

ART IN SPACES

Annette Moloney

Introduction	4
Counter Publics & Platforms	6
Slack Spaces	8
DIY Ways	10
Strategies & Smokescreens	12
Not In Our Name!	14
Legacy & Aftermath	16

Introduction



As a curator and practitioner based in Limerick I am acutely aware of that artists have increased access to vacant city centre shops and buildings particularly through the Creative Limerick initiative.

The research I have carried out over the last year has been conducted mainly through dialogue with artists and practitioners who are involved in setting up and running temporary spaces and also through talks I have given on the subject, reading and attending conferences on related topics.

This process of dialogue has led me to an analysis of a current circumstantial shift in Irish contemporary arts practice.

Through this process of discursivity with practitioners in Limerick and beyond I have become aware of the role of agency in curatorial practice, as a means of highlighting a ubiquitous area of arts practice often ignored at a policy and funding level.

The decision to self-publish this text aims to mirror the DIY nature and at times speed of the same projects drawn into focus in the text. The process of freely disseminating the document, mainly to the many new artists' spaces, aims to place this curator's analysis back into its context for further dialogue and discussion.

This text forms part of an ongoing curatorial practice including projects and further research.

Counter Publics & Platforms

In an article titled 'Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual' Simon Sheikh advocates that we must begin to 'think of artists and intellectuals as not only engaged in the public, but as producing a public through the mode of address *and* the establishment of platforms or counter publics.'¹

The downturn in the Irish economy and the collapse of the property market has certainly echoed and reverberated in the growing numbers of empty high-street shops and recently constructed buildings with no commercial tenants. Unfinished developments together with their calcified cranes have become common features of our urban centres. In the midst of the Celtic Tiger years the visual signals of the property boom and construction industry were seen as evidence of a growing and buoyant economy. Now these self same markers can be seen as signals of recession anxiety or to borrow a famous phrase from former US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld the 'known unknowns' of economic freefall.

While this situation does make for some dull and decrepit city centres, artists are working to turn this circumstance into opportunity, establishing new platforms and at times counter publics. Increasingly artists are making use of vacant commercial units or slack spaces to realise art projects; to create pop-up or guerrilla galleries and to establish studio facilities.

It is recognised that artists are skilled at seeking out reasonably priced, or at times free, spaces for their practices, mainly because, as artist Alan Phelan describes it, they are 'happy to work in the wrong part of town if it means that the outlay on rent is not too much.'² Dylan Haskins, one of the founders of Exchange Dublin, a collective arts centre based in a vacant commercial space (formerly a furniture show room) in Temple Bar, commented on this recently by stating

- 1 Simon Sheikh, 'Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual', http://www.republicart.net/disc/aap/sheikh02_en.htm Accessed: 27 Apr 10.
- 2 Alan Phelan, 'Spaces for Artists: Possibilities for an Independent Future', Fireside Conversations, ed. Liz Burns and Leah Johnston (Dublin: Firestation Artists Studios, 2009) 90.

artists are making use of vacant commercial units or slack spaces to realise art projects; to create pop-up or guerrilla galleries and to establish studio facilities.

There are already established informal networks of creative young people in and around Dublin who are making work with no money, for the love of it. What often stunts this work at a crucial stage is a lack of space to present it, be that a space for gigs, exhibitions, meetings etc. If you provide space for these projects in central locations you move the discussion from the suburbs and garages, where it can be lost, to the heart of cultural life and ideas. Space is the fundamental requirement that facilitates people to make work.³

By examining the development of art in slack spaces in Ireland through a curatorial lens a number of issues and questions arise. These include a need to examine the inconsistencies in the types of supports available to artists through local authorities. What are the effects of short term supports versus a need for sustainability? What are the implications of the lack of public policy in this area, particularly in the event of an economic upturn? And finally is there evidence that artists are moving away from the previously presumed norms of public funding and institutional supports to form counter publics and, in a way, becoming a new form of cultural asylum seeker? Have they become deliberately displaced practitioners, responding to circumstantial shifts in society?

This text aims to examine the terminology used in this relatively new area of practice; it explores related issues such as time and speed in the development of artists' projects; it looks at links to creative city strategies; and examines policy gaps and recent pilot schemes for this area.

