

# **DIALOGICAL INTERVENTIONS**

Edition  
Angewandte

Book Series of  
the University  
of Applied Arts  
Vienna

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*edition:angewandte*

Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien  
*University of Applied Arts Vienna*

# DIALOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

*Art in the Social Realm*

MARTIN KRENN, ED.

**DE GRUYTER**

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# DIALOGICAL ART AND PRODUCTIVE FAILURE



LOVE NOVEMBER 1971

*Love Nov 1971 from  
Transforming Long  
Kesh/Maze, Belfast,  
2018*

INTERVIEW BY

**Liliane-Sarah  
Kölbl &**

**Cornelia  
Kolmann**

with

**Aisling  
O'Beirn**

VIENNA/BELFAST,  
APRIL 2018

L-S.K., C.K.: We would like to know how you work as a socially and politically engaged artist based in Belfast? Do you have certain criteria for collaboration with artists and others?

A.O'B.: As an artist, I am interested in the politics of place expressed through vernacular information as well as the relationship between art and science. With each work, I try to respond to the specific circumstances of making that work. In *Transforming Long Kesh/Maze* with Martin Krenn (Fig. 1) it took a long time building trust and making contacts with various community organizations and individuals. However, those very necessary conversations allowed us to design a dialogical and participatory project.

L-S.K., C.K.: You mentioned trust, which is key for any dialogical art project. If people feel that the artist or the project isn't trustworthy and reliable, it makes it almost impossible to work together. We believe that at the onset of any dialogical project you have to invest time in building trust. Why did you start making dialogical art; what was your special trigger?

A.O'B.: I suppose it evolved organically. I also make sculptural objects to show in galleries, but I have always been interested in politics, working with people and art's communicative potential. The way I work with people for each project is different, it really depends on context. In *Structures Invisible to the Naked Eye* (Fig. 2) and *Another Day in Futile Battle Against the Second Law* (Fig. 3) I worked with astronomers from Armagh Observatory in my attempt to understand various astronomical phenomena. The work came out of my attempts and frequent failures at understanding scientific knowledge. By working with scientists I explore my "lack of knowledge," driving endeavors to acquire knowledge. Artists experiment and scientists experiment. Artists speculate and so do scientists, even though their methods and outcomes might be very different. I am always trying to find things out through making.

L-S.K., C.K.: Yes, it must be that this organic approach in your art practice results in your working with many different people?

