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BELFAST**

Coast to coast

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COAST

TO

COAST

COAST TO COAST 2023

Creative Informatics

Future Screens NI

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Coast to Coast
2023

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Creative Informatics

The Creative Informatics Partnership [AH/S002782/1] is a collaboration between Edinburgh Napier University, University of Edinburgh, Codebase and Creative Edinburgh, funded under the UKRI Creative Industries Clusters Programme [CICP] and managed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC]. The five year project continues to investigate how data and data driven innovation can be used to grow the creative industries: from creative products and services to new modalities of experience. Creative Informatics is an ambitious research and development programme based in Edinburgh, which aims to bring the city’s world class creative industries and technology sector together, providing funding and development opportunities that enable creative individuals and organisations to explore how data can be used to drive ground-breaking new products, businesses and experiences. Creative Informatics is nurturing local talent through five key funding programmes and regular events that support Edinburgh’s creative industries to do inspiring things with data.

creativeinformatics.org

Future Screens NI

Future Screens is a cross-sector creative industries R&D partnership between Queen’s University Belfast [QUB], Ulster University and local industry partners established to secure the future of the creative industries in Northern Ireland. It was created to accelerate growth through new product development, services and high value skills for jobs in a flourishing sector. With a multi-million pound investment from the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC] and funding from industry, the £13 million Future Screens NI venture is the largest single investment in the creative industries in Northern Ireland. The overarching aim of Future Screens NI is to develop a new understanding of the role the creative industries can play in advancing the NI economy both in terms of financial growth and the creation of new employment opportunities. It supported research in new technologies and opportunities, developing appropriate educational and training models, placing NI creative businesses in front of international markets and working with government and other key agencies to ensure sustained growth.

futurescreens.org

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INTRODUCTION: COAST TO COAST

In the Spring budget of 2023, the UK Chancellor declared that the creative industries were a growth industry. This served as recognition that the sector had generated over £100 billion in revenue, representing over 10% of the UK economy and providing 2.29m creative industry jobs. Furthermore, the sector had recovered well from the pandemic and, critically, was acknowledged as having a vital role in sustaining us throughout this time.

At a wider level, the digital transformation process that has been happening across the creative and cultural employment sectors is changing the way that practitioners are developing and distributing their work. In the UK, the term “CreaTech” [Tech Nation, 2021] describes this intersection where creative skills meet emerging technologies. The upwards trajectory of growth of the creative industries, relative to other sectors, has highlighted the importance of skills, talent and agility to

the economy [Bazalgette, 2021]. It is seen as one of the emerging “sunrise sectors” that will provide some of the clues to what the new jobs and, subsequently, the skills required for 2030 are.

In recognition of the creative industries’ contribution to the UK’s prosperity, wellbeing and resilience, the government has invested over £50 million through the UKRI funded Creative Industries Clusters Programme [CICP], led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC]. Launched in 2018, the programme’s aim was to catalyse R&D led growth and innovation across the UK’s creative industries. The investment supported nine clusters that brought together creatives in fashion, film and television, informatics, design, computer games, performance and immersive technology, alongside the brightest academic minds. It also launched the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre to inform and develop UK wide policy.

This publication represents a collaboration between two of the cluster projects: Creative Informatics, based in Edinburgh, which supports the region’s creative industries by increasing the number of businesses and creative entrepreneurs who can confidently innovate with data and Future Screens [NI], based in Northern Ireland, which delivers expert technical skills, opportunity and growth across film, broadcast and animation.

The motivation for what became known as the Coast to Coast project was the recognition that behind the rhetoric and statistics associated with the creative industries lie real people, producing creative output in times of undoubted challenge. These individuals and groups are attempting to wrangle the disruption of digital shift, with its increased pressure to continuously acquire new technical skills, and to build upon existing proficiencies for creative production, collaboration, innovation and dissemination. All the while, working against the backdrop of the seemingly continuous shifting sands of economic and social change.

