

Journeys Realised: Presentation and Exhibition

Before Exhibition

At the start of 2013, a few months after the work at Film City, I received an email from a curator in Ireland, Declan Sheehan, inviting me to be part of a group show opening in the summer in Donegal, as part of the annual Errigal Arts Festival (in this year celebrating its 25th Anniversary). The show was going to feature several artists who belong to the Diaspora of Donegal – with the curator keen to open up questions surrounding how this biographical aspect becomes present within each artists practice and in the work which they create. Early correspondence discussed our shared apprehensions of those overused motifs and formats, which have become common currency in work recounting the story of Ireland’s migratory culture⁶⁴. In the instance of this show Declan wished for each artist to view and prepare for the exhibition as we would in any other circumstance, creating work or selecting existing pieces which, we felt represented ourselves as artists – the common thread of diaspora was already represented through our family connection irrespective of the work on display. Certainly there was going to be a more direct reference in my work to such themes, due to it being that which I was currently researching. Importantly though, the work I would make would not claim to be a work which was thematically led by the history of Irish migration and diaspora, rather that it would be positioned as exploring how such familial narratives with this, and the impact of such upon on myself as artist, have informed the work I make.

Through discussion and communication with Declan, we both discussed and confirmed the opinion that a diasporic inheritance and a story of migration – in whatever form or expression it took - was something present in the exhibition, as audience read the work as being made by a group who were informed by the very reality of experiencing stories of family members who had left Ireland. For me, being very aware of the potential for my work to be seen as a sentimentalized and feigned communication of such a lineage, locating my work as part of such category through mutual practices making similar claim, was supportive. As part of our email correspondence during this preparatory stage, underlining the diasporic context of connecting to an Irish heritage through parents, grandparents and great grandparents, Declan frequently cited Jeanette Winterson’s assertion that “Where you are born – what you are born into, the place, the

⁶⁴ Whilst I would acknowledge such as having served a purpose in highlighting and conveying such a history within the general public realm, such representations have arguably been influenced by what has been described as a socio-economic *cultural commodification* of such realities (Marwick, 2001).

history of the place, how that history mates with your own – stamps who you are, whatever the pundits of globalisation have to say” (2012, pg. 16).

Prior to this invitation, the work the previous December, in Film City, was intended to mark a conclusion of sorts, or at least represent a final exalting of practice within this research work. Yet again my initial plans seem to mold and adapt with influence of circumstantial happenings, with my creative practice reaching out to explore my own relation and response to it. In some ways, the performance and significance of the work at Film City seemed to capture the sense of a wider narrative – representing the exploration of a collective sense of departure and exile, whilst this new work – although of course having wider resonance - signaled a return back to a personal experience. I had a strong desire to have this exhibition work communicate a form of private communion with that embedded in this family story, of the personal losses attached with this history; of Agnes’ in particular.

I had initial thoughts of framing the work made – whatever form it took - as a devotional act of sorts. Certainly this had been a narrative carried throughout the research as a whole – with afore mentioned notions of commemorative expressions and in capturing that sense of personal exposition. As previously described, my work was associated with a sense of feeling great fortune regarding the opportunities I had, knowing such was a result of support and sacrifice made by family, significantly with Agnes often recounting that she left Ireland in order to create a better future for herself and the family which followed. With the opportunity to be part of this exhibition, and moreover with it being held at a location within Donegal nearby to where my grandmother was born and grew up, reflected on making work which was symbolic of ‘a return’, with a communication between Agnes and myself forming as I brought an expression of her back into this landscape. Moreover, the opportunity to be part of this show was through this legacy of migration and diaspora, which Agnes had initiated. As writing from my sketchbook describes:

“Agnes, as ever, sits at the forefront, with my mind immediately drawn to the fact that it is through the lineage she passed on to me, connecting me to Donegal, that I have found myself part of a show featuring artists who are already so established...She had left with hopes and aspirations, for independence, for excitement, for that which would only be possible if she went away; through this departure I would have the chance to return, as part of this Diasporic collective”.

Excerpt from sketchbook

It is evident that acknowledging this journey within my family history was something I was keen to capture in the creative work. It is true that, as mentioned, these wishes and drives were not new to my approach to the research as a whole, though it did seem that I was now attempting to create a more outwardly resolved response, as gallery based work. As I started to develop work I was conscious of that previously discussed with Declan, of not wanting to rely on the stereotypical associations of Irish migration and began to contemplate on how I would express the above notions through an installed work. I conceived that I would again create spaces of empathetic engagement – in this instance be drawn in this instance from private communications between myself and my grandmother – to evoke a mixed resonance of loss, separation, absence, journey and memory for the viewer, allowing them to experience these wider themes of migration through association with this personal account.

