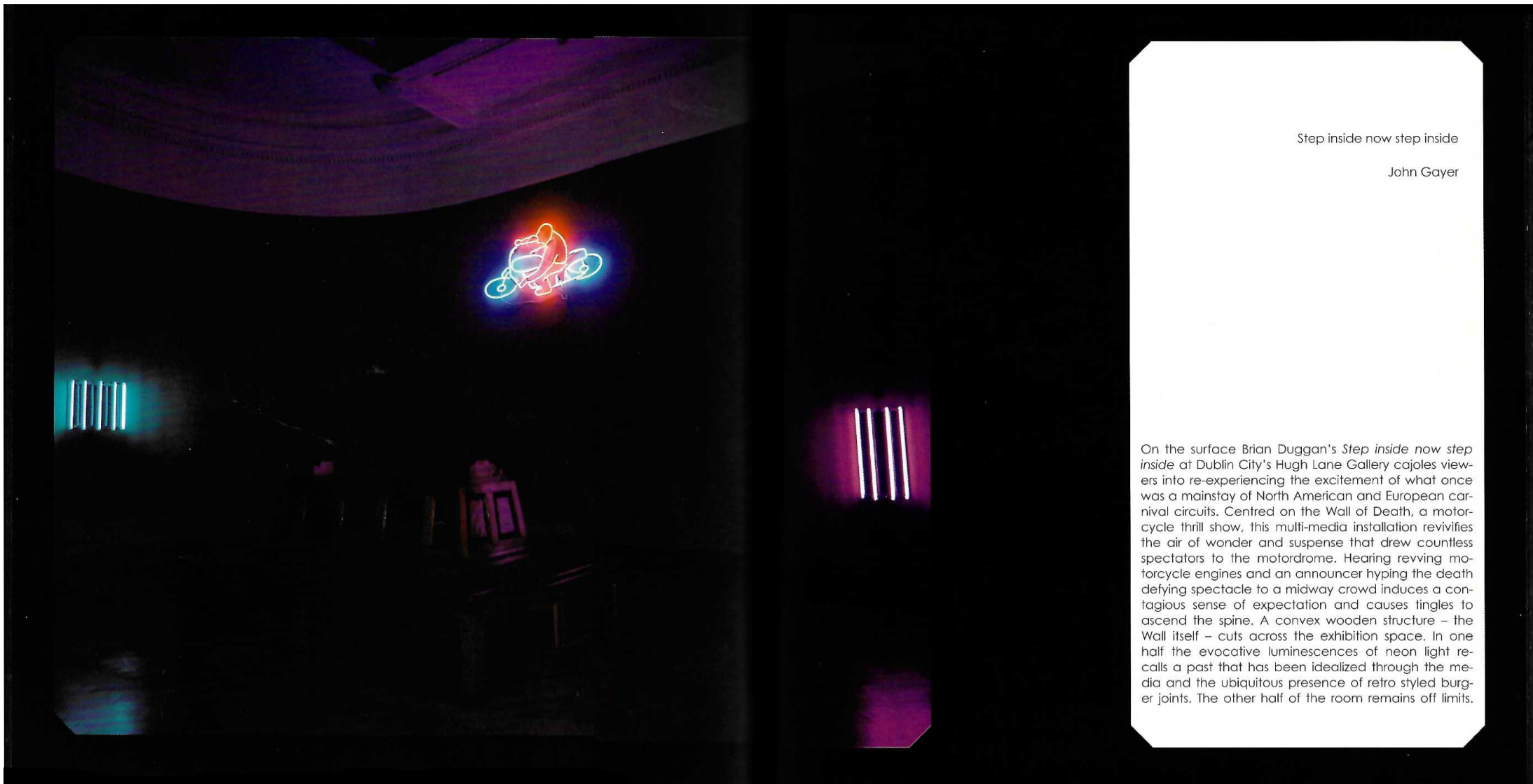




**STEP  
INSIDE  
NOW  
STEP  
INSIDE**

**BRIAN  
DUGGAN**



Step inside now step inside

John Gayer

On the surface Brian Duggan's *Step inside now step inside* at Dublin City's Hugh Lane Gallery cajoles viewers into re-experiencing the excitement of what once was a mainstay of North American and European carnival circuits. Centred on the Wall of Death, a motorcycle thrill show, this multi-media installation revivifies the air of wonder and suspense that drew countless spectators to the motordrome. Hearing revving motorcycle engines and an announcer hyping the death defying spectacle to a midway crowd induces a contagious sense of expectation and causes tingles to ascend the spine. A convex wooden structure – the Wall itself – cuts across the exhibition space. In one half the evocative luminescences of neon light recalls a past that has been idealized through the media and the ubiquitous presence of retro styled burger joints. The other half of the room remains off limits.



