

Sequences, Scenarios & Locations continued

Ronan McCrea

Context and Description



[Fig. 1]

School Play [Fig 1. Installation shot *Nameless Science*, Apexart. Image credit: Hugh Watt] was the outcome of a public art commission associated with the construction of a new school building for a state primary school, catering to children ages 4 – 12. The funding for the commission comes directly from the central government as part of a “percent for art” scheme for publicly-funded infrastructure projects.

School Play consists of two main elements: a permanent design for a school play yard, consisting of a series of painted circles and arcs on the tarmac; and a series of thirty color photographs.

The school is an “Educate Together” school, a model of school governance developed as an alternative to religiously governed schools and is based on a child-centered, multi-denominational, co-educational and democratically run ethos. The school has a relatively high proportion of what is termed “New Irish”, children of recent migrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, and the school is very proud of its multicultural character.

The design for the yard consists of a series of circles and arcs painted in various colors onto the tarmac and also on the adjacent footpaths and car park. This graphic element on the schoolyard has a dual function: primarily to be used by the children in their self-directed playtime activities, and also to create a set or stage for the creation of a series of photographs.

Following a period of research into the children’s play activities, particular attention was focused on those times of self-directed and self-organized play, which range from elaborate group games to individual daydreaming. These games are highly regulated by the children themselves, in that a lot of effort is invested into establishing the parameters and procedures for each activity, but these regulations creatively and rapidly shift, dissolve and coalesce from moment to moment. In this sense the circles are utilitarian – acting as boundaries and markings for un-prescribed play.

Imaginatively, some of the circles extend far beyond the edge of the yard. What is visible in the yard is a small arc, which, if it were to be completed into a full circle, would reach far beyond the school gates and encompass surrounding hinterlands. While this is a somewhat subliminal aspect to the design, it also links with an image from Joyce’s *Bildungsroman: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Stephen turned to the flyleaf of the geography book and read what had been written there: himself, his name and where he was:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe

Then he read the flyleaf from the bottom to the top till he came to his own name. That was he: and he read down the page again. What was after the universe? Nothing. But was

there anything after the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began? It could not be a wall, but there could be a thin, thin line there all around everything. It was very big to think about everything and everywhere.¹

The second element of the *School Play* project is a series of photographs, which were all shot from an elevated position looking down onto the yard during break time [Fig. 2-3. *School Play* photographic print, 112 x 90 cm]. From over 400 negatives, a final set of 30 images was selected for the series. Twelve of the photographs are printed in 112 x 90 cm size, framed and hung in the corridors and common areas of the school. The full series will be published in early 2009 as an artist's book designed by Peter Maybury, to be distributed throughout the school community and beyond.



[Fig. 2]

The circular markings become a set - in the sense of a stage set, or a film set - for everyday action. The circles and arcs mark out and bisect the pictorial frame. Random actions become relational. The play becomes choreography. Miniature dramas and moments, both individual and collective, become related through spatial arrangement. No directions are given from photographer to subject. Everything is random, like the Brownian motion of particles, or perhaps one of Canetti's crowds.

Working in a school, one becomes aware of a society in microcosm. The photographs recall Rodchenko's street photography in the composition of angles and perspectives and

something of his utopian notion of a new subjectivity revealed by new perspectives. They also acknowledge the historical methodologies of sequencing, series, and typology from Muybridge, Neue Sachlichkeit, and the Düsseldorf School of conceptual art practices in the 1960s.

A typology is a type of knowledge. In his book *The Ambiguity of Play*, play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith focuses on play theories rooted in seven distinct “rhetoric” - the ancient discourses of Fate, Power, Communal Identity, and Frivolity, and the modern discourses of Progress, the Imaginary, and the Self. Sutton-Smith asserts that this rhetoric “reveal[s] more distinctions and disjunctions than affinities, with one striking exception: however different their descriptions and interpretations of play, each rhetoric reveals a quiriness, redundancy, and flexibility.”² This reading of the rhetoric of play suggests it is an ideal subject for exploration of ideology and disciplinary boundaries.



[Fig. 3]

School Play

PhD research and *Nameless Science* project

School Play is one of a number of artworks created since September 2007, which address in different ways photographic methodologies and questions raised by my practice-based PhD. The title of the PhD is *Sequences, Scenarios & Locations continued (cinematic forms, the still image and celluloid materiality in the space between collective and individual remembering)*.

This research examines relationships between still (photographic) image and moving (filmic) image with particular reference to theoretical notions of ‘artistic medium’ and the use of analogue technologies in artistic strategies that articulate ideas of memory and narrative. The impetus for these questions arose from my episodic slide projection series *Sequences, Scenarios & Locations* made between 2000 and 2005, which is referred to in the PhD title.

