

to sing and dance along to OutKast's 2003 hit *Hey Yah!*, but even Chetwynd had to admit afterwards that the proceedings had been 'really chaotic'.

Things could have become chaotic also at Sentralbadet, a disused public baths of 1960s vintage, where Tarek Atoui, in collaboration with social-based practice Council, worked with Bergen's deaf community to explore auditory perception – or, as they call it, 'audition' – in a show titled 'Infinite Ear'. This was launched by a series of live concerts updating Atoui's 'Within' project using nine instruments, including percussion tables by Thierry Madiot, to make physical and tactile sounds using, for instance, marbles rolling around on a drum-skin, or creating sounds on textured wood with fingers or microphones and even playing a drawing. Many of these instruments have been years in the making, and for the first time they were brought together for compositions and performances by Pauline Oliveros, Mats Lindstrom, Espen Sommer Eide and BIT20, as an ensemble. Featuring such wonders as the Sub-Bass Prototone, built by Johannes Goebel in the 1980s, generating such a roaring sound that it engaged the acoustics of the whole building, one by one, group by group, the strange orchestra came to life, drawing sustained applause from a packed audience for whom the proceedings were conducted and signed for the deaf. It was an assembled sound that you felt both physically and emotionally – a cornerstone for the whole Assembly. ■

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## TULCA Festival of Visual Arts: The Headless City

various venues Galway 5-20 November

It is not often that an exhibition confronts audiences with propositions to become headless. Pitched as a container, diagnosis and provocation, 'The Headless City' curated by Daniel Jewesbury invited viewers to step outside their rationale and to make demands for public space in imagining a future for our cities. Based in Galway in the west of Ireland, TULCA commissions an Irish-based curator each year to develop a thematic inquiry. The festival, which is delivered on a comparatively small budget, has grown in scope and ambition in recent years.

Jewesbury's discerning curatorial theme tracked the trajectory of the post-industrial western city, framing neoliberalism as just the latest phase in the city's periodisation. An alluring selection of established and lesser-known artists activated numerous gallery spaces, while a robust programme of events unfolded in the public realm. An impeccably produced catalogue featured multiple renditions of headlessness, found in ubiquitous images of gallows, hanging trees and decapitated classical statues, variously signifying violence, ruin, obsolete ideologies and overthrown empires. This erudite investigation

was underpinned by Georges Bataille's philosophical conceptualisations of the city as being founded on dirt, death, blood, pain and loss – undesirable elements that the neoliberal city seeks to repress. This reasoning seemed all the more appropriate given that this year's main venue at Fairgreen stands on the site of the city's last slaughterhouse. Within the slick concrete interior of the glass-fronted space, Doireann Ní Ghrioghair's floor-level sculpture *Shaft II*, 2016, resembled a scored hunk of pork belly, heaped on a wooden slab. This meaty form was subsequently revealed as the buckled remains of a flaccid Grecian column. Fabricated in tainted plaster, it debased the pristine white marble that so widely symbolises imperial order across western cities. Elsewhere, the pillar formation was satirically resurrected with *Urn Column*, 1986/2016, conceived by the late Ian Finlay Hamilton as a wall text in the artist's signature Concrete Poetry style. Liam Crichton's monumental, site-specific artwork *SLEEPER*, 2016, explored neoclassical drapery as a well-established sculptural device, swathing Fairgreen's expansive rear wall in a static plaster curtain. Drapery was traditionally used to veil nudes or to soften the 'decapitation' of truncated torsos and portrait busts. In this festival's headless context, Crichton's rather theatrical intervention reaffirmed our search for the absent.

Helen Hughes's brightly coloured, retro-style cellophane sculptures channelled the synthetic charm of Minimalism, while Rachael Campbell-Palmer's brittle shards of pink architrave glistened like gemstones on a low plinth. Her nearby concrete stack conveyed an obsession with rudimentary materials found in brutalist architecture. In a similar vein, Berlin-based photographer Diane Vincent presented photographs taken from inner-city rooftops. 'Oben', 2014, evoked a strange nostalgia with claustrophobic depictions of brutalist concrete stairwells and corridors. Foregrounded by vast rooftops, the upper portions of distant buildings seemed to rise up from vacant, expansive terrain. Jane Rainey enlivened several venues with vibrant, floating landscapes which appeared fractured by some cataclysmic upheaval, uprooting trees and revealing luscious, sedimentary layers.