In some small way, the Coast to Coast project seeks to redress that balance by talking with creative practitioners, and undertaking a visual and textual study of creative practice, focusing on individual practitioners in Scotland and Northern Ireland across a range of disciplines. Using photography and interviews, the work

presents a qualitative picture of the lived experiences and concerns of these creative communities and networks, centred around the two coastal areas in the East and West of the UK respectively: the Edinburgh region in Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Coast to Coast takes a “human-centred” approach to data gathering and strives to reveal and articulate the similarities and differences between these two technology-driven, creative industries regional hubs. One motivation for doing so is to inform future policy and strategy by gaining a deeper understanding of the longer-term needs of the people that make up the creative industries – specifically by focusing on the distributed workforce that includes freelancers, the self-employed and practitioners based in small and micro businesses. These interviews are interwoven by essays that respond to the themes that have emerged over the course of the study. The project is also intended to complement quantitative studies undertaken across the wider Creative Industries Cluster Programme.

An overarching theme that has emerged from the work reported in this book is the wider role of art and creative practice and how it engages with communities at both the micro and macro levels. Art and creative practice have the potential to sow seeds; to lay beginning traces and help us imagine possible futures. They point us to corners of our society we may not be looking at, direct our gaze to issues we need to consider, signal to us what may be coming down the line, or help us imagine worlds we may be stepping into. Not only do art and creative practice have the potential to prepare us for such changes, they also help us to critically reflect on the desirability of these futures. But art can also consider the past and, in so doing, it acknowledges that the past is also a contested space, open to multiple interpretations. The past can offer nostalgia, and it is only when we accept the past that we can properly move forward. Speculation about possible futures, in many ways, is as much about understanding the past as it is about imagining futures. As well as asking the question “what if?,” creative practice can also reframe the question to ask “why are things the way they are?”

Art and creative practice may be our canary in the coal mine, artists have played a major role in alerting the world to the climate crisis, local artists draw attention to

local issues, filmmakers and novelists help us imagine the world in 20, 30, 100 years from now. The power of art is that it has the capacity to immerse an audience in worlds that do not yet, or may never, exist. Film, in particular, can act as a provocation by projecting us into different possible futures – causing us to focus, and reflect upon, current concerns and their potential trajectories. These concerns can be personal, societal or cultural, causing us to question how our lives will unfold in years to come. Cinema has the capacity to compel an audience, to show worlds that are both exciting and unfamiliar. It can also reflect new aspects of the places that we think we know or, in extreme cases, take the familiar world and turn it upside down. It is through such techniques that cinema allows us to better understand our world and our place within it. Whether it is the nightmare of the film noir cityscape or the distorted but prescient futurescapes of science fiction, cinema can create entire worlds in front of our eyes. Satirists help us see political issues in a new way by showing us the absurd. Remove all of this and our artless world could very easily deem us a blind society, stumbling around with no signposting or provocation. Art is universal in this sense, and then it is also local. Universally, art serves this function for nearly all societies and cultures globally; locally, the artist does this for their own local area, highlighting local issues, commenting on the nearby culture and society, and drawing our attention to what’s around us.

Each of the creatives interviewed in this book are addressing these issues in various forms. Whether through the creation of artefacts that derive an intimacy for geographic location, or by addressing wider issues of identity that impact on both local community and wider society. These creatives speak to their regions about lived experience but, critically, both regions also speak to wider society. There is an intimacy to their work that is grounded in location but that speaks of bigger issues – the values shared transcend borders; they are not divided by a sea but are, in fact, connected.

