



NEW ECOLOGIES OF PRACTICE DUBLIN

New Ecologies of Practice: A short season of projects by Catalyst Arts [Belfast] / Occupy Space [Limerick] / The Good Hatchery [Offaly] / Basic Space [Dublin] [February 9–April 13, 2012] consisted of a series of projects produced by artist-led initiatives from across Ireland whose approach offers alternatives to the programming produced by the island's established visual arts institutions. The exhibition also underscored the fact that the artist-led activity—increasingly viewed as a dynamic and critically significant component of the artistic landscape—has not been hindered by the recessive economic climate. In fact, the downturn seems to have induced an increase in alternative ventures. This activity has resulted, for example, in seminars addressing the use of surplus vacant spaces and municipal projects such as Creative Limerick that enable artists to gain greater exposure through the use of vacant City Centre properties. To take stock of and document aspects of this phenomenon, the National College of Art and Design/Gallery (NCAD) presented *New Ecologies of Practice*. Not only did this exhibition highlight the history, location, and approach of these operations, it also set out to reshape the way we might think about the nature and purpose of art and its presentation.

Offering a snapshot of its own history, Belfast's Catalyst Arts presented *Director's Cut*, which in many ways proved to be the series' most unsurprising installation. This overview comprised an assortment of publications and posters, a file cabinet of artists' proposals open to perusal, and a slide presentation, which provided a fragmented visual survey of exhibitions and events from Catalyst's first decade. *Art Rebels*—a group of 79 cardboard boxes anonymously filled by the gallery's members, exhibited in 1996, then kept out of view—formed the central component of the installation. Opened and set on the floor, the boxes are filled with diverse contents. Among the holdings we find old footwear, hair samples, and correspondence. The interior surfaces of some boxes have been lined with velvet

or glitter. There is also one exception: Fitted with a clasp and padlock, one box remains closed. This tongue-in-cheek project alternately induces wonder and disappointment. Promoting parity among Catalyst's members—which at one time included Susan Philipz and Phil Collins—viewers can only respond to the material content of the work. Here, notions of artistic significance, as accorded to many archives, art collections, and retrospectives, are challenged.

In contrast, Limerick's Occupy Space invited the artist's cooperative Art Links Limerick (ALL) to re-present their research project *The Value of Water*, which was launched in Limerick earlier this year. Turning the gallery into an Interactive Public Studio (IPS), this socially engaged project evoked the air of a campaign office. Though it was deserted on my visit, large wall-mounted signs and meeting tables covered with profuse printed matter, writing utensils, and Post-it notes suggested the initiation of an intensive public education project that tackled the subject in the broadest possible context. Questions printed on the signs related to the quality of water, its ownership, and its cultural and historical links. In the current climate where debate is being stirred by the proposed introduction of water metering for private homes, concerns over ever-increasing demand for water, as well as its cost, control, and conservation have become abundant. ALL's IPS struck a chord by revealing the complexity of an extremely important subject.

The Good Hatchery's minimalist and self-titled installation stands as proof that artist-led initiatives need not set up in urban centers. Rural bog lands, for example, also can harbor convertible vacant structures that can be used for residencies, on-site projects, and exhibitions. Espousing a DIY aesthetic blended with a subtle sense of humor, Good Hatchery chose to represent itself through a set of monogrammed bathrobes and a barrel-shaped sauna assembled from a kit. The act of taking a sauna typically promotes a sense of well-being, the potential of which was promoted by the enticing scent of

cedar, the heat radiating from hot stones, and the undeniable coziness of the structure. In this light the sauna came across as an incubation chamber, perfect for the production of ideas. At the same time it challenged visitors to bare all before the wall-size window separating the gallery space from the busy street outside.

Basic Space, the newest of the four collectives participating in this project series, was recently set up by NCAD students. With a modicum of assistance from the parent institution, it operates in a hangar-like warehouse near the school. In the NCAD Gallery they presented *BASIC SPACE Shop*, which provided a conflicting view of their operation. Here one could find Basic Space T-shirts, pencils, erasers, and postcards alongside mementos from exhibitions and performances. In fact, rubble, deriving from the excavations made for their exhibition *Underground*, constituted much of the merchandise. The intention of this retail outlet was to create a false mythology that still embodied truths about the group's short history and purpose.

New Ecologies of Practice emphasized the vibrancy and evolving nature of artist-led initiatives and showed how these groups are interested in undermining the neutrality of the white cube. They approached it as a multi-purpose space. The Gallery's willingness to explore emerging shifts in artistic activity also formed a most welcome development.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Catalyst Arts, installation view of *Director's Cut* from *New Ecologies of Practice* at NCAD Gallery, 2012 (courtesy of Catalyst Arts); The Good Hatchery, installation view of *Good Hatchery*, 2012 (courtesy of The Good Hatchery)