

# The Body Aesthetic



Installation of Gemma Gore's *stretcher/runner (cube)* 2013 (featuring Lee Welch) Pallas Projects Dublin

*A random documentary photograph—taken on the huff not the tripod. An image I saw before, an image that I stopped to untangle before, as if, as the caption & artwork title underneath the image declares, At the time, I didn't see it so clearly. At first it was an exercise in identification; most of the artists in the image I knew by face (by image) but not in person (by body). Taken in December 2013 on the occasion of Lee Welch's performance for the third edition of Periodical Review, 7 of 8 bodies are interlinked by a performance prop. The performer, Lee Welch, literally stands 'Stage Left'—the theatre expression that describes the performer's position on the left side of a stage facing (us) the audience. Welch is separated by the moving maul of bodies in body & spirit. The faceless couple in the foreground fall into the picture frame & form an entangled blot that creates a chain of half smiles as the maul moves in unison towards an unstable & uncertain destination. Giddiness pervades. Welch, Stage Left, is not giddy. He hides under an anxious elbow. He finger combs a script & his signature coiff. He runs in his head, the bodiless performer; they run on tenterhooks, the headless crowd. The slope of half-smiles slip-sliding away creates an asymmetry that chops the image diagonally in half. The crowded loneliness hurts. Remember! a performance is about to begin. Giddiness, like the compulsive yawning in a waiting room, is a symptom of what it is not. Welch's dramatic gesture is performative; the maul's giddy groping for something to hold on to is real. This is not trite togetherness, one-by-one they are yawning in the waiting room. Welch's elbow is an inverted yawn swallowing him up & sucking the air out of the room. Giddy. What power the performer has—even before the performance begins—to transcend the body while making everyone feel too close to theirs.*

“Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above the ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away—an ephemeral apparition. When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost the sense of something that lives and endures beneath the eternal flux. What we see is blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains.”

Carl Jung, *Memoirs, Dreams, Reflections* (1965)

“When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.”

From Antonin Artaud’s radio play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947)

THIS TEXT is to be read as a pre-text to an exhibition *to come*, Periodical Review “X”. Assuming the reader does not know what Periodical Review is as it approaches its 10th edition at the artist-run Pallas Projects Dublin, this writer will redescribe what it *was* as it transforms into a virtual ghost of its previous self in the midst of the pandemic, as Pallas’ co-directors, Gavin Murphy and Mark Cullen, host it online (with the promise of a “selection of works in the gallery”) like so many other cultural institutions have and will continue to do during this pandemic. From an insider’s perspective of someone invited to co-curate Periodical Review in 2018, the directors have proposed that I discuss “the philosophical and structural premise of the project, its discursive aims, and magazine-like approach”, including “the meaning that it generates in the context of contemporary art in Ireland, coming out of artist-run practice”. All this context and legacy, which indeed this “X” exhibition celebrates and will ultimately fail to realise in reality as it goes virtual, selective and soft, juxtaposes a one-track and on-track history that has been derailed in the present by the pandemic. With the past firmly on one’s mind, this writer will discuss Periodical Review in light of the past as we find ourselves under the shadow of the present. All efforts will be made to temper nostalgia and idealisation, even though this will be difficult considering where we stand, socially isolated and distant from one another in relation to culture, with the pretence “The show must go on!” on the tip of our tongues, an idiom that is hard to swallow. That all said, without this present moment to juxtapose the legacy of Periodical Review against, I can only speculate that this text and the other literature commissioned for this online edition would not have happened. And if essays were commissioned they would have been an exercise in waxing lyrical on the legacy and future of Periodical Review, what has become an annual bookmark—in a book usually without words—heralding the year just gone and the one to come in the visual arts in Ireland. What this big interruption does, in effect, and Periodical Review X proffers this writer, is the opportunity to reflect on what Periodical Review has been, and what it cannot be in the virtual edition.