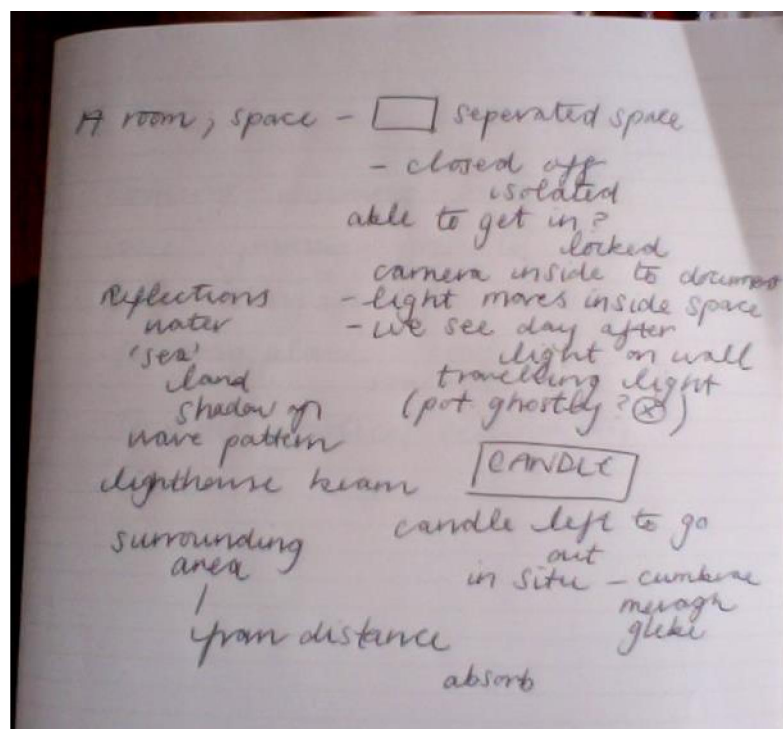


Figure 93 Page from Sketchbook (2013)

Clearly there was the consideration of audience and of referring to a much wider set of questions, which would be brought to the exhibition space. It was important to me however to allow for the work I created to be led as an engagement responding to the subtle layers of my own family history, with it being a process which would express personal resolve. In respect of this I allowed for some details to be present in the work, which may not be explicitly connected

to the broader themes. This connected to that previously discussed with Declan regarding the work representing diasporic identity through the identity of the author, as opposed to direct reference. In spite of the potential distancing of audience as they observed these abstracted and intimate references - as observer rather than participant – this looking into this interwoven obscuring of family ‘secrets’ – I hoped that this barrier and *distance* could in itself represent and contribute towards a continuing portrayal of that which exists within families when exploring these themes and intersections of time, place, distance and family stories, especially within the circumstance of migration and diaspora.



Figure 94 Initial 'sketches' of space at night with projection

Drawing upon recurring motifs, with a desire to communicate an accumulative journey towards this symbolic *return*, I decided to reference some of the structures I had created for my undergraduate degree show a decade earlier. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was the ‘building of the physical divide’, sculpturally used within the center of the degree show exhibition space (see image below). In creating a similar structure within the gallery in Donegal I was connecting back to now ‘recognized beginnings’ of my creative response. Additionally, there seemed to be a two-way conversation between this space of the past and the continuing narrative unfolding within the space in Letterkenny. Reflecting upon how I had constructed the space for my degree show, the creation of a divide, without being directly aware at the time, was already

demonstrating a performed creation of distance and border, enacting the traces of such within my personal family narrative.

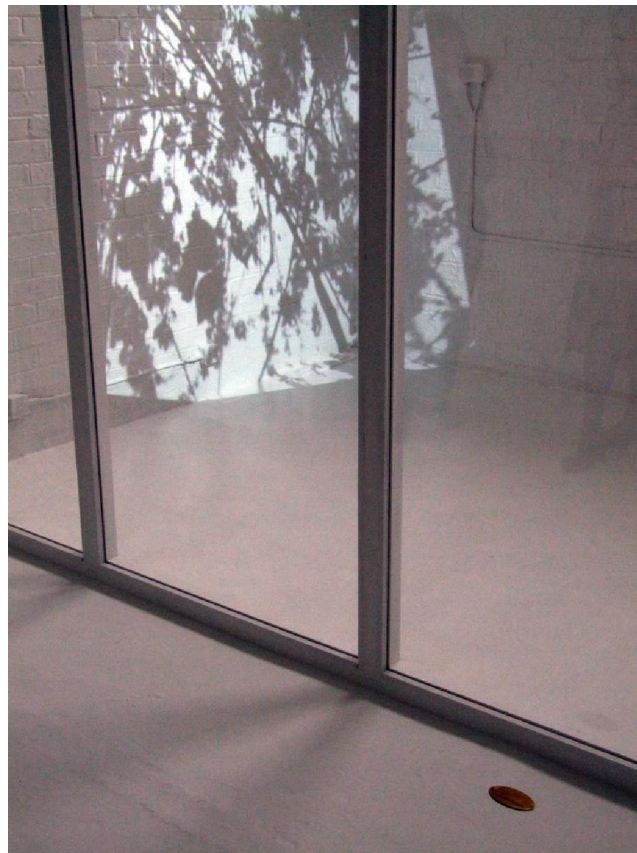


Figure 95 Still from Undergraduate Degree Show installation

Along with the decision to create a structural installation within the gallery space, I wanted to form and initiate a performance, which would unfold through the duration of the exhibition period. In response to this I conceived a performative work, which would take form within the gallery as a video projection behind the transparent central structure. The video work would be document a performance, which in turn would become representative of a recurring dream which Agnes frequently talked of, something I remembered her telling me of when I was a child. Returning each night during the years, which followed her migration from Donegal to Glasgow, she told me of how she would walk from her house at Glebe, along the road at Atlantic Drive, and down to her childhood school. Reflecting upon this now it seemed to me that these nocturnal visiting's became a ritual of going back and of not forgetting.

Prior to the exhibition I would make this walk, retracing Agnes' remembered route. Documenting myself I would then develop this material into a work which would involve other

layers of the collective journey made during the years which bridged her departure, marked through details of this journey of creative research practice.

