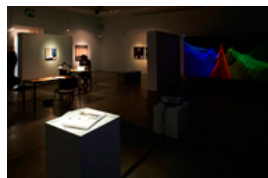


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Mark Curran

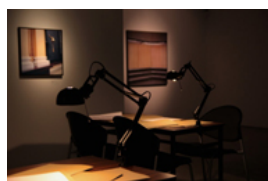
The Economy of Appearances

04.09.15 - 30.10.15

Limerick City Gallery of Art / Limerick / Ireland

The Economy of Appearances / Reviewed by Joanne Laws / 04.12.15

Mark Curran's solo exhibition *The Economy of Appearances* at Limerick City Gallery of Art had a retrospective feel. Five previous and ongoing bodies of work were presented, conjuring an unspoken pause in Curran's career, and prompting reflection on the expansive territory explored in his practice to date. Displaying a documentary photography approach, the artist portrayed people from a range of occupations and social groupings, including builders, miners, bankers and factory workers. Collectively, these artworks considered spatial designations (inner-city; periphery), workplaces (factory; coalmine; building site) and virtual zones (The Stock Exchange), not as separate spheres, but as interrelated spaces of social production.



Mark Curran

Installation view: 'The Economy of Appearances' at Limerick City Gallery of Art, Limerick, Ireland, 4 September - 30 October 2015

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Across the exhibition, the artist's durational research methods were apparent, evident in the time-spans (rather than singular years) featuring in artwork titles. In this way, temporality emerged as an important conceptual device. With Ireland's recent history increasingly understood in binary terms – 'before' and 'after' the financial collapse – a heightened awareness of 'past, present and future' permeated these artworks. For example, photographic documentation of Ireland's Celtic Tiger landscapes was punctuated with these 'boom to bust' critical junctures, perceived in retrospect as 'suspended moments' which foreshadowed economic collapse.

Nowhere does the passing of time feel more poignant than in portraits of children, where youthfulness is frozen, yet mortality and aging are pervasively implied – something Susan Sontag described as 'time's relentless melt'. Born during Ireland's boom years, most of the children depicted in Curran's 1998 series *Stoneybatter (Dublin)* – a young girl with her dolls' pram; teenagers wearing tracksuits or school uniforms – will be in their twenties by now. In each of the five small portraits, tower cranes dominate the urban skyline, their masts and beams criss-crossing high above the children like ominous steel crucifixes. As image punctum, these structures attest to over-construction and the property bubble that precipitated the economic crash in 2008. Ongoing revelations of poor-quality housing, soaring rental costs and unprecedented levels of homelessness in such inner-city areas, add further poignancy for contemporary viewers.

Addressing dramatic shifts in Ireland's labour landscape, *The Breathing Factory* (2002-2005) tracks the influx of multinational corporations during the 'boom' years, which transformed the Republic of Ireland into the 'most globalized economy in the world'. Situated on the site of a former meatpacking factory, the Hewlett-Packard (HP) manufacturing and technology campus in Leixlip, County Kildare is emblematic of shifts in contemporary labour towards information technology, pharmaceutical manufacturing and the service industries. Documenting the working environment and production-line architecture, *Tiger*, 2004, is a soundless film which was fittingly disseminated on loop in the gallery setting, via the screen of an open laptop. Several large-scale portraits of employees were also displayed, with white overalls and shoe-coverings hanging like deflated balloons on racks behind the subjects. Details included in the portraits' titles – first name, job title, time of day – echoed the type of information found on shift-work rotas.

