



Cleary & Connolly sans frontier

Helen O'Donoghue investigates the collaborative practice of Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly who, from their base in Paris since 1990, have extended the participatory nature of their practice to a worldwide network



Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly live and work in Paris, where they moved in 1990 following architectural studies in Dublin. After a lengthy collaboration with the esteemed French urban theorist Bernard Huet in the early 1990s they developed a long-lasting interest in the filmed city. Patterns of behaviour, both in cities and within our institutions, are a central preoccupation of their work; and these they examine through narrative and interactive video, installation, photography and text.

Both Anne and Denis trained formerly as architects and when asked to reflect on the transition from architect to artist Anne said: 'I had always wanted to study art as opposed to architecture, but in the early 1980s it really didn't seem to be a sensible career move as you can imagine, so I applied for, and got a place to study architecture in Bolton Street. Denis and I met there, in First Year, and he had made a similar decision. Having spent his teenage years drawing comic books at the back of the class, and learning sections of the *Iliad* off by heart, he capitulated and went for a profession. Perhaps he thought architecture would be a bit like drawing comic books for a living. It wasn't, and so when we qualified and moved to Paris we spent a lot of time immersing ourselves in what we both loved best – art. We hung around with artists, spent long afternoons at the Orangerie and the Jeu de Paume museums so the transformation happened gradually.

Many of our friends at the time were very interested in the whole Guy Debord 'Society of the Spectacle' thing, and I think this was a huge influence on us. Our first major piece was a series of videos called *Touchy*, examining the whole notion of looking at art in a light-hearted but critical way, and it was quite successful. This was the first time we made a statement through our work about the whole notion of objecthood and participation in art, something that has gone on to feed our work ever since. I think from that point on we no longer saw ourselves as architects.'



1 Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly, Paris 2011

2 Detail from *VOLONS* Joseph 2010 print 100x100 cm

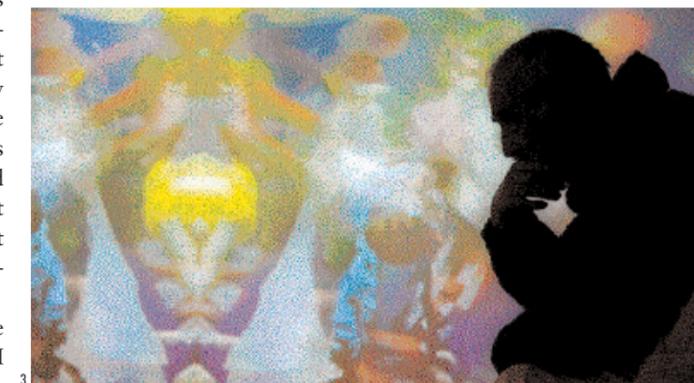
3&4 Detail from *STILL LIFE WITH...* 2010 Hunt Museum, Limerick (photo: Deirdre Power)

5 *STILL LIFE WITH...* 2010 Hunt Museum, Limerick (photo: Deirdre Power)

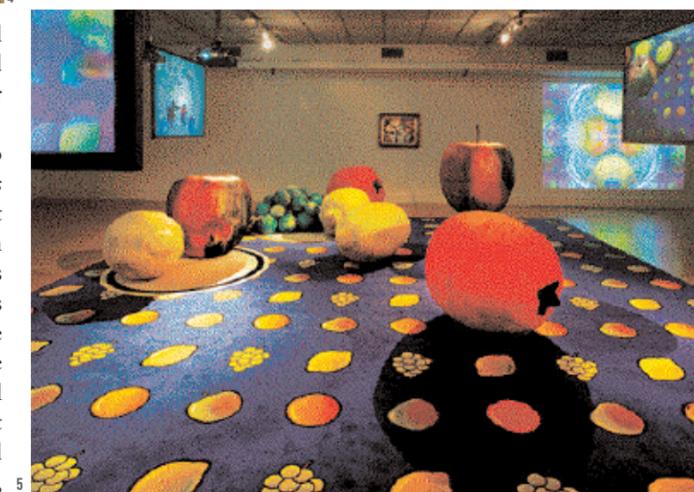
Their joint decision to turn from architecture to art is further emphasized by Denis in *In the works* a recent monograph on the duo: 'We are not fast workers, Anne and I. In fact, we made a solemn decision to give up fast work about fourteen years before. After finishing architectural studies despite ourselves, a couple of years of practice was enough to convince us that we were not made for the production machine of the architectural world. Architecture school functioned like a sort of particle accelerator, bringing you up to speed with all-night sessions at the drawing board,

producing reams of neatly drawn sketches, plans, sections, elevations, axonometrics, perspectives and working drawings. By the time you were shot out into the working world with your black leatherette portfolio under your arm, you were already up to speed, an accelerated particle, moving so fast that the only thing you noticed were other accelerated particles, travelling at the same speed and in the same direction as yourself – a swarm of accelerated young professionals, spinning over a cityscape teeming with cranes, pile drivers and services engineers. Neither of us was born to be there.'

However Anne does acknowledge how their architectural training has influenced their arts practice: 'The ability to work in a team is one of the most important things that we took with



us from architecture. Most artists work as individuals, but working in teams allows us to carry through very large collaborative projects such as the *Hall of Mirrors* project. Our architectural training also helps us to handle competently the design aspects of a piece, for example a recent interactive lighting installation at MIC in Limerick (Fig 6), where we developed a system from scratch to control the lighting in the way we needed, and then had to adapt stage lights to an outdoor environment.' They describe Paris in the early 1990s as an amaz-





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ing place to be due to a booming economy, where they had no problem in sourcing work. This was exciting and somewhat ‘extraordinary’ for these two young Irish graduates who had left behind the depressed economy in Ireland of the 1980s.

