A short journey (from Derry to Inishowen)

Conor McFeely

The consideration of one's 'place' has been a constant factor in Conor McFeely's practice. Place is given as much as it is chosen, which has led McFeely to probe how much choice and free will a person has. Though not always foregrounded this questioning of autonomy is an ongoing consideration of his work, whose contexts have been varied and include references to literature, cinema, art history and social and political contexts. This approach to making has led him to create a vocabulary of object-signs, which are questioned and continuously developed. An understanding of 'place' is frequently informed by historical events. This relationship is a constant feature in McFeely's practice and has led to a coalescence of references that he compares to a Venn diagram. This merging of layers can be thought of as a waking dream, a meandering rumination, a recall provoking the idea of the interplay between a hinterland of the imagination and memory, and the grounding effect of tangible material presence. This meandering is acted out in Flann O'Brien's novel The Third Policeman where the journey of the main protagonist drifts across place and time. His experience is one of managing his own disorientation.

'If I ever want to hide', he remarked, 'I will always go upstairs in a tree. People have no gift for looking up, they seldom examine the lofty altitudes.'

I looked at the ceiling. 'There is little to be seen there', he said, 'except a bluebottle that looks dead'.

The sergeant looked up and pointed with his stick.

'This is not a bluebottle', he said, 'that is Gogarty's outhouse'.[1]

If an artist has a responsibility to question the time and place they live in, defining or creating some limits on the scope of one's practice for the sake of

1 Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (Dublin, London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1967, 1996), 122.

aesthetic communication can be a difficult task when confronted with complex and overlapping events that present themselves for consideration.

Some such considerations can be found inside relatively small geographic areas. The effects of changing social and political histories leave their traces on the physical and psychological landscape, from the macroscopic to the microscopic. Let us look at one such configuration, on the north-western shores of Europe.

A route from Derry, situated on Lough Foyle, to the Inishowen townland of Leenan on the Donegal Atlantic coast offers a compression of evidence of over two hundred years of transmutation of the urban and rural landscape in this Northwest region. It is perhaps reflective of the island of Ireland as a whole. Wired into this landscape are a series of charged landmarks whose closer inspection aggregates to a territory overshadowed by the construction of a zone that is tribal, cultural, political and economic. This has come about since the partition of Ireland in 1921 that divided the country with a border still contested today. This border was essentially drawn up to appease the Unionist community in the North but contains areas within it that are still strongly Nationalist and aspire to the reunification of Ireland. New names and shapes have been applied to locations by successive generations of power. A time-lapse from a drone perspective might show the dynamics of continuous flickering collapse, shift and restructuring. Historical references superimpose themselves one on top of the other.

At one end of this path, like the emergent map formed on the cracked ceiling in MacCruiskeen's gloomy bedroom, sits Derry, whose docks on Lough Foyle were once one of the main points of departure to America for emigrants during the famine in 19th-century Ireland, and later the site where the German U-boat fleet formally surrendered to the allies in 1945. The docks, long redundant in every meaningful way, are now reorganised into a recreational zone. At the opposite end of this crack is Leenan Fort looking outwards to the Atlantic. The remaining smashed forms stand in as an earlier and abandoned version in the historical trajectory of architectural experiments described by Bataille as being a kind of physiognomy expressing the true nature of society. A former 19th century naval encampment, built under British rule, whose guns speak of their perceived threat from the sea. This fort is one of a series built by the English around this part of the coast because of its strategic importance. Slightly inland on the same route is an area known in pre-famine times as The Poitín Republic of Urris. In a small act of resist-

ance to a fine imposed on the parish whose main economy was poitín[2] production, the residents, using the geographical advantage of the Mamore Gap, sealed themselves in for three years from the military police. Smugglers and poitín makers would hurl rocks and boulders from above onto anyone who tried to disturb their activities. Impending border changes may see a return to similar enterprises. The western shore of Lough Foyle which is part of the Republic of Ireland is still currently grounds for dispute between Britain and Ireland. Britain still claims ownership of the shoreline, which is now tax-free for oyster farmers who maintain their beds along this tideline.

Encountering the currently invisible border between North and South a deeper inspection offers up a complex set of markers that have contributed to our current nexus. A memorial plaque on the border at Coshquin indicates the site of an infamous proxy-bomb in 1990. From the early 1970s until the mid-1990s this particular point is also associated with advanced experiments in surveillance and detection where demands for the verification of identity, 'what's the name?', were a common refrain addressed to motorists at the crossing. Jumpcut to Lough Swilly and the capture by the English of Wolfe Tone in 1798. Tone, sometimes called the father of Irish Republicanism, was on board a French ship in a failed naval battle at Tory Island. He was subsequently brought to Derry and later to Dublin where he died under unexplained circumstances three weeks after his incarceration. At the same location as Tone's capture on the shoreline stands the long-dead textile factory of the Fruit of the Loom who employed over 3000 people at its peak: the last monument to big industry in this area long since relocated to Morocco in 2006. The experience of journeying across this terrain induces what Debord might have called 'derive' or drifting, that is the movement or rapid passage through varied ambiences where one becomes aware of the psychogeographical effects of the situation one is in. It amounts to an engagement with a history of labyrinthine contours and pivotal points on a given itinerary. A planned journey, but with random involuntary and serendipitous encounters.

