ER

ENCLAVE REVIEW

Dennis McNulty: PROTOTYPES
LCGA, Limerick
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Once we have dismantled and reassembled the process of literary composition, the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading. In this sense, even though entrusted to machines, literature will continue to be a "place" of privilege within the human consciousness, a way of exercising the potentialities contained in the system of signs belonging to all societies at all times.

Italo Calvino, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts'

An Entirely Lyrical Instrument is a wall mounted flat screen in the Atrium of the Limerick City Gallery of Art: it shows an algorithmically generated page from Italo Calvino's essay 'Cybernetics and Ghosts'.

The letters of the words are permutated in successive sequences, altering different parts of the text. From the random jumble of letters new meanings sometimes merge with that of the original text we are attempting to decipher. In this essay Calvino speculates on the possibility of a machine for writing literature based on the reader's capacity to produce meaning from a random series of discrete elements: "The true literature machine will be one that itself feels the need to produce disorder." This capacity of the reader/viewer to produce meaning from arbitrarily assembled elements is further tested in *Untitled, algorithmic selection from the Permanent Collection*. Dennis McNulty and curator Mary Conlon applied a set of rules as guiding principles: they chose 'untitled' artworks from the gallery's collection list – that is, works either deliberately called 'untitled', or simply never given a name – and presented them by date over three walls. Although fully aware of the rules directing the exhibition, we are not long in associating themes, colour and shapes to spin meanings from these assembled works.

PROTOTYPES, McNulty's overall exhibition, presents itself as a series of discrete elements whose connections are left to the visitor to make. But as our own propensity to find significance combines with the artist's multiple propositions, meanings start to proliferate: this is perhaps what the artist is referring to when he speaks of a cumulative effect 'that makes sense on an extended timeline', in a conversation with John Gayer ('On Density, Flow, and Destabilising the Visual' [2011]). Buildings and their architecture offer a way to find one's bearing, and having been trained as a civil engineer McNulty has an ongoing relationship with constructed spaces and their materials. Working from a blueprint of the latest alterations to LCGA, the artist invested voids and transitional spaces with new and recast dropped ceiling structures. In the North Gallery, *The Wall* marks an unrealised partition; in the Ante-room, *Unstable Co-ordinates* signals the passage to the recently extended South Gallery; and in the Atrium, *Portal Fragment* leads to the Permanent Collection Gallery. These pieces function as partitions but also as vectors of

spatial translation: the dropped ceiling, a structural element that was initially developed with modernist architecture for acoustic purposes, also separates the living space from the 'plenum' which is used to house the electronic hardware necessary to the building. This separation of living and functional spaces was addressed in the video *1949* (2010), a single shot of Philip Johnston's *Glass House* in which was reflected the *Brick House* containing all the support systems. The dropped ceiling's interface is thus transferred to the gallery space generating speculations about which side we might be standing on.

Portal Fragment (2012/2014) brings in another dimension, as the orthogonal grid of ceiling tiles are cut into a hexagonal frame – although the two grids do not coincide. The regular geometry of the hexagon is a recurring element in McNulty's work and connects with different elements of the show. One is *Flomatic (algorithmically generated moving images),* which is a version of the 'dice drawings', another is *Gateway (redux)* (2009/2014)*.* A screen onto which two hexagonal grids are projected, one sliding over the other, stands between two panes of two-way mirror glass set at a sixty-degree angle. The reflections and the reflected reflections of the screen form a three-dimensional hexagon. *Gateway (wiki)* is a print-out of the Wikipedia page dedicated to a novel by Frederik Pohl. In this science fiction story, humans are exploring the technology and artefacts of a long gone alien civilisation, the Heechee. Most notable among these is 'Gateway', an

asteroid inside which hundreds of ships are ready to launch to an unknown destination in the universe through a pre-programmed system. It is speculated that the Heechee were 3-D oriented and that their prime ordering was from front to back.

The first part of the video, *The Archivist,* follows the methodical proceedings necessary for the archiving of knowledge at Brown University Library Collections Annex in Providence. In the voice-over an archivist remembers her first encounter with the Thought Interface, a memory-composite software which enables the recording, editing and subsequent archiving of memories. The second part of the video could be the recorded memory of a visit to the Ohio History Center with its brute concrete surfaces, geometrical forms, historical artefacts, taxidermic animals and attempts at reconstituting cultures of the past. Throughout the film sixteen-segment displays are used as inter-titles of sorts. These basic electronic constituents return elsewhere in the exhibition spelling out song lyrics one letter at the time: a lonely one in the Link Gallery loops 'maybe everything that dies someday comes back'; another, 'And you may ask yourself ...', encased between two panes of plasterboards, asks 'where is that large automobile well how did I get here'; and, somewhat ominously, a visual messaging board set up in the park runs the words from Arthur Russell's song 'Keeping Up': 'Getting to know what you like and what you love'. Are these words of longing, loving, dying clumsily appropriated by the machine to get to know us?
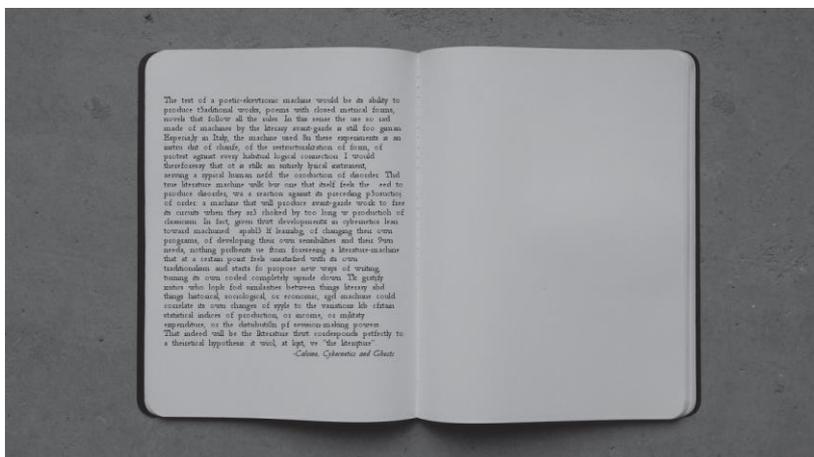
Denis McNulty: *An Entirely Lyrical Instrument* (2014), digital still. Algorithmically generated moving image on wall-mounted screen, no durational limit. Image courtesy of the artist.

For the opening event of Tulca 2013 'Golden Mountain', McNulty curated a film projection on the subject of technology and its ideologies: it included an ad for Google glasses and a TED talk on High Frequency Trading – how the stock exchanges depend on algorithmically generated buying and selling, outside of human control, exemplified by the 'May 6, 2010 Flash Crash' also known as 'The Crash of 2:45'. The entrusting of our fate to sentient technologies appears not unlike the boarding of a Heechee ship: not knowing whether we will strike it rich, be swallowed in a black hole or starve on the way. The collaboration with Conlon has brought fresh ways of engaging with McNulty's existing works as well as generating new ones. They have put together an exhibition that keeps on giving, no matter how long one stays with it.

Michaële Cutaya is a writer on art living in Galway. *Dennis McNulty: PROTOTYPES* was curated by Mary Conlon and was on view 17 July – 19 September 2014.