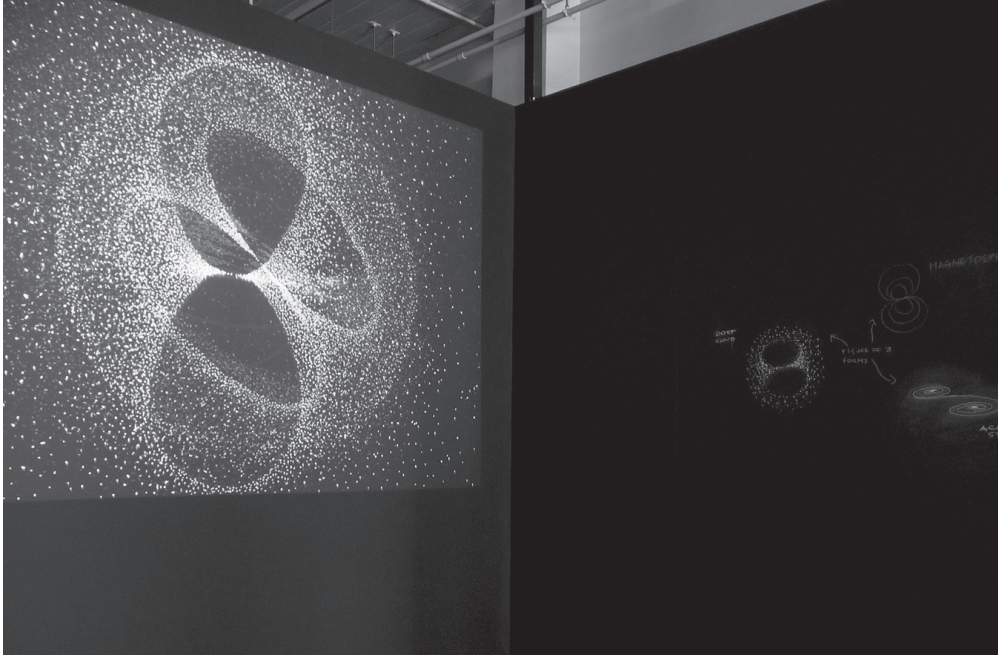
INTERVIEW WITH AISLING O'BEIRN



*Another Day in Futile Battle  
Against the 2nd Law*, solo  
show, Millennium Court  
Arts Centre, Portadown,  
curated by J. Baker, 2016



DIALOGICAL ART AND PRODUCTIVE FAILURE



*Structures Invisible to the Naked Eye* in  
"Secret Satellites, Belfast Exposed," curated by K. Downey, 2011

## INTERVIEW WITH AISLING O'BEIRN

A.O'B.: On one hand it's very organic, but on the other hand there are particular ideas or circumstances I work with. It is only through working that I find out how to collaborate and problem-solve. If I knew exactly what I wanted beforehand, it would almost be pointless to try.

L-S.K., C.K: Earlier you mentioned what knowledge means to you. Is it something political or something very powerful or... ?

A.O'B.: This is a very interesting question. What is the nature of knowledge? I see knowledge as very politically linked to power. Who defines knowledge, what can be classified as knowledge, how is it used or instrumentalized, and who are its custodians? A lot of the work I did with vernacular knowledge about Belfast – like gathering and redistributing place nicknames that don't appear on maps, or collecting hand-drawn maps and urban myths that people produce through experience – deals with these themes. *Some Things About Belfast (Or So I'm Told)* is a good example (Fig. 4).

L-S.K., C.K: To us, your work is very political, especially the prison project with Martin. It seems that you have a certain way of working – a very dialogical way because you give people who normally don't have a voice the opportunity to use their voice. How do you think about your work; do you think it is politically relevant and is this important to you?

A.O'B.: I would say any artwork is political; it is hard to avoid things being political. Anything that contributes in any way by allowing political debate to move forward is a good thing. If our project contributes to debate or discussion, we obviously would see that as a positive result.

L-S.K., C.K: Yeah, it sounds logical that it is political on the deeper level: one must have a closer look. The political aspect is not that obvious on first viewing, but still very powerful in its sensitivity and deepness. Do you think there is a certain aim or duty that art has for society?

A.O'B.: I think it varies from artist to artist. For me, art provides an opportunity to engage in societal and political debate. It is not something separate; it can't exist apart. Art can become a vehicle for discussing social change,

## DIALOGICAL ART AND PRODUCTIVE FAILURE

providing possibilities of communication, opening up dialogues with people. It has the potential to instigate change.

L-S.K., C.K: Exactly, art is great for opening up a topic. It creates another language, another space where you can talk about issues, and once everyone involved feels safe, you can take initial steps to instigate change. The special thing about art is that it can transmit ideas across societal boundaries, making them understandable and accessible to different people.

It would be interesting for us to hear your perspective on our project in Belfast. It was important that we saw what the city offered. We really wanted to work with its “mood,” so we started walking around for hours and hours, collecting impressions, thoughts, pictures, sounds. We put these things together, trying to find their essence. What we did – with the fences (recording the sound of hitting them as we went by), the dialogical and playful interactions with signs’ wording, the performances in the gallery – gave us a really intense connection to the town and some of its residents. We did not expect that at first. We tried to be very sensitive, but because of the noisy audio, the sound collage got very intense.

A.O’B.: Your project was great! It was very constructive and sensitive to the city. I really liked how you played the railings, which actually form barriers in the city. You employed them as a musical instrument. It was poetic, turning something politically aversive into something poetic. You noticed nuances – the different fences and signs, they all manifest forms of political control, and you picked up on things. When you live in Belfast and walk the same streets daily, you don’t tend to see such things, you are on autopilot.