Slack Spaces

Starting with terminologies the various types of properties becoming available to artists come under descriptions such as vacant commercial units, disused shops, overlooked spaces or slack spaces, to name but a few. The phrase slack space stems from the world of computer storage⁴ where fragmentation occurs when disk storage space is not always used efficiently. Computer files are generally stored in clusters, each file occupying a new cluster, making it easier for files to grow. Space left over between the end of one file and the start of the next is called file slack or slack space.

Terms such as slack space and pop-up gallery have gained currency in descriptions of the use of empty and vacant high streets by artists including recent newspaper articles in the UK Guardian which discusses the 'slack spaces movement' and how artists are 'colonising empty retail spaces'⁵ and also the New York Times which states that

*As the recession drags on and storefronts across New York remain empty, commercial landlords are turning to an unlikely new class of tenants: artists, who in flusher times tend to get pushed out rather than lured in.*⁶

Commonly the term used to describe the people accessing slack spaces in that of 'creatives,' however the term refers to a large band of practice. For example the Creative Limerick initiative, which assists 'graduates from the city's third level institutions to use vacant prime shop front space to sell/endorse their work,'⁷ utilises the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport definition of the creative industries to include advertising, architecture, art and antiques markets, computer and video games, crafts, design, fashion, film and video, music, performing arts, publishing, software, television and radio.



4 Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragmentation_\(computer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragmentation_(computer)) Accessed: 15 Nov 09.

5 See Guardian, Artists' creative use of vacant shops brings life to desolate high streets <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/18/slack-space-vacant-shops/print> Accessed: 22 Sep 09

6 New York Times, Luring Artists to Lend Life to Empty Storefronts http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/13/nyregion/13galleries.html?_r=2 Accessed: 14 Oct 09.

7 Creative Limerick, Launch Press Release, issued: 11 Sep 09.

8 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class (and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life)*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002) ix.

9 Florida, 68.

... tied to a need for contemporary art to show fiscal outcomes, such as profit, in a consumer driven world.

This term includes a broad range of cultural producers including the artforms recognised and publicly funded by organisations such as the Arts Council of Ireland such as architecture, film & video, music, performing arts, visual arts and literature, although publishing is quite a broad term. The definition includes areas of creative practice such as software development, computer and video games, television and radio, craft and design including fashion and the antiques market which are not generally supported by the Arts Council of Ireland but supported by other development and trade organisations.

According to the US economist Richard Florida 'if you are a 'scientist or Engineer, an architect or designer, a writer, artist or musician, or if you use your creativity as a key factor in your work in business, education, healthcare, law or some other profession' then you are a member of what he terms the 'Creative Class.'⁸ Florida also states that the 'Creative Class consists of people who add economic value through their creativity.'⁹

To some artists the overt use of the term 'creatives' and the new categorisation of contemporary arts practice as being similar to that, for example, of the antiques market raises issues about public perceptions of the role of the artist and also issues of inconsistency in the levels of professional qualifications and specialisation in the ventures being supported. This also points to a desire for economic indicators, seen as an impact of neo-liberalism in society, and is tied to a need for contemporary art to show fiscal outcomes, such as profit, in a consumer driven world.

DIY Ways

Artists working in a DIY way is not a new phenomenon and processes of self-organisation are well documented, going right back to the counter exhibitions in 1830's France under the title 'Salons des Refusés / Salon of the Refused.' Artists Collectives have been formed in Ireland for many years as a means of self-organisation and at times an anti establishment commentary, which points to a prehistory to the current DIY culture amongst artists. Also in terms of the availability of new spaces for artists not all publicly supported spaces for contemporary art in Ireland were designed for their current purpose, most were designed for another often commercial purpose.

One aspect of the current wave of DIY initiatives is the speed at which artists are setting up and realising projects. Going back to Dylan Haskins comments, where he describes 'an informed network of young people' the current Facebook generation are making use of new social systems to set up projects quite quickly. An example of this took place in March 2010 through a project developed by Basement Project Space in Cork in collaboration with Ormond Studios in Dublin which produced an exhibition as a result of an inter-studio exchange between artists from both organisations. What was striking about the project was the length of the exchange - two weeks - a time span which may be considered extremely short by artists from a slightly older generation. Taking into account that many artists who are currently developing slack space projects are recent graduates, often in their mid-twenties, the attitude seems to be - just do it, get on with it, self broadcast it, then move on to the next project.