As the wooden structure not only arcs from wall to wall, but also nearly touches the ceiling skylight, viewers confront an insurmountable barrier that catches them off guard. Assuming that they can enter the space behind it, they explore the circumference. Upon discovering the impossibility of this prospect, their expectations have been dashed, which either encourages them to reorient their attention or brings their interest in the work to a close.

A 20th century phenomenon, the Wall of Death typically appeals to motorcycle enthusiasts, daredevil aficionados and fun fair devotees. Skirting popular culture, it has appeared in Elvis Presley's 1964 film *Roustabout* and been the subject of a song released by Richard and Linda Thompson in 1982. The photographer Jonnek Jonnekson recently documented Wall of Death showmen in Greece and purports that they may be the last of their kind.<sup>[1]</sup> Personal experience originates with 1986's *Eat the Peach*, an Irish comedy viewed during a visit to New York City a year after its production date. In the film two men scrounge materials to build their own motordrome, the image of which still resonates in the memory. Perched in the bleakest of landscapes, this lonely ramshackle cylinder contrasted sharply with the summer crowds, intransigent surfaces and stifling humidity in the streets outside the cinema. This enduring impression cursorily parallels Duggan's installation. Not only do notions of spectacle underscore both instances, but the atypical contexts in which the structures are encountered also give rise to dramatic juxtapositions.

*Step inside now step inside* accomplishes this through an elegantly straightforward strategy. An untitled sound work located in a hallway connecting the new and old wings of the building introduces the installation. The sporadic burst of revving from a 1930s Indian Scout motorbike functions as an enticement that induces surprise and a feeling of dislocation in viewers, but fails to offer directions to the body of work to which it refers. This situation resolves itself within the classically appointed galleries of Charlemont House, the original

gallery building. A neon glow and the sounds of motorcycles subtly emanate from one of the galleries. Here, in an oval shaped space, Duggan presents what, in essence, amounts to an act of dissection. Comprised of a series of discrete, but interrelated, elements employing sound, light and material, the artist enables viewers to experience the work from multiple perspectives.

Making effective use of the space's symmetrical proportions, Duggan intimates two versions of the Wall of Death that leave viewers simultaneously positioned outside and inside the structure. The massive and impenetrable half a half size wall of death, made of vertically oriented beams of knotty wood, forms a curtain clearly at odds with the room's refined surfaces. This convex curtain completes the concave recess to create a fully cylindrical enclosure. Three wall mounted light sculptures, structures which literally and figuratively mirror the wooden form, articulate the surface of the opposing concavity. When facing this recess magenta wall of death floats just above the floor to the right, blue wall of death rests close to eye level in the centre and green wall of death marks the highest point on the left. These works form a trajectory that the eyes follow – the path of an imagined motorcycle across the wall – a vision that also conveys the vehicle's perpendicular orientation. The inclusion of a foreshortened neon representation of a motorcyclist lends credence to this visual suggestion. Situated near the top of the wall, the bike's descending course proposes to swoop across the ascending line. It conveys the necessity for speed and the inherent precariousness of this circuit.

An audio loop bridging the binary representation also brings it to life. Recalling show times and the gaps between them, the intermittent transmissions offer an array of aural viewpoints. The sudden sputter of an engine, audience banter and an announcer's cascade of superlatives take turns alternating with stark periods of silence. As the feet tap to the beat of the Jam's *A Town Called Malice*, carnival ambience fills



the space. When it suddenly evaporates, the ears at-tune themselves to the hum of lights or the echoes of distant footsteps trailing in from an unseen location.

The presence and absence of the soundtrack, in effect, yanks viewers from one reality to another and attenuates the potential range of experience by changing the viewer's relationship to the, largely abstract, material components of the installation. As it plays, attentive listening puts the viewer in a social and cultural context far removed from either the ordinariness of daily routine or the sanctuary of the art institution. It conveys a sense of immediacy, of a milieu occupied by daredevils and thrill seekers, dramatic posters and contentious proclamations that pump people full of expectations creating an air of hand wringing excitement, all of which shatters when the speakers suddenly fall silent. At this point the objects' presence assumes primary status. This causes viewers to experience the installation visually and physically as a series of interrelated surfaces, spaces and forms set forth in a range of scales. Cast as intermediaries, they attempt to rationalize the interplay. In circumnavigating the various convexities and concavities they witness how the space's structuring implies and conditions movement. Though they may be static, cylindrical structures necessarily imply rotation and movement about them parallels the motorcyclist's passage. The general character of the space also confers theatricality to the work. Its inner/outer duality suggests the presence of a collapsible object presented in an expanded state. And its Yin-yang quality frustrates and illuminates. While the wooden curtain denies access to actual space, the mirrored back panels of the semi-cylindrical light sculptures exist as a kind of stand-in, in that they create the impression of volume.