Anne says that this experience gave them an impression of real freedom: ‘We gave up architecture very quickly, started to do some illustration work to make a living, and started making art. Everything seemed so easy then that we were absolutely not afraid of the future. We weren’t obliged to make a living from our art, since we could do that through drawing, and so we focused completely on the explorative aspects of our work, developing ideas and experimenting with new technologies, without financial constraints. Paris has changed so much since then, two decades of economic stagnation has taken its toll, but

of technology and interpersonal relations into the fabric of their artwork. With the backdrop of his day-long cycle across the boulevards and avenues of Paris in search of his holy Grail (the solution to the technical problem that perplexes but does not outdo him), Denis’ essay, ‘in the Works’, conjures up images of that great cycling nation that gave us the Tour de France. This reader had visions of the wonderful quirky French filmmaker Jacques Tati in *Jour de fête*, or the more recent magical animated film by Sylvain Chomet, *Belleville Rendez-Vous*. It is a challenge that fully engages his mind and body, the cycle a metaphor for the dedication that Denis has to finding creative solutions to the shared vision that is a hallmark of Cleary & Connolly’s work. His reflections include ideas on perception and how children process images – ideas that fuel their work:

interactive lighting installation which is a public art commission, has just been launched in the new concourse at Mary Immaculate College (MIC) in the University of Limerick (Fig 6).

In October Cleary & Connolly presented their work as part of a launch for *In the work*, the previously mentioned monograph by Gandon Editions in Earlsfort Terrace at Dublin Contemporary where their work has been on exhibition. They had just completed a joint workshop that day for fifteen-to-eighteen-year-olds drawn from the Education programmes at DC11 and IMMA for Young Curators where they used their perceptual devices entitled *Dutch Wax* to explore the works on view in the two venues.

In 2012 they will present Hall of Mirrors (a three-way collaboration with scientists from universities in Paris and in



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6 COLOUR WHEELS 2011 Mary Immaculate College (MIC) in the University of Limerick

7&8 LA PESANTEUR 2010 Dance School, Sorgues, France photographic print on glass 726x226cm

9 Detail from VOLONS 2010 print 100x100 cm

10 WE CAN FLY – participative art project, St Dymphna’s and St Nicholas’ Schools, Ballina, Co Mayo 53 high-resolution Durst rho prints on perspex team – Denis Connolly, Anne Cleary, Cindy Cummings (2009–2010)

it is still a wonderful liberating place to live. In her essay ‘Texts and Margins’, the American professor of philosophy and education Maxine Greene has written about the arts being on the margins of day-to-day living.¹ ‘The margin,’ she writes, ‘is the place for those feelings and intuitions which daily life doesn’t have a place for and mostly seems to suppress. With the arts, people can make a space for themselves and fill it with imitations of freedom and presence’, which perhaps is what living in Paris has created for Cleary & Connolly.

In their publication *In the works* Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly provide insights into the processes of their collaborative arts practice. Written as part-autobiography in journal format, their essays recount the day-by-day intimacies of their work/lives. They reveal the processes at work from the distinctive perspectives of each artist’s practice. Their domestic and art-making worlds are intertwined and are present in much of their work – from the four-year *Boulevard* series documenting life outside the window of their home in Paris, to the sojourn in Mayo earlier this year when they were working with fellow-artist and dancer Cindy Cummings in St Nicholas’ and St Dymphna’s primary schools. Another element is the weaving

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‘Maybe (children) digest visual information better when it’s second-hand, when it has already been partly digested. Maybe we all do. The seventeen seconds a person might spend standing in front of a still-life painting may seem derisory when you consider how long it took to paint, but it’s a lot more than the ‘real’ bowl of fruit would get. Our eyes take in visual information all through our waking life, printed into the cones and rods of the retina for fleeting moments and then passed onto our brains. How important is any of it? Surely that can only be judged by what we do with it.’

Cleary & Connolly see their work as an ongoing engagement with the world. Recipients of the AIB prize in 2009 (See *Irish Arts Review*, Summer 2009), their work has been exhibited worldwide; at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Yokohama Triennial in Japan, the Czech National Gallery in Prague, the Barbican in London and Sesc Pompéia in São Paulo. An

Dublin) which is a new work at Farnleigh as part of Dublin’s role as City of Science in 2012.

Their work is a fusion of technology and humanity. In their work we see the old and the new interwoven. The age-old need for artists to connect with their audience – in this instance, children – is Anne’s main preoccupation, while using new media, the most cutting-edge of technologies is Denis’ role or concern. This intertwining is essential in this extraordinary arts practice, in order to create magical spaces of the imagination where images will linger long after the encounter, reminding us of Greene’s philosophy, and thinking of the children in Mayo, Paris and Japan, making a space for themselves and claiming ‘freedom and presence’.

All images ©The artists. Cleary & Connolly, Hall of Mirrors, Farnleigh Gallery 15 March - 22 July 2012, as part of Dublin City of Science 2012. Cleary & Connolly *In the works* (2011) Gandon, Cork ISBN 978 0948037 818 Helen O’Donoghue is Head of Education & Community Programmes at IMMA.