



The Absent Architect

1 Architect

Science and artifice join forces in a new installation by Cleary & Connolly that conjures with the fact that William Chambers, architect of the Casino in Dublin, never actually visited the site, writes **Michaële Cutaya**

For some years now Paris-based artists Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly have been making art projects based on new technologies to challenge the spatial perception of their audiences. They have worked in close collaboration with perceptual scientists and CLARITY, a centre for sensor web technologies, to develop interactive installations questioning visual phenomena and the experience of time and space. The headset *Inverse Universe*, for instance, presents the viewer with a world upside down or with colour and luminosity reversed, prompting the brain to adapt to make sense of this information – it is based on a 19th-century experiment on perceptual adaptation by George Stratton. Another work, *Real Time Rolling Shutter* expresses time as a geometrical dimension through the time delay of the rolling shutter.

Both architects by formation, Cleary & Connolly have often integrated architecture into their work, sometimes as a

setting, as in the series of museum interventions *Touchy*, and at other times as a constant of reference when distorting movement in time as in *Time is a Dimension Like Any Other*. They have long wanted to work with a historical building, whose perceived timelessness would play off the ever changing perceptual effects their work enhance. Through the co-operation of the Office of Public Works, the artists had the opportunity to develop a series of installations in response to the Casino's architectural forms.

In many ways the Casino at Marino is a perfect foil for Cleary & Connolly's work. The 18th-century Neoclassical building, designed by William Chambers was commissioned by James Caulfield, 1st Earl of Charlemont, as a garden temple for Marino park – the classical temple was accompanied at the time by other attractions such as a miniature Gothic



Cathedral. Its monumental proportions, strict Roman Doric order and balanced interplay of regular geometric volumes convey a 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' that the Hellenist Johann Winckelmann would have approved. Standing on its pedestal guarded by lions, 'its character is essentially sculptural, like some antique monolith carved into a classical cubic block' writes Seán O'Reilly in his description of the Casino.¹ But closer acquaintance with the building foils these first impressions: its perceived volumetric unity, achieved through a series of distortions in proportion and optical illusions, dissimulates the sixteen rooms over three stories the Casino accommodates. The top floor's windows are dissimulated by the attic balustrade, the actual door is only half the size that it appears and two main windows are partially dummy to maintain the regularity of the features on the four facades, which turn out to be all different – incidentally recalling that the use of four identical facades owe more to Mannerism than Antiquity with Palladio's Villa Rotunda as prototype. Thus the singular unit reveals a complex multiplicity which constantly challenges the visitor's perception of scale, volume and space: simplicity and symmetry are achieved through artifice.

The Absent Architect's project is composed of three installations integrated into the trajectory of a visitor entering the Casino. A loose narrative is based on the fact that William Chambers, the architect, while minutely following the construction and mindful of the smallest details, never actually



1 CLEARY & CONNOLLY THE ABSENT ARCHITECT Stereo-Symmetroscope

2 LADY CAULFIELD

3 LADY CAULFIELD and BYRON

4 ?????

visited the site. This presence/absence of the architect echoes with a series of temporal and spatial overlaps and superpositions throughout the installations. Expanding upon technologies developed through previous projects and adding new ones the three installations take their names from the complex play of symmetries – and asymmetries – of the building: *The Stereo, Iso and Temporal-Symmetrosopes*.

The first, *The Stereo-Symmetroscope*, is sited at the North-East corner just off the path to the entrance site. It consists of an electronic video stereoscope, which was first developed for *On Sight*, a public art commission for Lough Lannagh in Castlebar. It is a binocular viewing post which present to the eyes of the viewer two different takes of the front view – dif-

ferent weather, season, time of days and activities – it challenges the brain into reconstructing a single image from the continuities between the two. For the Casino several changes have been introduced to make the most of its location: instead of using two views of the same spot, we see in fact views from two opposite poles on the diagonal axis of the building, which are symmetrical in volumes – if not quite in details. The first sequence is shot from the north-east corner, while the second from the south-west. The volume of the building provides the necessary continuity for both eyes to recompose the image, but the two sequences differ in background and actions as well as incorporating scenes set at two different periods: some are set in the 18th century while others are set in the 19th century.

On entering the vestibule of the Casino, one is faced by a semi-circular apse with three curved doors. The artists have identified its axial point as the epicentre of the building, its ‘bellybutton’ – where its axes and its paths cross – and the site for the *iso-symmetroscope*. It consists of a rotating cylinder covered with hardwood veneer into which have been cut prisms of glass at different angles and heights. Inverting and rotating the reflection of the semi-circle, sphere, and cupola, the prisms in the cylinder superimpose them on the architectural elements of the vestibule creating whole geometrical figures. The device expands in its own way the interplay of symmetries Chambers created through the addition of features and dummy space: here a third door, elsewhere a false window or a closet.