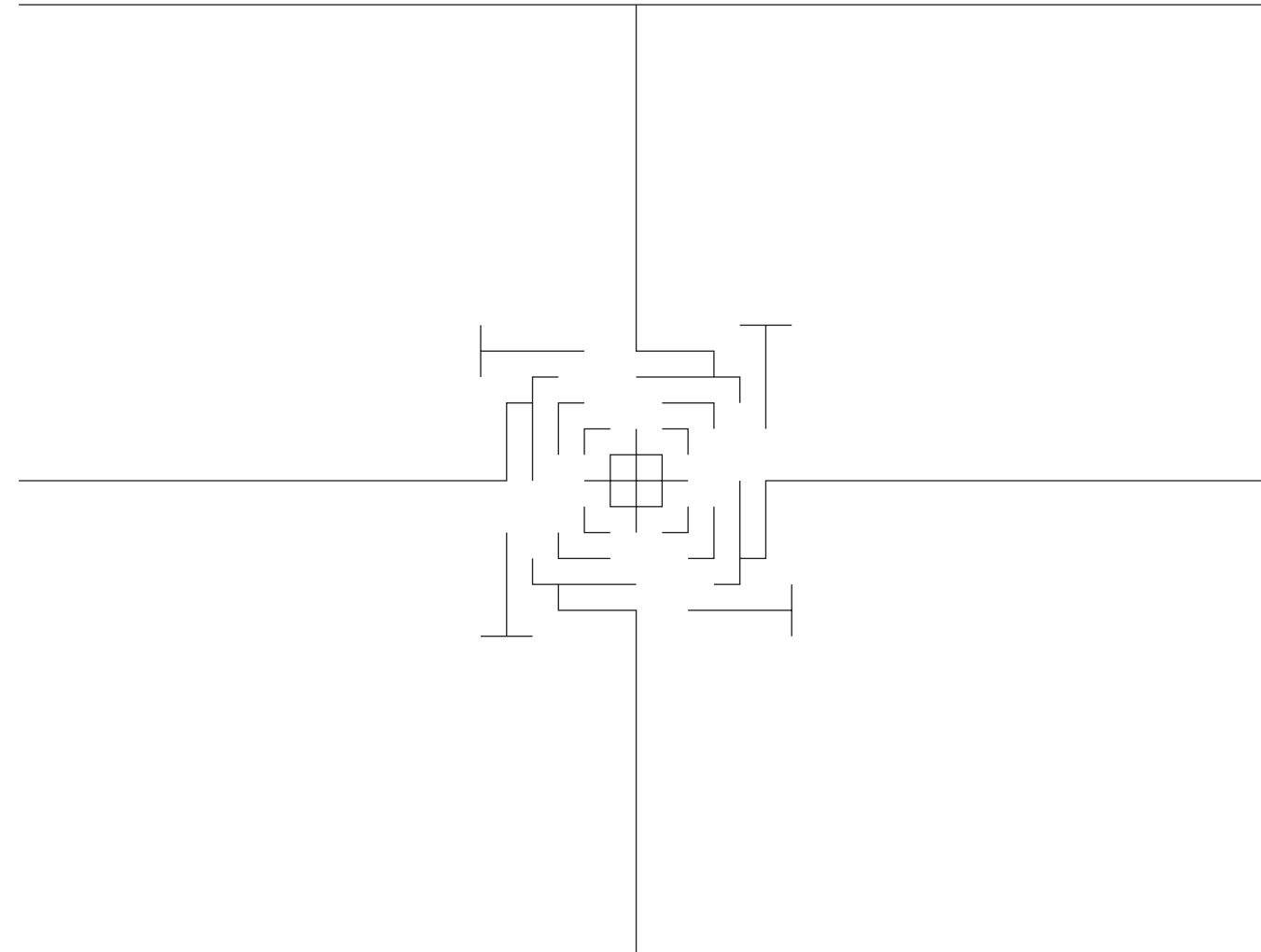
We would like to thank all of the practitioners, interviewers and photographers across both regions who participated in this study, and our colleagues at boom saloon, who designed the final publication. The work reported was funded by two AHRC Creative Industries Clusters Programme Awards, Creative Informatics and Future Screens [NI].

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TEXTURES OF LIFE



For Artist and Arts Facilitator Anushiya Sundaralingam, notions of self, belonging, identity and culture are omnipresent influences – as Frank Delaney discovers; photography by Elaine Hill

Originally from Sri Lanka, Anushiya Sundaralingam now lives and works in Belfast. Since graduating from the University of Ulster in 1998 with her BA Hons in Fine and Applied Arts, Anushiya has been a full-time Artist and Arts Facilitator. She has established a strong reputation for her work, which includes exhibitions, commissions and community work. Anushiya's output is broad and includes printmaking, sculpture, mixed media, installation, textiles, drawings and paintings which are represented in many private and public collections.

