN THEM, AND ARE THERE

FORE WITHOUT SENSE. LIGAMENTS ARE THEY THAT TIE THE BONES TOGETHER, AND OTHER PARTS TO THE BONES, WITH THEIR SUBSERVING TENDONS. A GRISTLE IS A SUBSTANCE SOFTER THAN

BONE, AND HARDER THAN THE REST, FLEXIBLE, AND SERVES TO MAINTAIN THE PARTS OF MOTION. MEMBRANES' OFFICE IS TO COVER THE REST. NERVES, OR SINEWS, ARE MEMBRANES WITHOUT,

AND FULL OF MARROW WITHIN; THEY PROCEED FROM THE BRAIN, AND CARRY THE ANIMAL SPIRITS FOR SENSE AND MOTION. VEINS ARE HOLLOW AND ROUND, LIKE PIPES, ARISING FROM THE LIV-

ER, CARRYING BLOOD AND NATURAL SPIRITS; THEY FEED ALL THE PARTS. OF THESE THERE BE TWO CHIEF, VENA PORTA AND VENA CAVA, FROM WHICH THE REST ARE CORRIVATED. THEY ARISE IN

THE LEFT SIDE OF THE HEART, AND ARE PRINCIPALLY TWO, FROM WHICH THE REST ARE DERIVED, AORTA AND VENOSA: AORTA IS THE ROOT OF ALL THE OTHER, WHICH SERVE THE WHOLE BODY;

CONSTAT AETERNA POSITUMQUE LEGE EST, UT CONSTET GENITUM NIHIL.
It is a fixed and eternal law that nothing is immortal.

THE OTHER GOES TO THE LUNGS, TO FETCH AIR TO REFRIGERATE THE HEART.



DIG WHERE YOU STAND

South Tipperary County Council Arts Service, 2012
 Edited by Sarah Lincoln
 Exhibition curated by Eilís Lavelle and Rosie Lynch

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Images:

Page 6, 8, 12, 13: Paul McCarthy, Dig where you stand exhibition, South Tipperary County Museum, 9 July 2012.
 Page 6: Detail of Susan Hiller, 2007, *Plate 5 Manx*, Etching, 37 x 42.5cm, courtesy of the British Council © Susan Hiller.
 Page 7: Still of Susan Hiller *The Last Silent Movie* (2007), courtesy of the British Council © Susan Hiller.
 Page 10, 11: Uriel Orlow, *Yellow Limbo* (from *The Short and the Long of It*), 2011, HD video with sound, 14min, film still, courtesy of Uriel Orlow and LUX, London.
 Page 19–25: Damien Lizun and Philippa Sutherland, 22–23 June 2012.
 Page 34 and 35: Sarah Lincoln, Bridget O'Gorman, Dig where you stand reading groups, 1 March, 19 April and 9 May 2012.
 Page 39: Photographer unknown, M7–M8 Interchange, 22 May 2010, detail, Public domain; Ed Uthman, A statue of Neptune at Trevi Fountain, Rome, 14 October 2008, CC BY-SA 2.0

Text:

Page 42–48: The text in Bridget O'Gorman's 'An excerpt from the Anatomy of Melancholy' is taken from Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (First published by J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1932), Public domain.

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