

# ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

MARCH/APRIL 2011 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU €6



ALTER-TOURISM  
UNCERTAIN SITES  
CHRISTY GAST

ESCAPE  
ALEC SOTH + THE  
URGE TO DISAPPEAR

DENSITY  
FLOW + PRESSURE  
DENNIS MCNULTY

STATE  
REPORT FROM BERLIN  
NSK STATE CONGRESS







ten



forty-two



# ART PAPERS

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Christy Gast, still from *Herbert Hoover Dyke*, 2010, single-channel video, 53 minutes (courtesy of the artist and Gallery Diet, Miami, special thanks to the de la Cruz collection, Miami)

ART PAPERS is about contemporary art. That's all we've been about for thirty years—stubbornly, unpredictably, and reliably. We understand contemporary art as a constellation of practices variably wielding ideas, images, space, sound, materials, encounters, discourse, and text. We also define it as a permeable realm subjected to the multiple, changing, and incessant pressures of contemporary life. That explains our fierce and unruly curiosity.

Looking simultaneously at art communities across the USA and around the world, ART PAPERS scans the event horizon to challenge accepted notions, and articulate debates. We engage artists, critics, curators, scholars, collectors, and readers to provoke discussions. Recognized as the independent critical voice that best covers all regions of the USA, we undauntedly assert a unique global perspective on what shapes art now. Blame it on our non-profit status, and our worldly, southern accents. They just afford us a unique perspective, and a great deal of intellectual freedom.

Informed, assertive, authoritative, and accessible, ART PAPERS is the essential, independent guide to contemporary art.



# On Density, Flow, and Destabilizing the Visual:

## Dennis McNulty in conversation with John Gayer

Dennis McNulty's output crosses disciplines and upends conventional procedures. In 2006-2007, for example, apartment dwellers functioned as audience and promoter for his *Anti-tour project*, a series of domestic sound performances in Brazil, Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Colombia. More recently, he produced an installation of large speaker-like sculptures, which intimated a potential for sound. In *The Driver and the Passenger*, his recent solo exhibition in Dublin, McNulty presented sculptures, sound works, photographs, videos and a performance that evinced the fragmented quality of memories, juxtaposed disparate sites, and compressed time [Green on Red Gallery; October 6—November 6, 2010]. It also prompted this interview.

**John Gayer:** Many artists tackle a single idea from multiple viewpoints. By contrast, the work in your recent exhibition put forth many ideas that only became manifest as one delved into the show. Could you address this multiplicity?

**Dennis McNulty:** Yes, it was quite a dense show. When I first started to work in a visual art context, I made what I called "sound performances," which were produced for a specific site and a specific time. I then slowly became interested in making works that were less ephemeral, that didn't require my physical presence. As I began to make "objects," I became aware of the interaction between things that inhabit the same space. This quite naturally led me to realize that I could deal with a certain density of information. My aim is to make work whose effect is cumulative—work that makes sense on an extended timeline. I'm comfortable with the idea that a work made in two years' time will reveal something about experience now. I see ideas as recurring, but in altered forms.

**JG:** When connections start occurring, they seem to ricochet through the space. It recalls the geometrical structure of one of your earlier sculptures, *golden gamble/space frame*, 2009.

**DM:** I create situations where different temporalities and types of spaces exist simultaneously, even overlap. I'm reminded of an interview with Clemens von Wedemeyer in which he talks about "productive perplexity." I also think that situations that initially seem chaotic or inaccessible hold a certain potential to reveal information, however slowly.

**JG:** What struck me in your work is the sporadic release of information, a process that takes us on an intellectual journey. While the idea of journey is central to this exhibition, it is something that also runs through earlier works.