So what is Periodical Review? From the standpoint of the ignorant observer, Periodical Review could be seen, positioned as it is at the turn of the year, as a ‘best of’ exhibition, summing up the best of the year just gone in the visual arts in Ireland. Periodical Review’s selection structure plays into this reading, whereby two people, called “agents”, who have a certain visibility in the local art scene, are invited alongside the two directors, Gavin Murphy and Mark Cullen, to form a panel who go their separate ways in the personal selection of artworks that have assaulted their senses and minds over the course of the past year. The panel then come back together to shortlist those artworks. This shortlist—always ‘too much’ in terms of the modest scale of Pallas Projects—collides in the gallery space with the organism of the artist community on the opening night, the opening being a significant drive behind the motivation and meaning behind Periodical Review. Looking deeper into Periodical Review’s selection structure as a previous selector, the ‘best of’ label doesn’t quite fit. During the selection process I learnt that the selection of artists could only be based on instinct rather than the trajectory or traction of the artist in terms of institutional visibility. Further, my first question to the directors regarding recent art graduates being eligible for selection was absolutely welcomed. With no thematic or context to shape my personal selection, the internal argument that played out in my head for months as I distilled so many good art experiences into just five best experiences was impossible to rationalise, so I went with my gut. What do I mean by “gut”? Well, that’s the thing about gut instinct, it is the reserve of the irrational when the intellect fails to register a logical or rational judgement or decision. Perhaps the gut instinct is, in Susan Sontag’s sensory maxim, “Against Interpretation”. The artworks I selected were artworks not artists, detached from the personal, peer or reputation function; artworks that inspired intellectual uncertainty and liberated one from a legitimate textual thread. The editorial limitations of Periodical Review forced me to shed the economy of visibility that determines the career of an artist, and focus in on the experience, the moment when I entered the space of the artwork, before the artwork becomes familiar, becomes intellectually manageable, that moment when the body rather than words fill the gap between the sensory and the artwork, the subjective moment when the artwork governs you before you govern it in the catatonic or cathartic aftereffects of being freed from its thralldom.

From the experience of co-curating the 2018 edition I never felt as relaxed as I did those cold December days hanging the artworks in the gallery. There was too much work; too much big work. We joked at the excess as we were forced into the rafters of the space which alleviated the pressure to conform to an exhibition that gives equal attention to the white negative of the gallery walls. There was a moment when the curatorial function became irrelevant. This was the moment I became excited, surprised, liberated from the conventional parameters within and without the gallery. There’s something Warholian about this excess—not the Andy Warhol of fashion magazines or the museum, but the Andy Warhol of the Factory. After being rejected by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns for personal and professional reasons, Andy Warhol created his most lively artwork, the Factory. Positioned on the periphery, geographically and symbolically, Warhol created—in Dave Hickey’s words—“a new centre”. The Factory was both a factory in a utilitarian sense where the frenetic conveyor belt of Warhol editions were produced, but it was also a public studio where the outside world came flooding in with ideas and gestures that fuelled the

Factory. Warhol, the empty receptacle, the body without organs or skin, became the Factory. Looking all around me in Pallas Studios in 2018, with little room to rest the eyes or the feet as I steered and stepped around floor-bound artworks, I thought of Warhol and his Factory, especially when visitors began to pile in on the opening night at what is felt today as an uncomfortable distance. This is what I call the body aesthetic, where the lively body of the viewer merges with the image, and distance gives way to the rapture of experience.

One thing we have learnt over the last eight months is that the disparity is immense between the virtual and the real in terms of experiencing culture with the physical and sensory body. This is especially true in relation to Periodical Review, a physical exhibition that, when it lived up to its living potential, which it has not always done, crowded Pallas Projects with artworks and people on the opening night. Periodical Review has always been (to my mind as a viewer & doer) an exhibition that is not an exhibition in the curated sense. The best Periodical Review exhibitions have been accrued rather than curated into this body aesthetic. In those instances it transforms into an exhibition that is not policed by the white walls of the institution and so is less territorial and more communitarian. It is an exhibition that depends on things and bodies rather than words to fill it. Words however have always undergirded this project, with its premise and promise of discourse or discursivity declared in the annually stable press release that has accompanied Periodical Review from the start. The now familiar epigraph that headlines the project—partly by Michel Foucault from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 1969—is significant. To repeat for those that skimmed over during the last decade: ‘An artwork is like a book, not made up of individual words on a page—each of which with a meaning—but instead “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences”’. Invoking Michel Foucault, one writer from the French philosophical avant-garde of the 1960s, an environment that was fully textual, or “textural” in Derrida’s terminology, is something I will treat with caution for the sake of criticality. Indeed, discursivity is here, as the directors write: “Not a group exhibition per se, Periodical Review is a discursive action, with the gallery as a magazine-like layout of images that speak (the field talking to itself).”

This exhibition that talks to itself, a Tower of Babel in a manner of speaking, packed to the rafters with mouths not pens, is not the discursivity of the written word, but of the voice, the talking heads of the opening night that talk alongside the artworks in a carnival of voices, one speaking for the other in the Bakhtinian chorus of *heteroglossia*, the multiple voices of the social sphere, a space that does not have room for the individual, or the other by itself, but others, in a shared ventriloquism, a shared body. That’s why I feel I can write now on an exhibition that I couldn’t write on before. As a critic Periodical Review never proffered words. There were no words to be had, as if the artworks, the excess of collective voices was too much, too garbled. That gap between the eye and the artworks was obscured by the excess. The viewer, finding that the exhibition has no beginning or end, stumbled in by way of the middle with too little room to perspective take or reflect on the excess as one was bullied out of space. To write on Periodical Review, as some have tried, ends in tautology. And those editions of Periodical Review that have pared back the excess, and perhaps were better ‘exhibitions’ in the curated rather than accrued sense, transformed a monster into convention, which missed the point of what this thing,