Transformations in Ireland's economic and industrial landscapes at the turn of the millennium were further probed in Curran's photographic series *Southern Cross* (1999-2001). Numerous square prints documented contrasting locations: Ireland's International Financial Services Centre and building sites around Dublin associated with the construction of new housing estates, motorways and cultural quarters. Their juxtaposition gives them equal weight as dual sites of short-lived prosperity and economic ruin. Conjuring a social documentary aesthetic, Curran created portraits of people working in these locations: construction labourers such as *Sean from County Kildare (Temple Bar, Dublin, 2000)* and young office-workers such as *Anita*

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from Dublin (IFSC, Phase 2, Dublin, 2001) were depicted in their work-wear. Modern construction materials contrasted starkly against the surface-patterns of older buildings, as illustrated in *Inner City (Bishop Street, Dublin)*, 2000, where outmoded floral-patterned wallpaper sat alongside unrefined brick-work. Elsewhere, a palette of concrete blocks was tightly encased in transparent plastic wrap, with highlights darting across its glossy surface like slashes. Amidst angular steel girders and reflective windows at the IFSC, the organic growth of a stray vine felt like a small miracle.

The inclusion of cardinal directions in artwork titles provided gestures of orientation. *North of the city*, partially-constructed new homes emerged from a hay field, while *West of the City* boundary markers and orange construction netting were obscured by overgrown weeds. Interestingly, 'Southern Cross' was the name of an aeroplane piloted by renowned Australian aviator Charles Kingsford-Smith, from Dublin to New York in 1930, on the final leg of his East-West circumnavigation of the globe. Perhaps no greater spatial dichotomy exists worldwide than that of east and west – a defining feature of modern European history emanating from the post-war partitioning of Germany into two polarised global blocs. *Ausschnitte aus EDEN / Extracts from EDEN* (2003-2008) comprises a body of research focusing on Lausitz – a town situated near the German-Polish border in the Brandenburg region of the former East Germany (Deutsche Demokratische Republik) – where evidence of the former East-West divide remains palpable, especially among older generations.

In the dimly-lit gallery space, an analogue slide projector disseminated luminous images of abandoned workstations, taken by Curran in the former Steilmann Textile Factory, which closed in 2006 before relocating to Eastern Europe. The photographs documented vacant chairs, bare tailor's mannequins and disused sewing machines shrouded in grey dust sheets. This distinct lack of human presence is counteracted in a digital projection occupying the back wall, which relayed 'extracts from recorded testimonies' in visual, textual and audio form. Lausitz is hemmed on three sides by Tagebau Hambach – Europe's largest opencast coalmine. Speculations suggest that the mine will almost triple in size by 2030, by which time lignite reserves will be entirely depleted. One image depicted the striped and barren landscape, imprinted with the corrugated tyre-tracks of heavy machinery. Verbal testimonies – taken from interviews Curran conducted with miners and students – offered differing perspectives on the region's impending industrial decline. One student described the large-scale destruction of the surrounding terrain as "*a wound on the landscape that will never be healed*". Conversely, one miner seemed to view this changing landscape as a sign of progress, presumably because he viewed it as physical manifestation of the man-hours, wages and families fed as a result of this labour.

As identified by the artist, while the impact of global capital on the Irish landscape was manifested through the unrestrained construction portrayed in 'Southern Cross' and Stoneybatter', conversely, the physical legacy for Lausitz seems to be one of 'emptying': fossil fuels are extracted from the land, while young people migrate westwards in search of employment. As summarised by one student "*(we) have problems seeing or sensing a future (for the area)*", while another stated "*80% of my class have left*". Containing various textual and artefactual elements, a brown 'dossier' folder was displayed on a plinth. With corporate, political, legal and pre-digital connotations, a dossier generally denotes a collection of paperwork amassing detailed information on a particular subject. Used recurrently across several strands of the exhibition, this presentation format served to separate the artworks from the 'back-story' of their production – outlined in written material, transcripts and correspondence – which prevented the viewer from being overloaded with information. Office-style props and apparatus, including desks and spot-lighting, created a corporate aesthetic, while reference material – displayed on aluminium book shelving and thoughtfully archived in a bibliographic handout – posited the suggestion of ongoing research.

Perhaps Curran's most complex body of work to date is an ongoing, multi-sited inquiry entitled *THE MARKET*, initiated in 2010 in the aftermath of the global economic collapse to examine how the seemingly impenetrable matrix of global markets actually functions. Displayed on the wall at the entrance to the South Gallery, was a text (extracted from a telephone conversation with a trader in a London Investment Bank) which has become an aphorism that keenly summarises the artist's epistemological position:

"...what people don't understand... is that what happens in the market is pivotal to their lives... not on the periphery...but slap, bang, in the middle..."