"You will agree", he said, "that it is a fascinating pancake and a conundrum of great incontinence, a phenomenon of the first rarity".[3]

2 Illicitly distilled whiskey.

3 Sergeant Pluck's observation of the map of cracks on MacCruiskeen's ceiling from *The Third Policeman* by Flann O'Brien, 1967.

Fig. 1: Conor McFeely, A natural History of Destruction, 2019, video still, 5min, HD Video with stereo sound

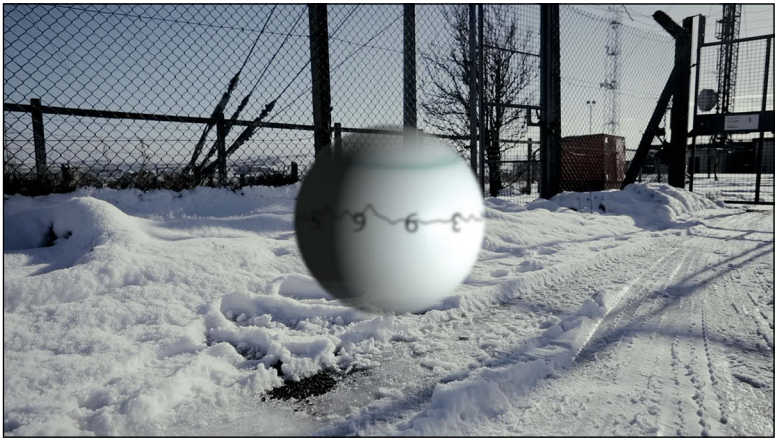

Fig. 2: Conor McFeely. Pioneers, installation detail, 2017, Dimensions variable; resin, exotherm, iron filings, magnets, perspex, fluorescent lights, photographs, artificial teeth, video, and sound loop on cassette

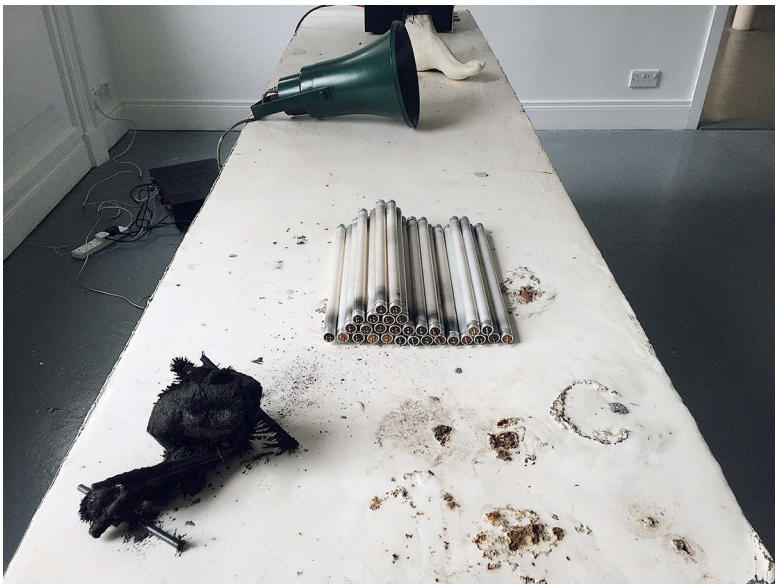

Fig. 3: Conor McFeely, Weatherman, installation detail, Franklin University, 2013. Dimensions variable; light boxes, resin, photographs, video and sound

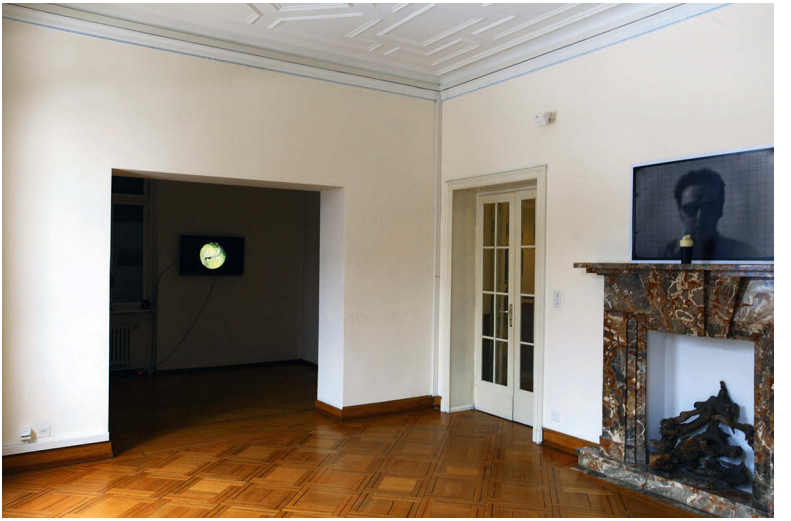

Fig. 4: Conor McFeely, Weatherman Projects Dunree seq 2012. 4min.44sec. Video still1. HD Video with stereo sound

Fig. 5: Conor McFeely, Weatherman Projects Dunree seq 2012. 4min.44sec. Video still 2. HD Video with stereo sound