In creating the work, as part of it, there would be an extension of myself within this landscape, and indeed with this dream of Agnes's. As a performative act it would allow me to come into contact and communicate with my grandmother – through a suspended sense of communion between ourselves. With myself retracing this 'journey' which she would make each night *travelling* along roads and landscapes familiar as part of the ancestral legacy belonging to us both I would trace a knowledge of such spaces imprinted on the generations which had lived for so long upon such land. For myself to enter and engage with these routes I would have the possibility of both remembering the voices of this familial legacy, along with this coming back in contact with my grandmother once more. In this work I would both express and produce a work with 'authentic claim' through such involvement.

In the lead to my visit to the exhibition space – in the lead up to the performed walk and the installation of work - I started a process of imagining myself walking into the space, trying as best as I could without being able to physically react to the gallery in-situ, as I tried to mentally gather the details of the work and decipher how they would resonate with each other. These elements included the projection of the video, documentation, the construction of the glass divide and perhaps an audio element. Again, through these I was wanting to translate an articulation of myself taking journey through these layers of self as artist, as ancestor, as granddaughter, and as being influenced and indeed part of this migratory history.

Overwhelmingly, as I envisaged walking into the space I saw it to create an echo of the environment first created during my undergraduate degree show, which had shown this initial register of Agnes and the weight she carried, along with its unfolding through Stephen's death, realised by myself through the discovery of my father's painting. In many ways these first engagements, though barely perceptible on surface, signaled the beginning of this search and journey through practice to release and realise these narratives. I saw the space having similar white walls, distanced and bare in terms of showing evidence of what may have gone on previously in the room. I did not want to muddy the experience of the space with memories and signs of things, which belonged to another set of histories. I conceived that the room would capture a protected intimacy and interiority, 'resting' as a site undisturbed. The built partition, separating the space into two, would act as reference to this previous space, carrying through it those afore narrative inferences and motifs. In arrangement in this present space, with the

inclusion of the projection of this dream narrative and the more realised themes of migration and diaspora, the structure would now have a more defined meaning and relevance.

I decided that the wall would mark off a corridor like passage, taking extension out from the width of the doorframe. From the area of space available to walk into, the audience would be presented with a 'viewing gallery', almost prescribed to stand and observe that which is behind the glass pane.

Developing this extension of separation, distance, presence, absence and of the tangible/intangible shifts experienced when remembering these family stories, I decided to make the video projection of the dream sequence part of such expression. I conceived that the screening of the recurring dream walk would be something, which was only played in the space when the room became empty, only coming on within the room at night. These nightly projections would be documented on video, and then played the following day on a screen in the empty space for the visitor, with the viewer only being able to witness a distanced account of this act of projection within the room.

With the video from each previous evening's projection displayed on a monitor within a corner of the room, I decided to place a large wooden table, centered within this closed off space behind the walled divide. During the day, the only scene available to the viewer, when they arrived at the gallery space, would be the presentation of an antique kitchen table, making signals towards a traditional domestic scene. The wooden table would be something I hoped to source whilst in Donegal, with the intention of finding a used table, somewhere which may have been housed over the years in homes which may have experienced this social history of movement of migration⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ I was aware of course that obtaining a table in Donegal would not necessarily guarantee such things though would at least be a gesture towards maintaining a degree of authenticity to place.



Figure 96 Gallery space visit (pre-exhibition)



Figure 97 Gallery space visit (pre-exhibition)



Figure 98 Gallery space visit (pre-exhibition)

As I engaged with the creation of the installation I made the decision to have a performance work occur by myself in Scotland, again extending sense of self within the space whilst being physically elsewhere. Adding to these elements I wanted to draw from the archive of Agnes' letters and engage in a process of re-writing each of these out in my own handwriting, sending a letter of daily from the distanced position of my studio in the West of Scotland, to be placed on the wooden table within the gallery space in Donegal. The new letters would trace a journey, initiated by the process of copying out and drafting the letters of correspondence, which were sent between my grandmother in Glasgow and family members in Ireland. Throughout the exhibition period, through the writing of these letters, I would begin to drift into assuming the authorship of my grandmother, creating correspondence drawn on those events narrated to me of the oral histories passed on to me by family members. Adding a durational build through the months of the exhibition, these letters would further this notion of time passing.

Other elements which I developed within the work included an audio element, with an old familiar folk song, edited to become a layered 'round', playing on a loop within the space, and also the display of a paper surface upon which the nightly projections would fall each evening.

With these details coming together, I conceived the following experience for the viewer walking into the space:

At the door of the gallery space there is a television monitor displaying footage of the empty room the night before, documenting the projection of a video within the space – a dream sequence – shining from one side of the room onto the pile of white paper sitting upon floor within this closed off partitioned space. As you walk into the room the viewer will see it has been sectioned off, with half of the room blocked off and set behind a large glass wall in front of them. From the small area of space available to walk into, the audience can stand and observe that which is behind the glass pane: a bright white space with a stack of neatly piled white sheets of paper – large A1 pieces – and a simple table with letters which have been accumulating while the exhibition has been running. The projected video work which is repeated each evening once the gallery space is empty shows a narrative which opens up a capturing of loss and departure, voicing those scenes which the artist’s grandmother returned to in sleep, during the years which followed her migration from Donegal to Glasgow. Dreaming of home she would visit these places, making journeys along roads and landscapes familiar as part of the ancestral legacy belonging between them, tracing a knowledge of such spaces imprinted on the generations which had lived for so long amongst such land. These nocturnal visits, became a ritual of going back and of not forgetting. With the artist entering and expressing such narratives, there is the possibility of both remembering the voices of this familial legacy, and of bridging and being in communion with my grandmother once more. Significantly, this documentation of the space appearing on the monitor reveals that this video projection is something, which is absent from the present daytime space. The monitor displays the story of that which has happened in the space the night before, with the viewer only able to witness a distanced account of this act of projection within the room.