**DM:** For me, that is related to the notion of flow, which embodies motion, trajectories, and transitions in time and space. Much of my work

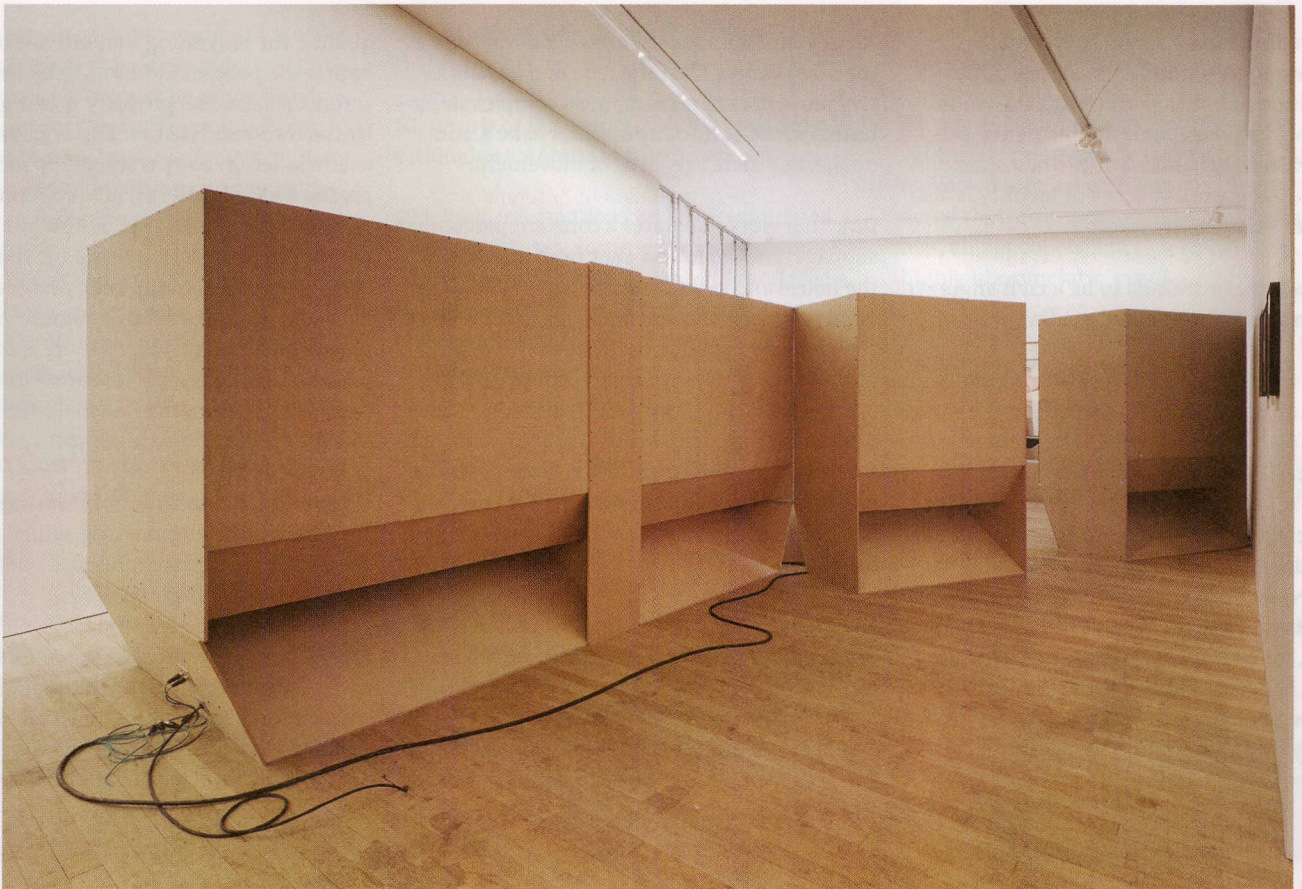
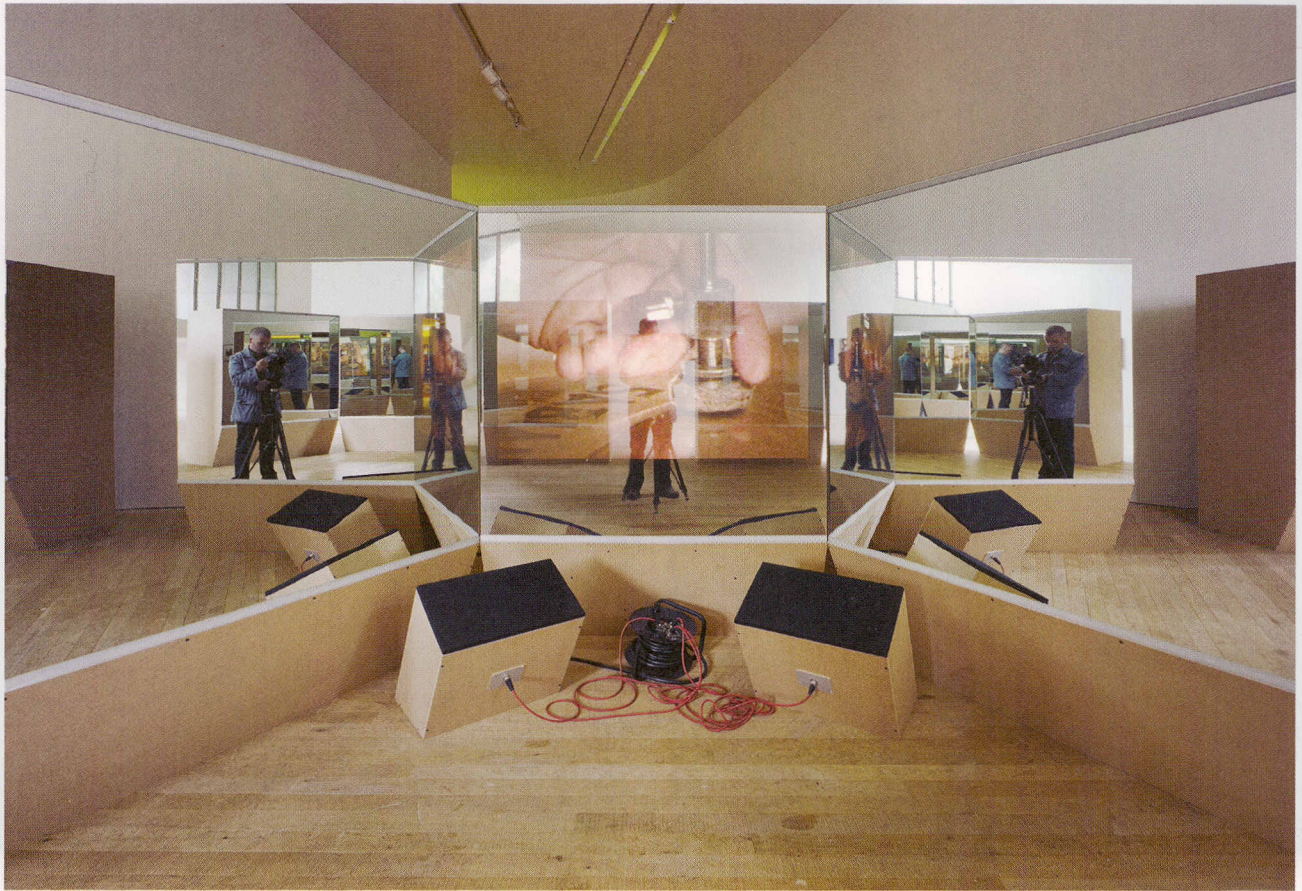
comes out of everyday experiences, that is, things I see when I'm travelling or on the move. It's not about seeing things that are new to me, but seeing the familiar from different vantage points—like the view offered from the top floor of Dublin's double-decker buses. They, for example, allow me to see over hoardings in the city. I think that space is produced by the way we interact with it and the ways we choose to move through it.

