

General Arrangement

Julie Merriman and Marcel Broodthaers at The Mermaid

Autumn 2011

“There is only one way to turn signals into information, through interpretation”

Joseph Weizenbaum

The *Unbuilding* Project is an award-winningⁱ architectural intervention into the gallery space at the Mermaid in Bray. It works as a support structure for artworks and it *is* an artwork. *Unbuilding* is a play of openness within closedness, an activator which has re-focused energy within the building. By challenging the conventions of the arts centre, subverting it from within, it redresses the flavourlessness of the spaces offering a temporary abstraction from the literal frame of a building. Despite its substance it is an architectural form which represents a kind of mobility that disrupts the usual pattern of the space. In situ now for over a year, the project has been a very successful addition; the energy it has created is warm, cool, familiar and engineered. It’s a ship-like the structure, which docks into the building.



fig 1



fig 2

This autumn the curatorsⁱⁱ have coupled a significant body of drawings by Julie Merriman with a slide installation by the Belgian Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76). The balance of focus, however, is very much on Merriman’s drawings, and the exhibition anthologises her work over about four years, a period which marks a change of direction for her. The works pollinate each other, being cross-breeds of style, generation and approach, mutualising artistic intentions by context and proximity.

Merriman's previous works have focused on architecture and have been an investigation of specific sites such as the *Building to be demolished* drawings (2002–06) and the *Carlisle Pier* drawing series (2006–10). These were commemorative drawings emerging out of her interests in buildings and in particular the *Carlisle Pier* drawings related to construction associated with maritime industries and Dun Laoghaire. In this newer work there is a move away from such direct interest in place. She has retained her concentration on the monumental and towards the end of this latter project became interested in naval architecture, which led to a new series of drawings, some of which were exhibited in the *Measured Fall*ⁱⁱⁱ exhibition in Limerick.

Merriman is currently undertaking a period of research gathering information on the visual languages and methodologies of other professions where drawing has been significant, such as architects (in particular military architects), engineers (civil, naval, military and aeronautical), scientists, mathematicians and cartographers. In these drawings the visual language of engineering seems to be particularly apparent. She is interested in the commonality of the language of drawing, in its industrial connections and its ubiquity. The work of mark-making, and the tension and space between manufacture and design, imagination and realisation, is to the fore now. There are clear references to the sea and sea-going, but her interest in it is as an action or a force rather than any romanticism.

Both artists make representational forms but are removed from the literalness of their subjects. Broodthaers' endeavours as a poet brought him little peer or critical recognition. It is said that a frustrated response to being passed over spurred him to make his first "accidental" artwork when he was in his forties. He embedded editions of his poetry in plaster, removing any possibility of a direct reading of his written work and re-creating his labour as a work of alternative representational meaning. The lyricism of this is poignant; as a new work it is fragmented and deconstructed. His concern for the materiality of work is shared with Merriman.

In 2009 Julie showed me an image while we were in preparation for a public interview. She witnessed and photographed the demolition of St Michael's tower block (2004) in Inchicore. The image was of the exploded flats, semi-collapsed, and opened to the elements. In the centre was small picture of an old ship, full sailed, pasted to a living-room wall; static in one context yet about to fall in another.

This is something that we have discussed: the space of the in-between; the erosion of a place or a meaning when objects and materiality are withdrawn or masked from their

context, and the play of that in our time. Julie grew up in Dun Laoghaire; I came to live there in my teens. It was a faded and depressed place like so much of Ireland in the eighties and



fig 3

early nineties; a heroin hotspot and a port of departure for the unemployed. It was also a place surrounded by feats of engineering and design. The harbour was the largest in the world at the time of its construction, co-designed by the infamous Captain Bligh. The Kingstown-to-Dublin railway, Ireland's first, was built by the overlooked William Dargan. Moran Park House was the site of early Irish broadcasts by Marconi. There were mail boats and the Atmospheric Railway from Dalkey Quarry, the Metals, the decaying Pavilion Theatre and needle-ridden Pleasure Gardens there, the ruins of the Salthill Hotel and the run-down Royal Marine Hotel. The seafront was rat-infested, the Dun Laoghaire bathhouse was decaying and often closed, there were outbreaks of typhoid among those who swam in the polluted sea. Brutalist architecture appeared in the form of a shopping centre, blocking out the sea from the town, and the "new" concrete church of St Michael's settled into the Victorian surroundings. Many of the middle-class houses of the era were being broken into bedsits and flats.

Julie and I worked together for a time in the late nineties when the boom had hit, and Dun Laoghaire saw the old convent in the town levelled, to make way for Bloomfields and Tesco. The Pavilion Gardens were passed over to a developer whose contribution back was the building of a theatre within a complex of luxury apartments which further blocked the sea from the town. Round this time there was a major public exhibition of proposals for a monumental building for the harbour; at the time this was being flagged as Ireland's equivalent of the Sydney Opera House. Its use was to be commercial and residential, but

there were plans to house a museum of the Irish Diaspora there. All of this and more seems to me to have a presence in the work.

In 2009, while on a trip to Bristol, Julie stood beside the giant hull of a dry-docked Brunel-designed ship. Brunel is a hero of hers. She told me that the volume of it, the knife-like sheer of its prow and the enormous height of the hull, was so atomising in its scale, so physically overwhelming that she felt ill beside it; a Colossus grotesquely removed from its context and so opposite to the tiny scale of her, inhuman now in its static volume. Then I think again of the falling tower block and the little image on the wall of the home in St Michael's Estate. It is monumentality set against frailty and failure of endeavour, strength and weakness of structures, materiality, the making and the erosion of things, and their tipping point, which together form an intense part of Merriman's more recent work.