Within the space, a soundtrack will accompany. Using the old Donegal folk song “An Mhaighdean Mhara”, which the artist’s remembered her grandmother Agnes often singing, the sounds of the landscapes unfolding in the video dream sequence (e.g. sea, wind, grasses on shore) will be heard. This story, like so many of those told in this region, captures the relationship of both fear and draw, which Agnes (and indeed so many of the people and generations who lived within this landscape) had with the sea.

Performing the Recurring Dream Work

I planned to travel over to Donegal in May to film and capture footage for the dream sequence. There were certain things, which I wanted to film and have as elements within the piece, feeling that these details may aid in this connection with the memory. The first of these involved an act of walking from one end of Tra Na Rosann bay to the other, filmed just before

sunset, as preface to the recurring dream journey. I wanted this to act as a gesture of acknowledging the transfer into – or indeed return back to – this previous ritual of my grandmother entering into these nightly visions; of a signal of time dissolving.

In terms of how I would film these works I wanted to create a mode which would allow for a continual slippage between representing the visual of what my grandmother would have seen – her first person ‘pair of eyes’ – and the vision and footage of myself, documenting my figure in the landscape engaging in these performative acts. Using small body cameras I devised a way with which I would be able to attach a camera to myself (becoming my grandmother’s figure walking through the spaces) and then have somebody at a slight distance filming me, with a camera attached to their body at the same level and perspective. In filming the activity in synch I would be able to edit together this switch, to and fro, between these two perspectives as the viewer is presented with a slippage of seeing myself drifting into the eyes of my grandmother as she journeys along the route of her dream.



Figure 99 'Dual' views of on-person camera and recording from behind

Other details included the decision to dress in a way which would create as little distraction in the scene as possible, wearing dark clothes, and also to not have any interaction with the other person filming during the process – allowing me to become detached from the technicalities of the filming, allowing self a separation from the method being used – focusing instead upon the ceremony of what I was doing as I reawakened my grandmother’s dream.

I also wanted to film a *post-dream sequence*, as sunrise came, following the activities of the night before. I felt that in doing so there would be a sense of yet another form of ‘return’, with this act of going back occurring during night hours, with morning signaling a coming back to present. I was conscious that when involving the material in the editing stages I would have to manage a wealth of inescapable connections with such scenes of sunrise, with notions such as resurrection

and a renewal, amalgamating with this gesture of capturing the coming in of this new day. Whilst these associations may have of course influenced my decision to film these sunrise scenes – perhaps similarly to the connections I was aware were common to the burning of a votive candle – it was principally captured to relate and signal shift from the performance which had just ended.

On the day, in lead up to the night of filming, I had a feeling of anxiety – which was inevitably tinged with the awareness that it was going to be a very long night of filming, with little space to rest between sunset and sunrise. The physical demands of this though were in keeping with the other examples of overcoming and enduring such obstacles within the other stages of my creative work⁶⁶. Through each of these I felt able to glimpse sight of the physicality of journey endured in these wider migrations, cathartically transferring that into the works I would go on to make – such as this video work, and in turn the artist's book.

At a local hotel which I was staying at, I had gone through the various pages in my sketch book and notes written, containing that which I would try to connect to when out on the walk. Reflecting, I feel I was trying to let them sink in and settle on a level, which would allow them to resonate through my actions. Such process was yet another example of my practice offering me this space to communicate and connect with Agnes and her legacy. For myself to enter and create, such works, there arose the possibility of both remembering the voices of a familial legacy, and of forming an active presence of my grandmother once more⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ Such as traveling around Ireland the previous year without my own form of transport, or wanting to light the sea of candles at Film City on my own, despite the time constraints

⁶⁷ An excerpt from my sketchbook illustrates the way in which I foresaw how I may feel whilst tracing the route of her dream – from family homestead to the small school beside the seafront. Revealingly I wrote:

“Would I pause to rest in a space where she may have. The smells of the night air. Her dark hair in the night...the blackness....Being guided. The summer night air...did she breath the same air...did she smell the same smells. I know what unfolded for her....did she think about what had happened in the lives of her female relatives the way I try to make sense of my self through her?”.