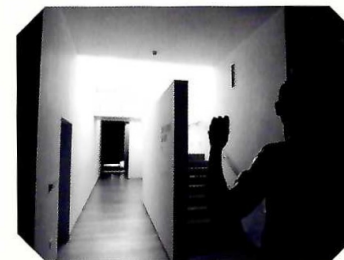
The contradictory nature of the installation and the way it toys with certain precepts makes it a fascinating work. The proposition, for example, that a gallery in a classically styled building could, in a sense, double as the setting of a motorcycle stunt show calls up a host of issues. It directs attention to the structure,

use and inherent rhythms of architecture, the fringe elements of society, the intersection of high and low culture, scientific demonstrations and the packaging of spectacular events. The consistencies and inconsistencies of the representation also confront viewers. Normally, the audience for such a show stands on a platform that runs around the upper periphery of the structure. Duggan's installation, in contrast, puts viewers onto the floor of the motordrome. In skirting the surfaces of the walls, their bodies experience the repetitiveness of the course. It makes them aware of the rider's position, his perpendicularity, the limitations he faces and the risks associated with breaching the force of gravity.

People come away from the exhibition knowing that, on one level, Step inside now step inside literally goes nowhere. While this aspect of the installation gives it a resounding charm, it is the work's immersive character that forms its most salient feature. Perhaps the installation stands as a metaphor for the challenges facing an artist, a lonely figure doing the circuit, who's bent on trying to beat the odds. Or maybe it alludes to institutional protocols, especially the various ways in which museums promote art work, choose what to show and condition its reception. Duggan himself has noted how this installation has involved thinking about the role and function of the art work, its relation to previous work, the audience's whereabouts, and the position of the artist in relation to all of this. [2] The open ended character and intrinsic complexity of this work invites multiple interpretations. For those completely absorbed by Duggan's reworking of the Wall of Death phenomenon, the adventure goes further. It approaches an alternate state of being.

John Gayer,  
October 2009

[1] Wall of Death by Jonnek Jonneksson accessed 18 September 2009 at <http://www.burmagazine.org/photographs/2009/08/wall-of-death-by-jonnek-jonneksson/>[2] Personal communication, 12 September 2009. Step inside now step inside, The Golden Bough: Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, 13th June - 13th September 2009



Brian Duggan lives and works in Dublin. Solo exhibitions: Step inside now step inside, the Golden Bough, Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, curated by Michael Dempsey 2009. A Long Walk off a Short Pier, G126 Galway, 2008; Atelier Portes Ouvertes, Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, 2007; More Often than Most, Pallas Heights, 2005; During the Meanwhile, The Hugh Lane, off-site, curated by Christina Kennedy Dublin, 2005. He graduated from Crawford College in Cork 1995, and received his Masters in Visual Art Practices IADT, 2005.



Residencies include: Project304 Bangkok/Chiang Mai; Braziers International, Oxfordshire; and Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris. Recent group exhibitions include: Black Church Open & Invited, Dublin, 2010. This must be the place. The Irish Museum of Contemporary Art 2009. Arduous Intent, TULCA 2008, Galway. The Lucifer Effect, Primo Alonso, London, 2007. Fully Loaded, K3, Zürich, 2006. Braziers International, U.K 2006; BEFF 4, (touring from Thailand) REDCAT Gallery, California Institute of Arts, Los Angeles, 2006. EV+A 2004, 2002, Crawford Open 2001.

In 2006 The Irish Museum of Modern Art acquired a work for the permanent collection and it was included in the exhibition (I'm always touched) By Your Presence, Dear, 2007-2008. Curated by Rachael Thomas. In 2009 Dublin City gallery the Hugh Lane acquired a work for their permanent collection. From 1996 to 2009 he was also the co-founder and co-director of Pallas Studios, Heights and Projects. He has received several awards from the Arts Council including Bursary award in 2009, 2007, 2005, 2002 and also from Culture Ireland 2007, 2006. Current projects include a % for Art Commission "O Machine O'Machine" for Fingal County Council. Upcoming: Supernormal Braziers UK 2010. DORM, The MODEL, Sligo, 2010, Crawford Gallery Cork 2011, Artists' Residency Programme (ARP) Irish Museum of Modern Art 2011.