The third installation, the *Temporal-Symmetroscope* is located in the Saloon, the main apartment on the *piano nobile*. Facing the fireplace, on a specially designed unit,² a computer runs software that works with the integrated camera. The live feed of the visitor walking about the room is superimposed on pre-recorded footage. The same camera previously recorded a sequence of the architect and his patron discussing details of the construction in his studio. When superposed, the architecture remains the same and the recorded scene with its 18th-century characters and props appear as ghosts around the visitor occupying the same space on the computer screen, mirroring through the computer software the ghostly presence of the architect.

As two of the installations include filmed sequences, both outdoors and indoors, a shoot became an important part of the project. It involved professional actors – like Pat Shortt – as well as amateurs – including the artists themselves, friends

Vincent O’Shea and Niamh Clarke, as well as local children. The artists conducted research into costumes and furniture of the period and Rose Anne White, from the Office of Public Works, provided historical notes to help construct the characters and the situations they might be involved in, giving the scenes a certain historical accuracy.

In the 18th-century outdoor scenes, we have Chambers and Charlemont walking around the Casino, discussing the construction project and conjuring up the building through their gestures. The building itself has been partly replaced by a drawing to convey its prospective state. The scene is followed by a series of everyday life activities: a boy catching a cat, a matron with children, a gardener and so forth, these are based on Anne Caulfield’s – Lady Charlemont – sketches, but they also allude to Charlemont’s uncommon decision to

leave his demesne unwallled to allow the Dublin public to enjoy his grounds – a common occurrence in Italy but not in Ireland at the time. A contemporary commented: ‘the utmost liberality of admission is permitted here; the inhabitants of Dublin may at all times amuse themselves with an agreeable walk’.³ The eyepieces alternate scenes from the 19th century and draw on the relationship Lady Charlemont had with Lord Byron. We see them walking together while he reads his poetry to her – the two scenes also mark the transition from the 18th century enlightened conversation to the emphasis on feelings of 19th-century romanticism. This romantic scene is followed by children dancing, a beggar passing and so on. All scenes are observed by a mysterious lady, designated as Anne Caulfield, who appears in both eyepieces: a stand-in for the artists maybe and a point of symmetry between the images for both eyes.

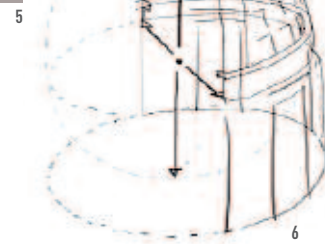
For the indoor scene, the Saloon has been transformed into the architect’s studio with Chambers and his patron discussing aspects of the construction through various volumetric models and sketches. The apprentice James Gandon – played by Denis Connolly – is observing them from his position at the drawing board – Gandon’s own original 18th-century desk lent by the Custom House. The volumetric models draw attention to the geometrical figures that compose the Casino: Greek cross, cube and sphere.⁴ A strong cosmic symbolism run through the building with carvings of Apollo, the sun god, zodiac figures and what have sometimes been read as Masonic symbols on the parquet floor.

In their practice, Cleary & Connolly set up what they call ‘interactive environments’. These are not so much things in themselves as settings that demand the participation of the visitor: a ‘participative/perceptive loop’ named ‘observer participation’. Sometimes their work is so discreet that the impatient visitor might miss it altogether. For the Casino, it is not so, but their objects insert themselves into the architectural setting so as not to disrupt the visit. The artists propose a form of mediation between the building – its architecture, its history, its idiosyncrasies – and the visitor: enhancing and challenging the experience of the place.⁵ ■

Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly ‘The Absent Architect’ for the Casino at Marino, Dublin until 30 April.

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- 1 *The Casino at Marino*, text by Seán O’Reilly, published by the Office of Public Works, 1991, p.16
- 2 The hardwood veneer unit was made by Fitzgeralds of Kells op.cit. p.7
- 3 The drawings and models were made by architecture students of Studio 13
- 4 More information on Cleary and Connolly’s practice on their very informative website <http://www.connolly-cleary.com/Home/credo.html> and ‘Cleary and Connolly sans frontières’, by Helen O’Donoghue in *Irish Arts Review*, Winter (Dec 2011/Jan 2012) pp.80-83.



INSTEAD OF USING TWO VIEWS OF THE SAME SPOT, WE SEE IN FACT VIEWS FROM TWO OPPOSITE POLES ON THE DIAGONAL AXIS OF THE BUILDING, WHICH ARE SYMMETRICAL IN VOLUMES – IF NOT QUITE IN DETAILS

5&6 bellybutton – where its axes and its paths cross – and the site for the *iso-symmetroscope*

7 Temporal-Symmetroscope is located in the Saloon

8 Chambers and Caulfield/Charlemont discuss the construction

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