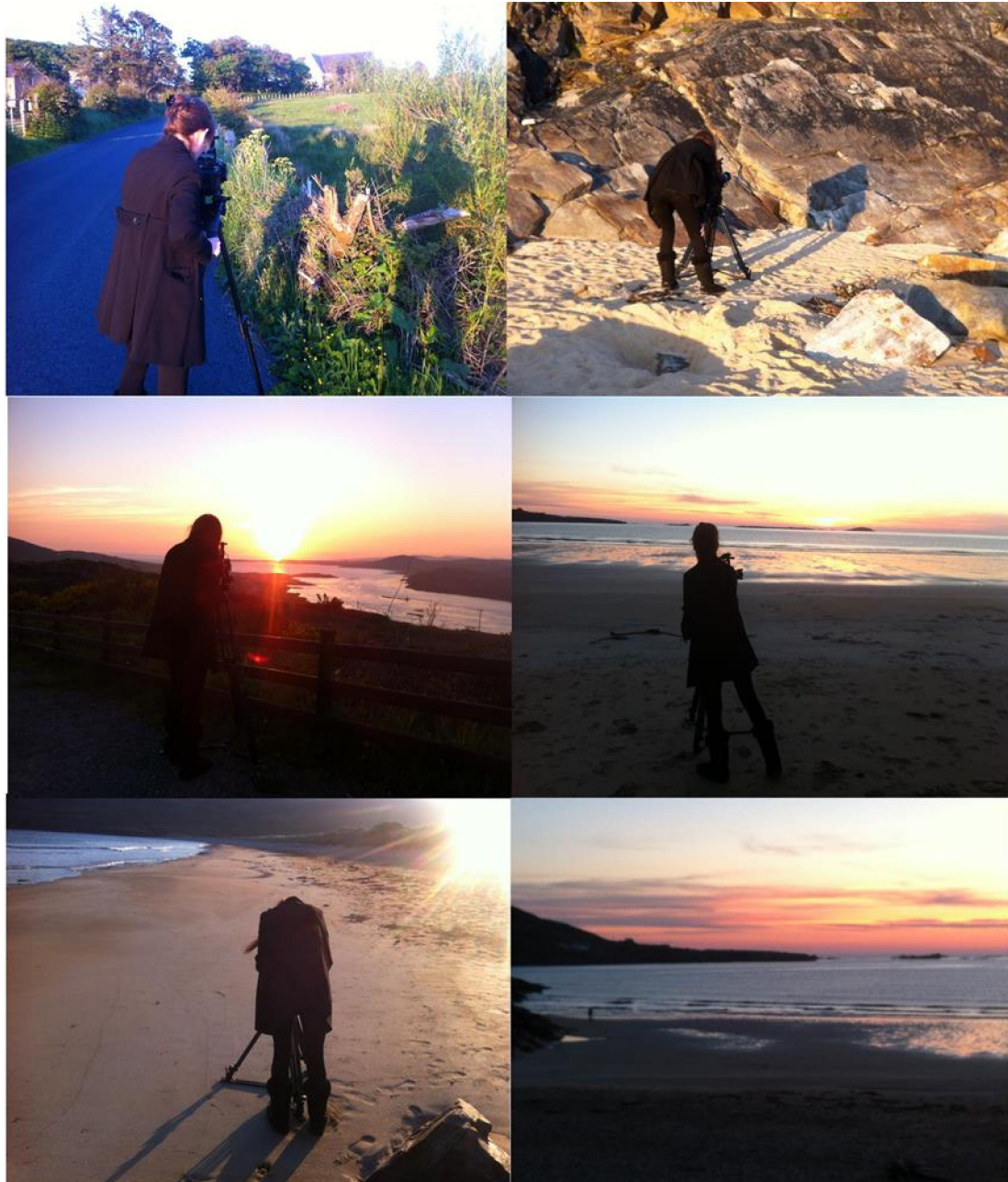


Figure 100 Documentation of evening filming (2013)

In terms of how this activity would inform my practice and in turn develop into a gallery piece, it was evident that both the physical film and the experience of what I understood of Agnes through the process of being part of and engaging with this dream performance would be present as layers within the gallery space. The film would act as a work, which could tangibly echo the experience and create a visual manifestation to allow the audience to glimpse at this encounter between my grandmother and myself. The experience of understanding through performing this evocation of a memory, of imagining and creating that which my grandmother narrated to me, would become transmuted into my handling of the space, of how I arranged the

objects sculpturally and also in how I related to the details of any continuing art work such as the development of the artists book and the process of rewriting the letters.

Please note that with regard to detailing the encounter I believe its experience is captured and expressed in the video work, which formed. I want to preserve its communication within this means. The resonance of the engagement remains as that which I wish to hold on to internally in such form, without breaking it down as a procedure. The film has been included on the accompanying DVD and through the visuals referenced.

Editing the video and making the accompanying audio

When I returned back from Ireland and began editing the material captured for the dream sequence, I was conscious that I didn't want to make the video work represent mere illustration; with the potential risk for this footage to become recognized as documentation of the performance. It was important to me for it to be part of a work still forming through my handling of the video material and my experience of the act of the performance that evening. Having said this I wanted to include the walk across the bay at Tra Na Rosann in entirety, 'unedited', in order to include the narrative of having underwent the physicality of through a durational account. The walk was captured by a body camera, on me, as I walked the fifteen minute stretch of shoreline, pausing at the end of the bay, and then turning to walk towards the sea. The walk was also filmed by a larger stationary camera, located at the starting point of my walk. As my scale subtly shifted, I gradually disappeared as I walked further into the distance, with myself being barely visible in the final stages of the film. In this sense, this recording needed to be viewed in a linear way, with its message being evoked through watching it at full length. Moreover, with little actually happening on screen – both my movement and the sun setting being things which changed gradually – the experience of the long walk was conveyed through this.