To the right of the entrance, a wall-mounted monitor transmitted *The Television Studio*, (2012-13) – a soundless film comprising selected news reports from German television, which offered the viewer scope to study the visual vocabulary of global reportage. News bulletins were interspersed with

charts and graphs, as Stock Market statistics scrolled horizontally along the bottom of the screen, echoing the 'breaking news' aesthetic that has become commonplace since 9/11. Anthropological-style footage of civil unrest in foreign countries alluded to the notion that perceived 'instability' has long-range consequences for global markets.

A series of spot-lit photographs document the sites of trading and financial services industries in several capital cities. An image of a tree, taken on the grounds of JP Morgan (formerly Lehman Brothers) in London's Canary Wharf, offered no indication of the collapse of the former investment bank in 2008, which precipitated the worst Global Financial Crisis since the Great Depression. Documentation of interior-architecture included a bell used to commence trading at the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX), and a series of closed doors concealing the Medieval-sounding 'Trading Pit'. Portraits of traders and bankers offered snapshots of identity within an otherwise ambiguously defined 'market'. In the ECX, a dispirited-looking trader, *Bethlehem*, looked more like a prisoner, in an ill-fitting beige overcoat brandishing a trading number.

In the centre of the darkened space, office desks and chairs were arranged to suggest a typical corporate environment. Desk lamps illuminated the paperwork and dossiers strewn on the tabletops, conjuring the fraught atmosphere of a late-night meeting, not unlike the one held by the Irish Government on 30th September 2008, which was later described by the current Finance Minister as the "blackest day in the history of the Irish State since the outbreak of the Civil War". That night, 'market confidence' won out: Ireland sacrificed itself to the Gods of the European Union, issuing a blanket guarantee of defunct banks to the tune of 440 billion Euros.

Filmed in the Zuidas – a rapidly developing financial district of Amsterdam, also known as the 'Financial Mile' – Curran's crisp new film *Algorithmic Surrealism*, 2015, presented a slow-pan of suburban plant-life, creating simple compositions with close-ups of ever-green foliage. An accompanying voice-over was disseminated via headphones, and relayed the 'brave new world of emotionless finance', where human ethics, empathy and reason are rendered extraneous. Loosely based on an essay by former derivatives broker and financial activist Brett Scott, the reticent monologue relayed the role of algorithms within High Frequency Trading (HFT). The fact that many of these complex principles were largely unfathomable, only served to underscore the viewer's uneasiness at the seemingly ominous prognosis: that algorithmic *infrastructures are creating a "disconnected workforce for an emergent artificial intelligence"*.

These abstract relations were reinforced in a pivotal new artwork, *The Economy of Appearances*, 2015, which imagined future finance through 3D data visualisation. Spindly rainbow lines zigzagged across the screen, configuring elastic grids against sheer blackness, occasionally mimicking nature's spatial pattern: DNA. An algorithmically-generated soundscape developed by Ken Curran accompanied the film, tracking usage of the words 'market' or 'markets' in public speeches by current Minister for Finance Michael Noonan. This undulating soundscape washed over the space like white noise.

Having experienced a previous iteration of this sound piece in LCGA two years ago, it was rewarding to engage with the audio and new visual components in tandem. While in previous encounters over the years, aspects of Curran's artworks have occasionally seemed vexed or unresolved, *The Economy of Appearances* felt comprehensive and strangely complete, deftly occupying the spaces of LCGA to great effect. As already discussed, Curran's methodology allows concurrent or overlapping projects to unfold over time – an approach which takes tenacity and commitment, as well as an ability to know whether an artistic inquiry has reached its natural conclusion.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer based in the west of Ireland.

This text was originally commissioned by *Limerick City Gallery of Art* in September 2015.

For more information and images please visit Mark Curran's research Blog THE MARKET: <http://lockout2013.wordpress.com/>

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