Expanding the architectural trajectory to consider futuristic landscapes, the automated city prevailed in several spaces. At Fairgreen, Sol Archer's crisp video work *Dispatches from Futureland*, 2015, considered the scale of the human body against a backdrop of encroaching automation, while Dave Madigan and Meadhbh O'Connor's sculptural installation *Gridlock*, 2016, occupied the floor space at 126 Artist-Run Gallery. Steel shelving struts and component castings conjured a dystopian silhouette, with the only signs of habitation found in orderly arrangements of materials including seeds, clay, salt and cement. Human endeavours were tenderly reaffirmed in Anna Homburg's photographic series 'Between The Walls', 2010-12, which depicted secret places beyond the dense urban sprawl, offering room to play, imagine and dream.

Across several venues, black-and-white photographs by Irish artist Patrick Jolley (1964-2012) drew viewers into distant realms. The 'Kola Region' series, 2009-11, depicted elusive

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figures in landscapes shrouded by fog, a recurring device within Jolley's work. His digitally transferred 16mm film *Corridor*, 2009, depicted monkeys patrolling sparse corridors while a hotel-style soundscape seemed to emanate from behind the closed doors. A precise sense of scale was never disclosed, and the monkeys appeared abnormally large within some kind of artificial set. As the light dimmed in the closing scenes, the agitated monkeys faded to shadow and, rather than intruders in a domestic realm, they appeared as forlorn captives, trapped in an animal enclosure. This threshold between the illusionary and familiar was pivotal in Jolley's work, which hinged on the proximity of seemingly contradictory elements and rendered it ungraspable, despite our deepest urges to know it intimately.

At the Galway Arts Centre, notions of habitation underpinned a number of artworks, including Sinead Curran's video installation *Moving Space*, 2013, which soothingly depicted life on a barge. Fred Robeson's *Unbuilding Permanent Structures*, 2016, took the form of a ridge tent, fabricated in concrete canvas – a material choice that prompted reflection on temporality and permanence. The rudimentary shelter also triggered visual associations with the makeshift camps of the European migrant crisis, a notion further reinforced by surface images which depicted the crumbling cityscapes of war-torn Syria. In launching the festival, a poignant opening speech was delivered by Irish architect Gráinne Hassett, who had recently returned from the so-called Calais Jungle following the mass evacuation of migrants by French authorities. Hassett, who designed structures for the encampment, including a women and children's centre, described how, even in a situation of survival and desperation, the city of improvised shelters and charity kitchens also had mosques, theatres and cricket pitches. She spoke of a situation made 'on our watch as European citizens' that allows the free flow of capital and consumerist goods across borders, but not of people.

Fewer than half of the commissioned artists presented artworks in gallery spaces, with many exhibiting across several venues, generating continuity across the exhibition as a whole. Others developed projects in public spaces, including a hospital, a military barracks, the City Library and the Mechanics' Institute. Sorsha Galvin's pensive intervention *Desire Pathways*, 2016, carved vibrant channels through residential areas, portraying the joy of deviating from established routes. A programme of public events created opportunities for 'reflection in common', including a star-gazing event and an open-ended, discursive platform entitled the Society for the Conservation of Politics and Public Space. Among the range of performances that took place, a deadpan raffle by Dublin comic James Moran invited audiences to 'check out of our age of anxiety' and check their tickets instead. Under the voyeuristic gaze of curious onlookers, Glasgow-based duo Two Ruins performed *Blind Spot*, an intoxicating work involving a classic Citroën CX illuminated from within by red neon lighting. The oily, semi-naked men lay motionless, as the front seats reclined and straightened for eight minutes – the average time British couples reportedly spend having sex – before moving on to rumoured 'dogging'



Rachael Campbell-Palmer  
*Curbed Comfort*  
2016

locations and other seedy sites around the city. In keeping with this entropic mindset, which sees all cultural systems gradually decline into disorder, Steve Oram's *AAAAAAAHI!*, 2015, delivered unhinged scenarios of meat-bashing, food-fighting and cannibalism. A wordless script, enacted through the grunts, splutters and snorts of alpha-males and beta-females, conveyed a tale of suburban debauchery in the territory of *Shameless* meets *Planet of the Apes*.

Overall, 'The Headless City' found itself suspended between past and present. The call to reconsider our cities unfolded amid a year of national self-reflection in Ireland, arising from the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Following Galway's successful bid for European City of Culture 2020, it seems inevitable that carnivorous developers will descend, property prices will soar and every inch of public space will be micro-managed or otherwise absorbed. It would be difficult to identify a more fertile setting for artistic imaginings on public space. The curator showed dexterity in moulding his rigorous body of research into something quite loose and non-prescriptive, which allowed smut, romance, banality and grit to freely coexist, while suggesting that we continue to pursue the things that we are fanatical about. ■

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