The artist notes: "my work is influenced by the notion of 'self,' the challenges of identity and the nature of belonging. When my surroundings change, through displacement – whether by choice or not – I respond and adapt. I work with a range of subject matter, themes and media to convey my sense of the complexities of people, place and conflict. My work continues to be influenced by my past and my present."

Anushiya moved to Belfast in 1989. Originally from Jaffna in Sri Lanka, she emigrated from one country in conflict to another. During the 1980s, Sri Lanka was not dissimilar to Northern Ireland in that it was no stranger to internal conflict; something which, ultimately, fed into Anushiya's practice.

"I came to Northern Ireland from Sri Lanka during the civil war. I didn't come as a refugee, as I was married when I came here. I went to London first, and then came to Northern Ireland. Belfast was good for me. I think, looking back, I would have gotten lost in London. Belfast was small; similar to where I came from. I felt at home here. I cycled everywhere, as I did back in Sri Lanka, met so many nice people and made friends. It has definitely worked out for me here! I have given a lot to Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland has given a lot to me; I have taught Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland taught me as well, so it's kind of a reciprocal connection. As well as being an artist, I have taught art and have been involved with various communities and participatory arts. I have practised as an artist consistently since I've been here. I like working in different places. Environment is important to me. I have a studio in Belfast but I also have a studio in my back garden."

Anushiya's work is tightly related to place. It is multi-layered, colourful, atmospheric and concerned with texture. She consistently links Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland in the pieces she makes, referencing identity, culture, nature, belongings and the human body.

"My work is always about life, about humans and nature, so everything connects... yes, the human body and conflicts. And it all comes back to the fact that I'm influenced by those things and my work connects where I come from in Sri Lanka, and my culture, with where I live here in Northern Ireland. I am also interested in world events and what is happening around the world that relates to my own experience. For example, recently I have been working on the theme of migration, construct-

ing small sculptures of boats using various techniques such as drawing, printmaking, painting and 3D modelling. As a multidisciplinary artist, my technique changes often.

"Sometimes, a piece starts as 3D work, and I then go into drawings, print-making or vice versa. The concept is important, and it influences the techniques. In this case, I have made 3D structures in the form of boats and transferred them to drawings and paintings. The boats are a symbol for refugee migration; it's a worldwide issue and people are leaving their countries all over the world and having to travel in small, often unsafe, boats. The idea is to create an installation and then, from this, I can communicate an idea. This work came about slowly from personal experience and through looking at the real world. I wanted to do this project for years. This work was initially inspired by an experience I had nearly thirty years ago: I came from Sri Lanka in 1989 and went back in 1995. The civil war was bad at the time, so the roads were closed; all bombed. When I went back, we couldn't go straight to my home. It took me three days to go from Colombo to Jaffna. I come from Jaffna, which is in the north of Sri Lanka – it was a long journey both on foot and using every kind of transport available from tractors, to bikes, to lorries and, of course, sections by boat. It was a traumatic time and a traumatic journey. Our boat was small and we travelled by night. Years later, when I read about refugees fleeing their country in small boats, it brought the memory back. Now I want to make work about this. I want to communicate this, to highlight it."

Anushiya's work takes on a multitude of forms, shapes and textures. She works with a wide variety of materials from bamboo, to fabric, metal, paper, textile, wood and wax. In addition, she uses raw materials such as clay, burnt wood, spices and various other elements to form pigments and colours. The result is work that is highly textural, colourful and unusual in its presentation, yet full of layers of consideration and thought.

"I have always liked to work with my hands, creating something new – I challenge myself to develop new ideas. When I was young I was always making things, working with my hands. When I went to college I did print-making at first. Initially, I did traditional printmaking but soon discarded that for more experimental printmaking. Today, my printmaking is always experimental, always changing; I print on different materials and at different scales. And then, sometimes, I become more interested in the piece being an installation and it being more site specific. I'm always experimenting, exploring new ways of working motivated by space, objects and surfaces. I take risks and challenges with my work. Take the boat, for example; it's represented in various ways – first the body, the blood, the veins and the skeleton... and it's connected to Sri Lanka, and home, and also world events and personal experience, all working together in the idea. I'm just playing with different ideas and seeing where it takes me."