Figure 101 Start of walk at Tra Na Rosann bay

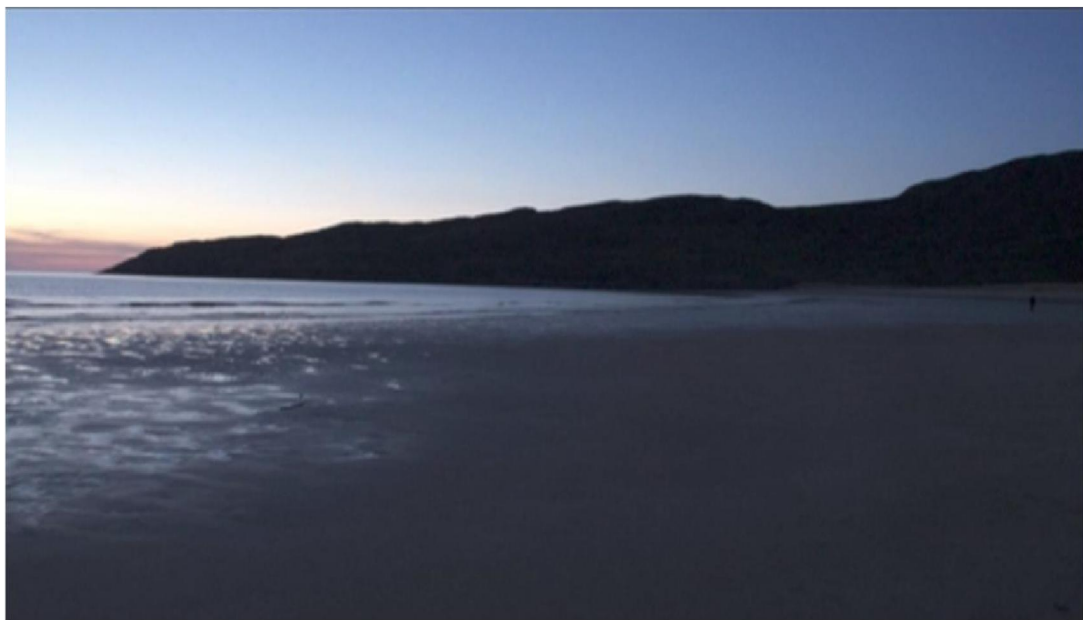


Figure 102 End of walk at Tra Na Rosann bay

In comparison, the footage captured as I walked from the family home at Glebe, down towards the shore to Agnes's school – the route of her nightly dreams – felt as if it should be handled differently. As mentioned previously, the journey from Glebe to the school was intended to become an intimate space of union between my grandmother and myself as 'we' walked upon this familial landscape, and visually I wanted to shape the shifting between camera perspectives (using both the recordings of my figure walking, and the 'first-person' visual walking through the landscape) into something which communicated a suspension of time periods and cycles of lapsing consciousness.

As I started to add an audio track which included my own voice-over, this dream phase became very definitely a place to weave multiple layers of conversation with my grandmother, drawing from some of my own archive of developmental film work – again a reference to an accumulation of practice over the years - alongside new pieces of written responses to her memory. The accompanying visuals mirrored this fluidness of time and I felt I was afforded a space through which to connect with Agnes and align the thematic fragments in a gesture of bringing these layers together within this creative form. This practice of editing became a way to combine both my experience of the performance and to perform another narrative in the experience of the piece.

Initially I had envisioned having the field recording of the walk providing a soundtrack, whilst text written by myself would appear sporadically on screen. I quickly decided though that such words would be better spoken over the visuals, and as uncomfortable as I was to listen to my voice as part of the work, it was the best course for maintaining the intimacy of the piece. Another audio aspect which I wanted to explore in the film was to integrate the use of the folk song mentioned earlier - the Donegal folk song "An Mhaighdean Mhara" - as part of the video work, rather than have it play independent of it. This haunting, repeated motif – almost 'roaming' through the layers of the film – would be heard throughout the day on loop as the documentation of the previous night's recording played on a side monitor. Moreover, with the playing of this on loop, as part of the account on the television monitor, there was a notion that the repetition of this may become lodged in the minds of the viewers, 'roaming on' after they had physically left the space.

When searching for a recording of the folk song I found a traditional, unaccompanied version, which seemed to suit the nature of the art work. By chance, after selecting this particular recording, I discovered that it had in fact been recorded in Letterkenny, Donegal, in the fifties as part of an oral archiving project carried out by the American folklorist and ethnomusicologist

Alan Lomax. It seemed once again it seemed to have a steered connection, with this work being brought back from American archive into the contemporary realm within the location where it was originally recorded.

Installation of the work

I arrived in Letterkenny, Donegal, four days before the exhibition was due to open. Initial building had started in the gallery space as directed by the plans and drawings I had sent over in this lead-up. As I explored the space, with this new partitioned wall built I was gladdened and relieved of how the room had developed. There were a few things which remained to be done, namely, positioning and testing the projection, arranging the screen within the ‘viewing gallery’, sourcing the table which would sit behind the ‘glass wall’ structure, and crucially, making the final refinements to the video work and installing the camera and timer to record each evening.

Following a walk around a cluster of charity shops in the main town area I found an old dark wood kitchen table which was dated within the same era as when Agnes had communicated back and forth with her family. Bringing the table back to the gallery space and arranging it in place, there formed the intended echo of a rural and domestic structure within the space. Behind the glass partition, in the bright white space, the table evoked the site, which would have seen a collecting place of letters, both written awaiting collection and delivered and read. I envisioned as the letters would come to be delivered through the exhibition period, accumulating to represent the way in which such letters would at once diminish and augment the physical absence of family members like Agnes, with news of the wider distances contained in these letters brought.

The final coming together of the video work loomed with a certain weight. I had decided to leave the final assembly of video and audio to be made once I had physically come over to the space for the installation phase. Similar to the ‘testing’ experienced when I visited and lit the candle at the various ports in Ireland, and when I made the night walk around Atlantic Drive, there was an intense focusing which underpinned the process. Requiring a particular channeling and dissolve between self and the material I was making, I wanted to have my emotive experiences be absorbed into the work. As described, I was anxious that such an exchange would fail to occur or be possible. Indeed, there was also the apprehension that despite me having felt such connection, this quality wouldn’t resonate and impart ‘outwards’ to the viewer. The pressure of this made for some lengthy periods editing the material, leading to a particular moments of feeling I had lost means to connect with it.