this monster is, a rhizomatic entity wherein artworks tumble over each other like rats in the attic, like burrows in the ground, like bodies on the opening night. Too much is not nearly enough. The analogy of the “magazine” to metaphorically capture the aesthetic of Periodical Review is curious and catchy, one that, etymologically speaking, signifies a storehouse of signifiers, from a periodical publication for a particular readership, or an insert in a newspaper, something like the fashion (think Warhol) or lifestyle section that glosses over the absorbent matter of the serious news. What do Murphy and Cullen mean by “magazine-like layout of images”? For me it transposes a design ethic onto Periodical Review. This simplifies the idea of the magazine into something that is solely structural. The magazine represents more than a storehouse of images; the magazine inspires kinship and feeling around a particular subject or activity. The magazine is a subculture within a subculture that documents to instil action not archive. It is a history in motion, fugitive and gasping for breath as it runs parallel to the subject or activity it documents. The magazine, like Periodical Review, becomes a dead history, a dusty archive, if the subject or activity it documents ceases breathing. The magazine is the torn music posters Blu-Tac'd to the bedroom wall where music plays or is being played; the magazine is not valuable in and of itself, but what it produces parallel and beyond itself. At its best Periodical Review is a maximalist exhibition that fills the room like the all-over paintings by American artists of the 1950s—alive like the algae on a pond that populates the surface from bank to bank, breathing and fizzing with insects and, down below in the water, the unseen and lively depths where the pulse of life ripples under the surface like a skin.

This year's Periodical Review, denoted by an “X”—the “X” in ‘Malcolm X’ in Slavoj Žižek terminology is an X that strikes-through the “roots” of identity to start again and broaden rather than resurrect as difference—registers as something different than its simple numerical signification in the midst of the pandemic, something that is redefining everything in its path, especially physical and social relationships with the artwork. The internet is sometimes lazily discussed as rhizomatic and not, in the appropriated terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, tree-like. This was an ideal on the part of the internet's inventors until governments and corporations utilised the internet's tree-like hierarchical structure in the arena of politics, power and the police. “X” in the midst of the pandemic and the virtual Periodical Review is a substitute for the unnameable, a strike-through, a violent attack on what was once named Periodical Review, and what will be named again in its proper manifestation as a physical body rather than a virtual one. The aesthetic acknowledges itself, talks to itself, in the absence of the body. Here's to a future where and when the body and aesthetic collide once again in the arena of the artist-run, a time when we are not forced to play at such a distance where the acknowledgement of that collision is less real.

\*A silkscreened version of this essay will be available in the Spring of 2021 under the new art press “Naked Barefoot Snowbound” by *small night zine*.



For the past decade *James Merrigan* has prompted & disseminated polemical & playful art criticism as a writer, editor, teacher & artist. He is a product of the financial crisis of 2008, born out of an absence of out-in-the-open critical, visceral, urgent & personal confrontations with art-making, the artwork, the artist, other art agents & institutions, contexts & desires within an emerging network economy (Instagram being its present manifestation). If critical confrontation is his first motivation, getting lost in the sentence is his desire—he responds to artists’ acknowledgements to his reviews with “Thanks for the words” & signs off with “Safe Passage Through the Artworld.” He is attracted to artists who have elements of risk, danger & dumb in their work—artworks that put artists on the line. His 10-year project includes online & printed identities and entities: *+billion-journal* (2010-17), *Fugitive Projects* (2011-13), *Madder Lake Editions* (2016-20), *Orphan* (2019-20) and *Shot in Silk* (2020). James was selected for EVA International (2014) as a fugitive art critic, and was guest-editor of the “Sex” and “Death” issues of Visual Artists’ News Sheet in 2016. In 2011 he was awarded the inaugural Critical Writing Award by Visual Artists Ireland & The LAB Dublin. Recent curatorial projects include ‘Soul-Beating’ (2017) and DESTROY ALL HEROES (2018) at Gorey School of Art’s Periphery Space. In November 2019 at Pallas Projects Dublin he curated ARRANGEMENTS, the inaugural launch & exhibition of *small night zine*, which works with artists in the development of silk-screened art & text projects. Current writing projects include an exclusively textual art press *Naked, Barefoot, Snowbound*; the development of two correspondence art courses at Gorey School of Art & the Royal Hibernian Academy Dublin. His current reading habits include the pragmatism of Richard Rorty, the French philosophical avant-garde & psychoanalysis. James tutors at Gorey School of Art & lectures in Psychoanalysis & Art at Trinity College Dublin.