**JG:** This heightened awareness of space reminds me of subterranean references evident in *the here and now/crystalline space*, 2008, and *Deepwater Horizon*, 2010, and your frequent use of that amorphous solid more commonly known as glass.

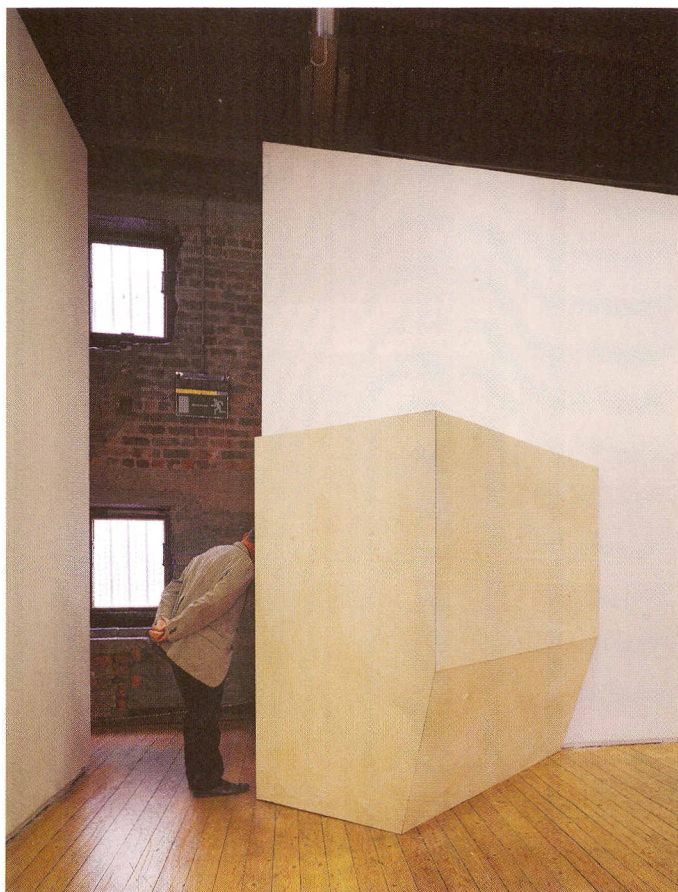
**DM:** I work with materials that are drawn from the constructions we inhabit. Glass is the ultimate boundary material. I like the way it separates the things we see from the sounds they might make. The separation suggests a primi-

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Dennis McNulty, still from *Projected from first principles*, 2010, two HD projections, metal, 3 two-way mirrored glass panels, Mylar and sound (commissioned by the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh) / OPPOSITE: installation views of *We built this city (don't you remember?)*, 2010, at The Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland, mirror, two-way mirror, drafting film, aluminum, video, MDF, ratchet straps, and sound (photo: Ros Kavanagh) [all images courtesy of the artist and Green On Red, Dublin, Ireland]









tive form of editing—a kind of cinema. My experience with sound has made me quite aware of the non-visual aspects of the world. As a result, I'm keen on destabilizing the primacy of the visual and want to draw other senses into the work. A sense of tactility is also implied in many of my projects.

**JG:** You originally trained to be a civil engineer, and then studied music and media?

**DM:** Yes, my latter studies focused on psychoacoustics, which deals with perceiving the world through sound. We tend not to be conscious of it, but hearing informs our understanding of space as much as, if not more than, vision. It's very interesting when the acoustic behavior of a space doesn't conform to the expectations generated by visual cues. When you walk into Philip Johnson's Glass House with all its hard surfaces, for example, you expect a particular acoustic behavior, but the space is unusually calm. The brick floor and stippled plaster ceiling really absorb sound. The house doesn't sound the way it looks.

**JG:** In your video *1949*, 2010, which was shot at the Glass House, the reflective and transmissive properties of glass create a complex depiction of space. It initially appears to be a still image, but there are hints of movement.

**DM:** That work generates a constant perceptual slippage. The video was shot from one side of the house and looks through it. The near pane of glass reflects the sun and trees and the Brick House behind me but, at the same time, you can also see a plant inside the house and the kitchen, as well as the trees on its far side. This presentation of temporal and spatial confusion refers to the freezing of time and the layering of space. The shot is six seconds long and hasn't been processed in any way apart from being looped.