*the current Facebook generation
are making use of new social
systems to set up projects quite
quickly.*

Nonetheless there is also evidence that some mid career, established and quite high profile artists are also happy to display projects in temporary galleries and slack spaces. Recent examples include a project by Paradise Row, a London based contemporary art organisation, which set up a self described 'pop up space' near one of the main venues of the 2009 Istanbul Bienal and showed works by high profile artists such as Jake & Dinos Chapman and Margarite Gluzberg. Also a collateral event at the 2009 Venice Biennale, titled 'Distortion', was developed by James Putnam through an Arts Council of England curatorial bursary. The exhibition produced projects by YBA artists such as Gavin Turk, Mat Collishaw and Noble and Webster. Two further examples come from Artangel, the UK based contemporary art commissioners, who for many years have been making use of voids in commercial zones. These include the 2001 'Break Down' project by artist Michael Landy and 'Kuba' by Kutlug Attaman which took place in 2005 in an old post office sorting office.



Strategies & Smokescreens

Coming back to the links between contemporary arts practice and the 'creative' economy speaking after the Global Irish Economic Forum held at Farmleigh, Dublin in September 2009 the then Minister for Arts, Sports & Tourism Martin Cullen stated that 'creative ideas are the lifeblood of innovation and economic success.'¹⁰ The Minister referred to research carried out by DKM Economic Consultants titled the "Economic Impact of the Cultural Sector" which recognised that the cultural and creative sectors are in themselves a major part of the Irish economy both in terms of output and employment. The report shows that the cultural and creative sector is one of the most dynamic areas of the Irish economy, with a total economic impact in 2008 of 11.8 billion.

From a European perspective a 2009 paper published by the Council of Europe titled 'Culture: A Tool for Reversing Recession' sets out positions to be used by European Ministers of Culture when negotiating with their Ministerial colleagues, particularly from Departments of Finance, in order to minimise budget cuts for their departments and sectors. The paper proposes that cultural investment can be an important tool in combating the effects of recession, leading the way back to prosperity. Two of the main arguments in favour of culture in the paper focus on boosting confidence and transforming spaces.

The paper affirms that 'culture has many forms – artistic and social – but all have in common the ability to inspire and demonstrate confidence' and links the current recession to a 'failure of confidence.'¹¹ The document proposes that culture is a likely tool for the improvement of confidence, more impactful than the areas of trade and employment, because the 'cultural sector can provide the vital catalyst that turns perceptions positive: the most difficult operation for most other political and economic initiatives to pull off.'¹²

The document recognises that recessionary times result in vacant and at times derelict spaces and contends that the cultural sector, especially the visual and performing arts, can make quick and good use of these spaces without compromising their long-term use as commercial premises. Instead of decline, the impression given by a street of contemporary art galleries, music venues and craft shops is of a creative and dynamic urban space.¹³

¹⁰ Press Release titled Cullen - "creative ideas are the lifeblood of innovation and economic success" <http://www.dast.gov.ie/publications/release.asp?ID=100663> Accessed: 20 Sep 09.

¹¹ Council of Europe, Culture: A Tool For Reversing Recession - Ten Arguments For Use By Ministers, 2.

¹² Council of Europe, Culture: A Tool For Reversing Recession - Ten Arguments For Use By Ministers, 2.

¹³ Council of Europe, Culture: A Tool For Reversing Recession - Ten Arguments For Use By Ministers, 2.

¹⁴ Phelan, 95.

¹⁵ Dialogue with Lise-Ann Sheahan, 14 Sep 09.