The first investigation into these issues surveys the historicization of experimental film practices of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular structural and materialist film and how these ideas inflected ideas of medium-specificity within paradigms of modernism and postmodernism. Seeking out the echoes of this discourse in contemporary artistic practices, I find an entry point into these questions via a remark made by Stan Douglas to Diana Thater about how he would have realized his 16mm film work *Der Sandmann* had he been “a hard-assed materialist.”

Important within the context of the exhibition *Nameless Science* is that all my recent artworks, such as *Medium (The End)*, *Medium (Upsidedown)*, *Medium (Corporate Entities)*, *School Play*, and *New Town Project (Extract # 1)*³ are produced in what can be called the art world. While forming part of the “practice” of a “practice-based PhD”, these works also exist independent of the PhD context. They succeed or fail on critical terms in the institution of art, rather than in the institution of PhDs.

Interrelated and overlapping, the “practice-based PhD” and artistic practice are nonetheless separate, notwithstanding the presence of all sorts of research practices within the domain of all sorts of artistic practice. For me, they are distinct on the level of content, form and institution. A useful metaphor is one coined by Paul Willemen who suggests that the function of research is “to irrigate the ground of practice.”

Response

Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein

Deleuze perceives the unique relationship between philosophy and art as “a system of relays within a large sphere, within a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical.” So how to put this in a format like the *Nameless Science* show? Seen from the viewpoint of the arts, one might recognize the contingency and fictional quality of knowledge or the aspect of oppression and exclusion inherent in knowledge structures like exhibition spaces. Ronan McCrea was not sure how he should deal with the format of presenting his PhD project still in progress. But he did deal with it, together with Henk Slager, the curator of the *Nameless Science* show. The outcome proved to be a laboratory situation where the artwork has become a strong communicative tool in exchange with the other presentations; a cartography of artistic knowledge production.

Two elements frame McCrea’s contribution: four photographs - color prints out of a series of thirty - on the wall, and a simple wooden table in front with a leaflet on it. The photographs show a bird’s-eye view of a schoolyard with playing children, where Ronan created a series of floor markings suggesting an undefined game. The photographs seem to demonstrate that the games are played spontaneously.

In the leaflet, we read that, a starting point, “Ronan McCrea examines the photographic process of communication” and it ends with the ontological question of “whether playing a game – as an anthropologically ambiguous and in fact undefined phenomenon - could be captured in a decisive moment.”

Immediately the visitor tries to put these elements together. In reference to the bird’s-eye perspective of the photographs, one starts to position oneself physically and psychologically regarding the schoolyard and its playground. As the observer is part of the game, he/she finds him/herself in a performance situation, as part of a spatial production.

A central question for Ronan McCrea is: What characterizes the process by which the interaction of a performance gesture, objects, the subject and the community become entailed in concrete spaces? Could playing a game indeed be captured in a decisive moment, as the exhibition leaflet claims? A frozen gesture – after Flusser? Still – motion, a performative gesture?

I think of John L. Austin and his influential 1955 lecture ‘How to do things with words?’ which I would paraphrase as ‘How to do things with art?’ Austin added the performative to the referential dimension of linguistic utterance. Today, visual art could be considered a paradigm of contemporary culture, since artists position - as is the case in Ronan’s project - referential and performative aspects against each other, while shifting the idea of the world as text to the notion of the world as performance.

The resulting liminal space I experienced in the exhibition is one of negotiation and dynamic. In my point of view, here visual art has become a kind of meta- commentary on our culture, reflecting its fundamentally transitory character while playing with possible meaning and subjectivity. The reality of the schoolyard is the backdrop and context of a redefinition of space as quintessentially dynamic and performative, defined by geographical and bird’s-eye structures of the apparatus and by an understanding of human bodies as open systems of exchange.

Within practice-oriented research, Ronan’s project investigates fictional and non-fictional methodologies to find out what kind of knowledge becomes privileged or repressed the moment performative experience is established as a mode of knowledge acquisition, as a methodology of critical research, or a way of communication. The required research does not comprise a set preliminary work phase of art production. It is a work as such, where artistic research and its product are one and the same. As Ronan McCrea argued, it once again disrupts the dichotomy of practice-led research and theoretical research. According to the cultural scientist Marcel Mauss, the poorly-delineated boundaries between the scientific fields would not display the most urgent problems, but be the place for the as yet “unknown”.

In this liminal sphere, where the performative production of “wild knowledge” or “nameless science” is still unstructured, non-conceptual and uncanonized, a form of knowledge once termed experience in philosophy can flourish. Such knowledge does not occur within the space and framework of the expected. In that respect, Ronan McCrea's project is a clear metaphor of the undefined game we are all playing.

¹ James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 15-16.

² See Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³ For further details see: www.ronanmccrea.com