**JG:** I didn't realize it was so short because my eyes became so preoccupied with deciphering all its layers.

**DM:** It's very interesting to look at photographs taken in the building. The house has a timeless

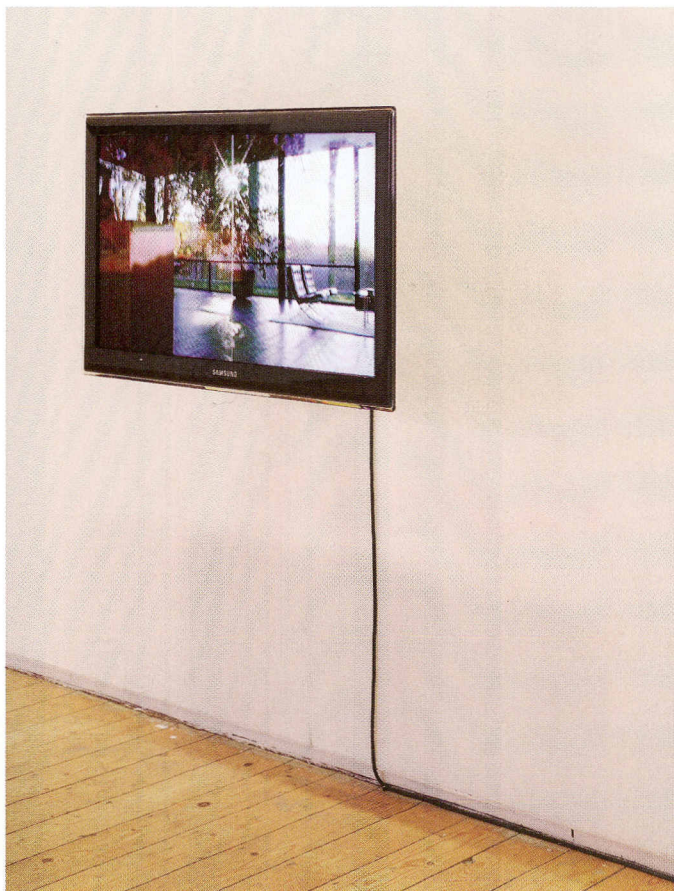
quality: the only thing that offers clues as to a date is the people's clothing. They look like actors on a set. The property is being preserved by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as it was left in 2005 when Philip Johnson passed away. But the archive contains diagrams with measurements that denote the precise placement of objects. It made me realize that everything has actually been preserved as it looked in 1949, just after the house was completed. While on residency there, I also became aware of the incredible resources invested in the site's maintenance—invisible operations engaged in halting natural forces of entropy.

**JG:** In my mind, this idea of invisibility recalls the field of civil engineering, which gives access to hidden structures and networks ordinary people never get to see.

**DM:** Well, engineering is a hidden profession. Civil engineering deals with the invisible forces that compete inside structures; gravity and mass, tension and compression. The process of engineering involves breaking something

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: installation view of *Box with the sound of our unmaking*, 2010, plywood and sound; *Alternative proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #2)*, 2010, concrete, aluminum, mild steel, and glass (photos: Ros Kavanagh)





down to its constituent elements and then reassembling them to produce a desired outcome of some kind. It could be argued that Modernism mirrors this process. It has just been applied to non-engineering disciplines. Engineers also evaluate things numerically—abstractly—in order to achieve certainty in a world full of risk.

And, unlike the history of architecture, engineering's history has not been well documented. This topic came up in discussions leading up to *Ghosts of the Garden City*, 2010, a performance that focuses on Dublin's Modernist heritage, which I made in collaboration with architectural historian Ellen Rowley and musician David Donohoe.

**JG:** *Ghosts of the Garden City*, performed as part of *The Driver and the Passenger*, focuses on buildings seemingly absorbed into the urban backdrop. Only major changes, like demolition, gain them notice.

**DM:** I guess that's just the nature of perception. Moments of transition are key. That's when we

usually notice things. I try to produce works that provoke a re-evaluation of the familiar.

**JG:** *Ghosts of the Garden City* also pushed educational presentations into a new sphere.

**DM:** Well, information can be disseminated through lectures, documentaries, even musical performances, so for this project I produced a hybrid event that was all of those things and none of them at the same time. Though the work assumes some of the clichés of television documentaries, I played with the content and structure typical of such presentations. I emphasized the textural aspects of the voice and some of the images. Rowley's lecture and the featured images don't always mesh. Dates are indistinct and I draw attention to her voice by leaving the screen blank at times. Changing the relationship between what is seen and heard creates friction between the images and verbal content and forces the audience to generate meaning from one or the other on their own. Then it breaks down at the end. The narration stops. An extended musical performance

accompanies a haunting still image that illuminates the screen.

**JG:** Yes, as Donohoe's improvised 1980s style synthesizer soundtrack moved to the forefront it evolved into a dance number that engendered rhythmic swaying and the tapping of feet, an apt conclusion to a fascinating, though highly idiosyncratic, event.

**DM:** I was hoping people would get up and dance. Maybe next time.

John Gayer is a frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. He is currently based in Dublin, Ireland.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: installation view of *1949, 2010*, video loop; installation view of *Deepwater Horizon, 2010*, dual video loops and monitors (photos: Ros Kavanagh)