That *about to fall* ship image of Merriman's and her deconstruction of scale and the complexity of making, creates a tension between the technologies of behemoth engineering feats, the forces of such technologies, their reliance, volume, ambition and their overwhelming relationship to the human form, their power to change human life, and it is how smallness works *alongside* that disturbs within the work. Through the site of making, engineering and of manufacture her drawings make reference to materials of a personal scale. There is value placed on the hand of the individual and the intellect, on its role in the meld of manufacture. So within her work there is an agitation between the determined force of manufacture and the personal ambition for creativity. Her interest is in the detailed and individual mark-making and the collaborative energy necessary for the realisation of the Grand Project.

Broodthaers' *Bateau Tableau* (1973) is visual tribute a classical maritime painting of a large ship from the nineteenth century. A painting of gentle distinction, its provenance is unattributed but Broodthaers thought it to be late nineteenth century by an amateur painter.^{iv} He bought it in a Parisian antique shop for what he considered to be an exorbitant price; however, it was an image he too held dear. He rediscovers and re-imagines it, exposing it as personal by appropriating its meaning. Both artists are referencing the investigation of others' labour, Broodthaers in the found anonymous painting, Merriman in the plans of others for manufacture and design. Merriman appropriates the syntax of technical drawing languages, and Broodthaers applies a series of fractions which recalculate the ship painting into bites of visual information,

... break[ing] down the iconography of the pictorial and symbolic [and] reflect[ing] Broodthaers' interest to displace realistic representations. Broodthaers accentuates the basic elements of the art object to make visible and decode its materiality.^v



fig 4

Individual sections of the painting are photographed on slides, which pass over the lamp of a carousel projector, clicking through the scrutinized seascape. The equipment is retro/nostalgic now for its quaint back-lit throw and the reassuring clunk of the motor drive to which the images change. I imagine in the early seventies slides and projectors had the material substance akin our beloved PowerPoint – connoting Broodthaers' practice of institutional critique. The approach of Merriman to the materiality of her work links it with the major impact of technology on the professional application of drawing. The computer has rendered obsolete manual and older mechanical drawing methods such as diazo or blue line used by architects and engineers. Merriman's drawings are made through carbon paper and typewriter ribbon: outdated materials. She references the tools of pre-computerised offices, blue-prints, carbon copies, hand-drawn plans and maps, black-out, white-out, frayed and deckled edges, the anatomy of bureaucratic communications, materials of serious institutional purpose.

This attention – the close scanning of the material detail, repetition, crossing of one meaning into another – is common in Merriman's work. She has been studying the highly skilled anonymous drawings of makers and planners and has spent much of the last seven years researching aspects of maritime engineering and design, the social, historic and commemorative resonance of the subject, and the concrete plans of such sites.

Over time – and time is an important aspect of her practice – she has strengthened and developed her interest in the meaning of mark-making itself, researching archives in Cork, Dublin and London. The function of these drawings is a shared communication and their purpose is clarity, to work to conventions and codes easily legible by those who have the skill or training to decipher them. Hulks, scaffolds, assembly schedules, rivet maps, masts,

layered cross-sections of hulls, all shimmer under the layer-upon-layer of her drawings, so much so that it is the spectre of their being, not the image itself, that is important.

Broodthaers' work becomes an erosion of another's work – not so much fragmented, but relieved it of its pictorial sweetness to re-present it as broken down; the result is re-ordered, random, beautiful and prosaic. It is a method of remaking which exposes the heavy grain of canvas, the lacquer, the stretcher studs. Each slide is a part of the total clicking structure of the painting. Which in detail becomes more interesting for its loose brushstrokes or close-ups of romantically billowing sails, golden skies, taut rigging, faint stays, as it is the very ground of the canvas itself which is focused on. The cheap varnish of the work shimmers – or is it the flash of the camera? Who makes what in these rearrangements?

Merriman's drawings have the gravitas, depth and potential of an unknowable cartography. Her departures are marked by detailed and fragmented layers of information. The attraction of these works is in their mobility, how they turn: signs of one type of visual language, the extruded static and fragmented information of plans, re-presented as a challenge and interpolation of the Grand Project, whatever that might be now.

Sarah Seanson, November 2011

Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76) was a Belgian poet, photographer, film-maker and influential conceptual artist. His work is included in many museum collections around the world including Tate, London, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Julie Merriman (b. 1963) graduated with an MA in Visual Art Practices from IADT in 2009. Merriman has participated in numerous exhibitions, residencies and symposiums in Ireland and the UK.

i Irish Architecture Awards, Best Cultural Building 2011, Shaffrey Associates Architects, judgement cited as follows: "In a period of disquiet and discussion about the value of building and the built environment this timber exhibition structure reasserts the possibilities of the temporary, the short-lived intervention as an approach to explaining and celebrating architecture as a communal as well as an artistic activity."

ii Ellis Lavelle and Clíodhna Shaffrey.

iii Occupy Space, Limerick, Nov. 2010, curated by Annette Moloney.

iv See D. Schultz, *Marcel Broodthaers: Strategy and Dialogue* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

v Source: <http://www.manifesta.es/eng/artistas/artistas/broodthaers.htm#>

Figs 1 and 2: The *Unbuilding* installation; images courtesy of Tomas O Connor (Shaffrey Associates Architects).

Fig 3: Photograph of St Michael's Estate, *Image of sailing ship*; image courtesy of the artist J. Merriman.

Fig 4: Marcel Broodthaers, *Bateau Tableau*; sourced at <http://arttorrents.blogspot.com/>