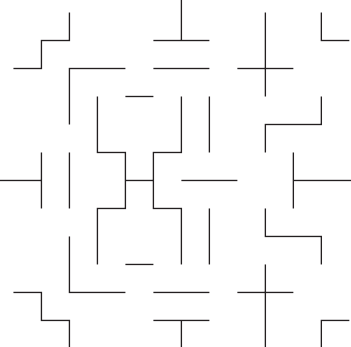
Anushiya's interest in nature is also evident across her work, often represented in the pigments and the colours she chooses to work with. At other times, it's represented in the materials, or sometimes in both – again, adding further layers of ideas to her work.

“The powders and colours are often earth. I also use Kumkum powder, turmeric powder, vibuthi and burnt rice to make pottu; with that I created a large-scale print installation for an exhibition. I love working with colour and texture. Colour is very important to me as it represents different ideas, different aspects and different strengths. I also like to use natural materials – for example, I have been working with linen, linen yarn and flax. Last summer I started to grow flax in my garden. I have enjoyed planting the flax seed and watching it grow to becoming a fully grown plant, and I'm really enjoying the experience of using it in my work. And, of course, flax connects to Belfast and Northern Ireland. I'm interested in change, and the growth cycles of past and present. The flax stems remind me of flowers and fields in Sri Lanka, thus linking the two places, and also represent the body – the head. The flax fibres themselves also look like hair. Materials speak a language of their own. Metals, for example, give me different ideas to wax or to flax or to paper or fabrics; they all give me ideas and the process of working with each takes me somewhere different. I collect everything. So my work is never just one thing: I'm always connecting with different mediums. Mediums are the tools to express my idea, and every idea demands its own flow and its own materials.

“The ideas just come with subjects, materials and techniques. Concept is important – that comes from nature, life, culture and identity, both from here and from Sri Lanka. I work with ideas which come from images, and I visualise these images. Visuals are my language. They can be anything: a place, nature, life. I can see something, and it will give me an idea; I feel something, and then I question: how can I use that or work with it? And I follow that and see where it takes me. It's my work, it's my life.”



WORKING AT THE NEXUS POINT



From viral internet videos to immersive genealogy, the work of Ray Interactive spans an enticingly broad spectrum, as Malcolm Jack uncovers; photography by Wojtek Kutyla



**IT ALL BEGAN
WITH A
GIANT DRUM
MACHINE.**

In 2014, Edinburgh based Irish digital designers, artists and music aficionados Brendan McCarthy and Sam Healy, AKA Ray Interactive, had the inspired idea to take Roland's classic TR-909 – an iconic piece of equipment integral to the house and techno explosion of the 1980s – and build a fully playable model of it. At a whopping 216 times scale.

A video of the 9-foot-909 in construction went viral on the internet, just as they began transporting their beat-making immersive DIY mega sculpture to music festivals across the UK. Curious crowds would gather round to bang its chunky buttons two-fisted, twist its enormous dials and create wild collaborative cacophonies of sound, inspiring impromptu dance parties in the machine's monolithic shadow.

A few years after first meeting online as a pair of bored web designers "stuck in the corporate world," as Healy puts it, Ray Interactive's joint mission to create fun, thought provoking and accessible work at the nexus point of art and tech and digital and IRL experience had its first big breakout moment.

Nearly a decade on, Ray Interactive is now McCarthy and Healy's full-time concern. It has grown into a passionate studio based at Lava Town in Leith, partnering with artists, companies and cultural organisations to help craft ambitious, weird and wonderful ideas, and bring them to life using a dynamic blend of design and technical ability. They've gone on to build everything from an interactive light installation for the Enchanted Forest in Pitlochry to an algorithmic digital artwork installed at Aberdeen Music Hall, and an interactive game for Edinburgh Film Festival.

"I always liked Claes Oldenburg's work," says McCarthy, taking us back to the initial eureka moment of inspiration behind the 9-foot-909. "He created these giant pop art sculptures of ordinary objects, like a shuttlecock, or a book of matches, or a bike half-buried in a park in

Paris. That's what sparked it. People always enjoy it when you play with scale."