The last part of the installation, on the eve before the opening, I set up the camera and timer for the first night projection occur. This was to allow for there to be footage of such – as instance of the previous evening - on opening night. Arriving the next morning to collect the filmed account a feeling that the work had started was felt. In reflection, it was poignant to have this quiet beginning to the work, with a privacy in the moment of such.



Figure 103 View of space



Figure 104 View of space (divide detail)



Figure 105 View of space (table detail)



Figure 106 View of space (monitor of previous night's screening detail)

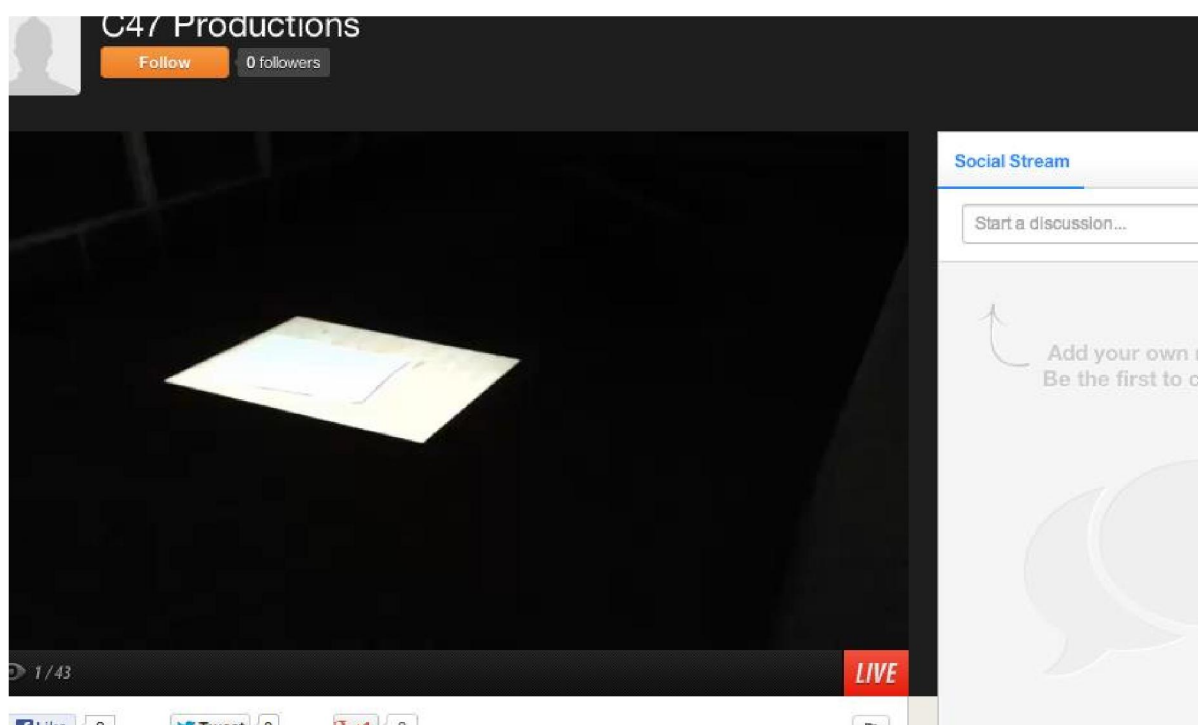


Figure 107 View of space (webcast footage of live night screening)



Figure 108 View of space (table with letters and paper stock)



Figure 109 View of space (self placing the daily letter on table)



Figure 110 View of space (self within space)

Writing the letters

The process of writing the letters each day was intended to be an activity, which would accomplish and address several aspects. Principally it would act as an alternative means of iterating the family stories contained within them – allowing me to assume and draw from having the experience of copying each word and rewriting their actual contents. Also, in addition, in sending the letters each day to arrive in Donegal there was a performed notion of creating a daily entering and presence of self in the space whilst being physically over in Scotland.



Figure 111 Collection of letters accumulating

The archive of letters had belonged to Agnes, representing the contact she kept with her family in Ireland, and in particular collected over the period following Stephen's death. The letters had an added significance in that they represented an important point in my own research journey when they were initially brought down from my parent's attic. Their discovery had underlined the importance of Agnes' voice within my creative research practice. Through engaging in this, the letters themselves would perform yet another echo of journey, initiated through the process of copying out and sending of the correspondence between my grandmother in Scotland and her family in Ireland. Echoing the unfixed authorship within in the video work, where the viewpoint and voice blurs between my grandmother's eyes and my own –

representing both her granddaughter, and someone locating themselves within a place of origin, these letters would develop into a work assimilating the original archive of Agnes' letters, with a narrative containing my own process of becoming embedded in the experience of her journey. The writing contained in the letters was intended to become a work assimilating the original archive of Agnes' letters, with a text formed through my own process of becoming part of the narrative of her journey. Forming my own routine of sitting down to write one of these letters each morning, I would post these daily over to gallery space in Donegal, having the gallery staff go into the closed off space and leave each unopened letter on the wooden table centred behind the divide. Throughout the duration of the exhibition the letters would be left unopened, stacking up on the table, and opened at the end of the exhibition, in a private reading with my father and I.

This notion of how I would open the letters brought up a concern, which had been building since I had started to reflect upon the making of the dream sequence video work. I still felt that there needed to be more attention paid to the notion of presence and display within the gallery, of how these visually concealed internal conversations between myself and my grandmother – which explored these suspended states, evoking absence and loss – would be accessed by the viewer. My sketchbook revealed reflections which seemed to echo this want to create a work which would form spaces for the viewer to experience a departure of sorts and a feeling of something having passed, despite only gaining a distanced view of such. As response to this I included a written contextualisation of the work available for the viewer to be aware of this aspect.