It is worth noting here the sentence which depicts artists occupying spaces 'without compromising their long-term use as commercial premises', clearly indicating that artists are not the desired long-term clients in urban centres. Also the use of the word 'impression' can be taken as an acknowledgment that artists can help create a smokescreen of economic upturn without putting off the long-term premium paying clients. This point is also accepted by Alan Phelan who writes that

The glut of new and unused buildings [...] as well as existing older buildings avoiding dereliction orders [...] may find unlikely but favourable tenants with artists. With so much unused property, landlords and owners may need space occupied. Whether these turn into long-term secure arrangements is unlikely.¹⁴

The phenomena of city authorities developing 'creative city strategies' and 'rebranding exercises' has grown over the past number of years, with heavy influences from the aforementioned Richard Florida. The Creative Limerick project is one such initiative. Developed as a pilot scheme by an architect and planner Lise-Ann Sheahan at Limerick City Council the project assists artists and creatives to gain access to city centre spaces and is connected to Limerick City Council's anti-dereliction policy and offers reduced rates to landlords. Creative Limerick has worked to assist artists through some of the bureaucratic mine fields that can make or break a project, such as public liability insurance, fire certification, etc. So while artists in Limerick don't necessarily have an offer of funding through Creative Limerick they can access a broader definition of the term resources which includes funding but also incorporates knowledge, experience and time.

Dialogue with Lise-Ann pointed to her observations that 'artists in Limerick are investing large amounts of time and on occasion their own cash to make projects happen.'¹⁵ She was aware that this energy was unsustainable long-term and was keen to find ways of supporting artists' time and had researched other European models and possible funding opportunities. She was also clear that Creative Limerick was at early stages; operating as a pilot scheme since spring 2009 and required external and objective evaluation. However the experience from practitioners on the ground in Limerick at this time is that the support expressed by Limerick City Council through the initiative is appreciated and continues to grow in a collaborative way.

Not in our name!

Artists' responses to creative city strategies are not all positive however and recently came under fire by a group of artists in Hamburg who developed a manifesto titled 'Not in our name! Jamming the Gentrification Machine'.¹⁶ Through the manifesto the ideologies of Richard Florida come under scrutiny so much so that Florida's beliefs are described as a spectre which hangs over Europe.¹⁷

The manifesto comments on Hamburg's move towards an 'image city', sending out a picture to the world of a 'pulsating capital' offering the 'best opportunities for creatives of all stripes' and refers to a quote from Florida which states that 'Cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race.' The artists pronounce that the rebranding exercise is turning Hamburg into a 'consistent, socially pacified fantasialand'.¹⁸



16 Not in our name! Jamming the gentrification machine: a manifesto, <http://www.buback.de/nion/> accessed through <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1961.html> Accessed: 2 Mar 10

17 Not in our name! Jamming the gentrification machine: a manifesto, Accessed: 2 Mar 10

18 Not in our name! Jamming the gentrification machine: a manifesto, Accessed: 2 Mar 10

19 Deschooling Society conference jointly organised by the Serpentine and Hayward Galleries, took place from 28 & 29th April 2010, http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2010/02/conference_deschooling_society.html Accessed: 10 May 10.

20 Writers notes from the Deschooling Society conference.

The following extracts from the manifesto clearly communicate the position of those artists involved in the writing of the document

Dear location politicians: we refuse to talk about this city in marketing categories. We don't want to "position" local neighbourhoods as "colourful, brash, eclectic" parts of town [...]. We are thinking about other things. About the million-plus square metres of empty office space, for example [...]. We think that your "growing city" is actually a segregated city of the 19th century: promenades for the wealthy, tenements for the rabble.

Which is why we want nothing to do with the ad campaign for "brand Hamburg". Not that you asked us nicely. On the contrary: it has not escaped our attention that cultural funding for artists has been on the decline for years, and is increasingly linked to local political criteria.

...artists are expected to follow the funding money and interim-use opportunities like donkeys after carrots - into development areas that need life injecting into them, or investors or new, more solvent residents.

...we - the decoys - are moving out in droves, because it is getting increasingly impossible to afford space here.

These sentiments were echoed at a conference titled 'Deschooling Society', which took place in London in April 2010.¹⁹ While in the main the conference discussed the pedagogical turn in contemporary arts practice artist Martha Rosler spoke about the pervasiveness and effects of neo-liberalism in society and the 'populist mode of cultural uplift' in what she described as the 'Floridian Formula.'²⁰

Legacy & Aftermath

On the issue of policy for art in slack spaces there are those that feel that new areas of arts practice need to develop first to prove the need for policy. However this relatively recent phenomenon is growing fast and how long does it need to be in operation before policy and resources become available?