L-S.K., C.K: Indeed, we tried to find a way of exploring the city (as outsiders), of turning something political into something poetic, to make it less heavy. Luckily it worked. But we were not sure it would... What does the notion of failure mean to you, for yourself or for your projects or in society?

A.O’B.: Failure is almost inevitable. With art, there might be micro-failures within projects, or sometimes it might be the ultimate failure of a whole project, but it can

## INTERVIEW WITH AISLING O'BEIRN

actually be something informative and used productively. Failure can act as a political metaphor. If you reach a dangerous tipping point, it can alert people to do something positive. So, I try, with illogical artworks, to explore the inevitability of failure. Collapse... and then you start again, you try to make it work and it collapses again... (as in the piece *Boolean Logic*, Fig. 5). The unstable, salvaged timbers allow materials to articulate something about failure in relation to political instability.

L-S.K., C.K: Would you say that the moment of failure, not only in artwork but in society, has a productive aspect?

A.O'B.: Well, it doesn't feel very productive at the time (*all three laugh*), but on the other hand, maybe something can be harnessed from failure if political alarm bells go off. It can make people much more politically active and alert. We see this now in the grand political arena, with the growth of anti-fascist movements across the world in response to the alarming rise of the far right.

The recent strikes in UK universities give a more localized personal example, being as much about the failure of neoliberalism and of the marketization of education as about pensions. On this micro-stage, new alliances and camaraderie between staff and students were forged. Besides the obvious stress of being on strike, it became a vehicle for seeing and discussing broader issues, and even inspiring new artworks. So in this sense confronting failure was very productive.





## BIOGRAPHIES

extensively in Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, North America and Canada, presenting “Actuations” (performance/installations).

**FLORIAN MALZACHER** is an independent performing arts curator. Among his publications are *Truth Is Concrete: A Handbook on Artistic Strategies in Real Politics* (2014), *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (2015), *The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy* (2016), and *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy* (2017).

**ARIANA JOYA McMANUS** was born in Vienna in 1996. She has studied in Ireland, worked as a social volunteer and done an internship in jewelry design. She now studies art education at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Her work ranges from painting to mixed media installation and sculpture, often addressing intimate topics such as family or personal conflict resolution.

**SUZANA MILEVSKA** is a visual culture theorist and curator. Her theoretical and curatorial interests include postcolonial critique of the hegemonic power regimes of representation, gender theory and feminism as well as participatory, collaborative and research-based art practices. Currently she is Principal Investigator at the Politecnico di Milano (TRACES, Horizon 2020). From 2013 to 2015 she was the Endowed Professor for Central and South Eastern European Art Histories at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, where she also taught at the Visual Culture Unit of the Technical University. Milevska was Fulbright Senior Research Scholar at the Library of Congress (2004). In 2012, Milevska won the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory.

**AISLING O’BEIRN** born 1968, is an artist based in Belfast and Associate Lecturer in Sculpture at Ulster University. Her work is interdisciplinary and explores the politics of place, uncovering tensions between disparate forms of official and unofficial information. She examines space and place as physical structures and political entities, often using and animating forms derived from the observed and theoretical structures of contemporary astronomy and physics. Her work takes various forms, including installation, sculpture, animation and site-specific projects.

**NATALIA PERSHINA-YAKIMANSKAYA** (artist name Gluklya) was born in St. Petersburg (1969) and lives and works in Amsterdam. Considered one of the pioneers of Russian performance, she co-founded the artist collective *Factory of Found Clothes* (FFC), which uses conceptualized clothes as a tool for building a connection between art and everyday life, and *the Chto delat*, of which she has been an active member since 2003. In 2012, the FFC was reformulated as the *Utopian Unemployment Union*, a participatory project uniting art, social science and progressive pedagogy. Gluklya’s work *Clothes for*