As with the process of going across to Donegal to film the dream sequence work, there were two phases which emerged in terms of how engaging in making the work contributed and influenced how the work took form. Described previously, as I was writing these letters each day I was aware that they represented both a performance which was being made, with a live-ness which could only afterwards be remembered and also that they were forming a source from which I would go on to make creative responses from, through the artist's book. I was at both "Post"- and "Pre-" stages concurrently, shifting between being within the act and remembering the act – alongside the parallels between the oldness of the letter and the new form which it was taking. I made the decision to write reflections in my sketchbook at the same time as I was sitting down to write the letters, noting down responses and creating another extension of the work.

Surprisingly, as I sat down to write the first letter, before I even selected the first letter to write, I began to articulate a reflection upon why it had taken me so long to sit back down with the archive of letters. Although they had emerged as a source fairly early into the research, I had kept them in the main untouched. Moreover, as I started to comment on this, a wider narrative took form regarding why I believed I had hesitated from engaging in directly making work about the subjects wrapped up in the letters for so long. Initiating this reflection, I wrote:

“I have been scared to start writing out the letters about Stephen’s death. In a way it is for the same reasons it perhaps took me so long to make this work, and also why practice had to follow on from a long few years of immersing myself into these stories. I wanted to be at a stage where I could lose myself in it all – when I had amassed the energy to take it on...in that sense I am fortunate – Agnes didn’t have anywhere to go to cope with it”.

Excerpt from sketchbook

With those first sentences I had signalled that, overwhelmingly, this work was a process of coming to terms with a collective family memory which I was so suddenly aware involved more than myself, but was a collaborative work involving all of the family discussions which had happened within the research process and indeed the ever cyclical history of these family histories being shared.

Collected as an accumulative archive at the end of the exhibition I opened each in turn and read them back to my mother and father⁶⁸.

Artists Book

With the artist’s book I was hoping to again create a space or means through which to experience and have the themes of the work resonate. Unfolding through the pages, the fragments of text, image and biographical information would build to express the journeys, which had unfolded within this family history. I also wanted to include within the book text from the letters, which I had written during the exhibition, along with imagery from the video projection.

As mentioned earlier, the stack of blank white paper, which had been the surface upon which the nightly projections had played was also to be incorporated within the artist’s book. At one stage I had intended for this paper to actually be that which I used to make the book, making a

⁶⁸ A recording of this can be found on appendix CD 3.

set of handmade books from the material. As the book development continued however I started to visualize a different aesthetic to its construction. In keeping with the very clean and structured feel of the gallery space – and indeed the back catalogue of work within my practice – I decided that, whilst there being reasons in terms of a sense of handling, a handmade book would have a certain informal tactility, less likely to foster a sense of being a sort of untouched and distanced tome. I wanted for the book's structure, as formal or official agent, to contrast with the intimacy of the story within it, and moreover I wanted the contents of the book to be that which took hold of the reader – again a reason for creating this uniformed and clean binding. With a handmade book I believed there was potential for the craft-like nature of it to detract from it being read as described above.

I spent much time testing various paper supplies and samples until I managed to find a paper supplier who understood the aesthetic I was trying to develop. Speaking with them I expressed that I wanted a particular finish to the paper I would use – wanting to have the print on the page rest with a certain powdered matt finish. I also wanted the paper itself to have a certain sheen to it, with both the feel of a soft finish and the way in which the light would interact with the page – albeit subtly – would engage the reader and influence the experience felt when reading the book.

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As mentioned earlier, the stack of blank white paper, which had been the surface upon which the nightly projections had played was also to be incorporated within the artist's book. At one stage I had intended for this paper to actually be that which I used to make the book, making a set of handmade books from the material. As the book development continued however I started to visualize a different aesthetic to its construction. In keeping with the very clean and structured feel of the gallery space – and indeed the back catalogue of work within my practice – I decided that, whilst there being reasons in terms of a sense of handling, a handmade book would have a certain informal tactility, less likely to foster a sense of being a sort of untouched and distanced tome. I wanted for the book's structure, as formal or official agent, to contrast with the intimacy of the story within it, and moreover I wanted the contents of the book to be

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Framing the artist's book, for the purpose of this review of practice, I have framed it as being part of a sculptural extension, as opposed to locating it within the theorisation and literature discussing Artists Books as medium. As part of my body of work the form of the artist's book was means to absorb this performance of myself as artist, channelling an experience through surface and in turn creating a space for the viewer to take on such transfer. The writing within it was an example of one of the ways in which writing had a performed and sculptural role within my practice, as framed earlier.

The book was another way in which I could present a sense of self, and further situate self as part of this dialogue between creative act and a recognition of the narratives involved in both a family and wider collective history.

Zadar 2014

In early 2014 I was approached to be part of a group show in Zadar, Croatia. Coincidentally, it was around the same time the year before which I had been asked to be involved in the group exhibition in Donegal. The curators, Katarzyna Kosmala and Josip Zanki were planning the project, titled “Back to Heritage: Follies and ruins: between incompleteness and the imagination”, for early September, taking place within the 8th century building of St. Donatus Church. The preserved structure, long since disused for religious service, now functions as an arts venue within the old town area of Zadar, within ancient walled surrounds. Kosmala and Zanki described the premise of the show as addressing “processes of representing and reinterpreting cultural heritage, reflect upon contemporary uses of archaeological remains and probe into follies of human memory in the context of Scotland and Croatia, drawing on the legacy of different influences” (Kosmala, 2014).