What would policy look like? What would the guiding principles be for the self-organised DIY Facebook generation? Would these include requests for flexible supports, resources within and beyond funding, and due notice such as written agreements on immediate vacation clauses for the closure of cultural projects in slack spaces, for example? How would policy recognise and support the labour and at times money invested by artists?

Also in connection with the increasing numbers of artists collectives setting up impromptu spaces – how long will it take for the individual collectives to form their own national, community of interest, one which can lobby politically and ask questions about the interim-use opportunities; the lack of funding and resources and the lack of policy in this area.

Are we expecting and hoping that artists in Ireland will undo the damage done by planning provisions which encouraged out-of-town shopping and doughnut development? How long will it take for the Hamburg sentiments to take shape in Ireland? Will a back lash arise against the temporary terms and conditions of access to free space?

By way of conclusion, artists are seeking refuge in a variety of slack spaces in cities and towns and by aligning themselves with under-developed creative city strategies, which may lack long term supports for artists, they run the risk of assisting in the gentrification of badly designed and at times abandoned urban spaces. Is access to space enough? According to Simon Sheikh 'Art matters, certainly, but art is not enough.'²¹

²¹ Simon Sheikh, 'Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual', Accessed: 27 Apr 10, 4

²² New York Times, Luring Artists to Lend Life to Empty Storefronts http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/13/nyregion/13galleries.html?_r=2 Accessed: 14 Oct 09.

²³ Not in our name! Jamming the gentrification machine: a manifesto, Accessed: 2 Mar 10.

this opportunity gives artists access to city centres but does not necessarily place artistic practice at the heart of city centre communities

Supports are available in some local authority and urban areas in Ireland depending on which area you're working in. One influencing factor here is that some of the local authority staff who are in a position to help artists are on part-time or temporary contracts, so may find it difficult to work collaboratively with artists and to advocate for change without threatening their personal job situations'. This in turn makes it difficult to develop longer term planning and vision when a number local authority staff contracts and contacts for artists are in place for less than three months. Signs of support, albeit locally and at times sporadically, are evident through pilot schemes but these are not necessarily supported nationally. This situation, in many ways a battle of capitalism versus culture, may change over the coming and no doubt challenging years.

If the role of the artist in this current circumstantial shift is purely to 'deter crime and draw the next wave of paying tenants'²² then this opportunity gives artists access to city centres but does not necessarily place artistic practice at the heart of centre city centre communities on a longer term basis.

In the words of the artists from Hamburg 'a city is not a brand, a city is not a corporation. A city is a community.'²³

Annette Moloney
June 2010

Biog

Annette Moloney is a practitioner, curator and collaborator based in Limerick. Her curatorial practice includes talks, particularly on art in slack spaces, writing, artists peer critiques, mentoring and public art commissions. Recent roles include working as a project manager at the Irish Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale; as Artistic Director of Clare County Council's Public Art Programme and as Public Art Specialist with the Arts Council of Ireland. More than anything she tries to retain an artist centred and idea centred approach to her work.

Acknowledgements

The writer would like to thank the following artists, curators and practitioners for commenting on the ideas developed in this text: Maeve Connolly, Amanda Ralph, Sean Lynch, Fiona Fullam, Sean Taylor and Sarah Tuck from Create.

Particular acknowledgment is due to the artists and spaces who informed the text including Faber Studios, Occupy Space, SpiritStore and Askeaton Contemporary Art all based in Limerick; S-W-I-T-C-H in Tipperary; alter/native in Roscommon; Black Mariah in Cork and exchange and thisisnotashop in Dublin.

This text was informed in part by talks on the subject given by the writer at SpiritStore, Limerick; National Sculpture Factory in association with ArtTrail 2009, Cork; National Gallery of Ireland Research Day, Dublin and the Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast.

© 2010 Annette Moloney

ISBN: 9781869895167

The document is available online at:
www.artinslackspaces.ie

Contact:
info@artinslackspaces.ie

design: pure designs
www.puredesigns.ie

All photos: Annette Moloney