The duo speculatively approached Roland with their idea, and to their surprise not only received the Japanese corporation's blessing, but a couple of thousand pounds of funding to get the project off the ground. "It's laughable now when we think about what we achieved with such a tiny budget," reflects McCarthy.

While Healy worked on the interactive digital tech that would power the device's internal workings, McCarthy went back to his native Ireland to pull in a few favours and do a bit of "wheeling and dealing" to get the frame and moving parts constructed. "I somehow convinced my uncle Morty, who is a great carpenter, to help me do it," says McCarthy. "He's the reason the 909 is built so well. I also traded a website and logo redesign with my brother's friend, a local welder, to help make the metal components."

The 9-foot-909 made its debut at the Green Man festival in Wales. "While we were there, people were coming up going 'oh my god, I just saw this on the internet, I can't believe it's here!'"

Another festival, Bang Face, was so impressed that a few years later they commissioned McCarthy and Healy to build a playable scale model of another legendary Roland – the TB-303 bass line synth [synonymous with acid house music]. More robust and refined than its predecessor, to this day it continues to tour festivals every summer. It's Ray Interactive's evergreen and instantly identifiable calling card, and a perfect encapsulation of their purpose to create work that's playful, tactile, immersive and inclusive. They want to challenge the notion that tech is some malignant force, desensitising and dividing us and driving us all indoors.

"We want to cure people's addiction to the unhealthy aspects of tech, like social media

doom scrolling and so on," says Healy. "We don't believe that tech itself is fundamentally evil. It's got as much potential for good as it has for bad, it's just that often it's the bad guys that are in charge at the moment. We're very keen to rehabilitate tech's reputation in that sense.

"We also want to fight against the myth," Healy continues, "of there being a very sharply defined line between art and tech, or science and art. We believe that the sciences are a form of creativity, and that the arts are a form of inquiry, like the sciences."

Ray Interactive draw inspiration from the likes of Turkish-American artist and designer Refik Anadol, London trailblazers Marshmallow Laser Feast and the digital design studio ISO in Glasgow. Around half of their work finds them as commissions, often through word-of-mouth connections, while the other half comes from ideas which they develop themselves and seek funding for. Clients and partners to date have ranged from Edinburgh University and The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh to Glasgow Film Festival and tech brands such as Epson.

Alongside the giant Roland sculptures, the other big game-changer in Ray Interactive's story was connecting with Creative Informatics, after attending one of their events in Edinburgh in 2019. "We weren't commercially viable at first, nor were we artistic enough to get any Creative Scotland funding," says McCarthy. "So, we were kind of falling between the gaps. But when Creative Informatics came on board, it felt specifically put together to help people like us, with the kind of left of centre ideas that we were trying to develop."

One recent example of the kind of work they've been able to undertake with backing from Creative Informatics was a collaboration with artist Victoria Evans, to create a mobile web app which "sonifies" the rise and fall of tides across the UK. "You're supposed to use the

app when you're on a beach facing out to sea," Healy explains, "and you put on headphones, and it locates the nearest tidal station that it has data for. It then generates a piece of sound based on high and low tides for the next three months from the point that you use it. All compressed into three minutes."

Evans is a traditional conceptual artist, but with a strong interest in realising ideas through technology. Tidesong was her brainchild – Ray Interactive helped her put it into practice. "That was a particularly satisfying one," says Healy, "because we were very much on the same page as the artist aesthetically, about how it should look and what it should do, the cleanliness of the interface and so on.

"We got some really good feedback on the usability of it," Healy continues, "and about using technology not as a distraction, but as an aid to focus. Instead of making your mind completely diffuse, like scrolling through social media posts does, this is kind of a meditation aid that lets you focus completely on the here and now."

The pair also has a long-running and fruitful collaboration with Dr. Pip Thornton, currently a Chancellor's Fellow in GeoSciences at the University of Edinburgh. Pip's research focus is on 'linguistic capitalism,' the often negative effects of the digital economy on the written and spoken word. Critiquing Google's relentless commodification of language, Ray Interactive helped Pip to expand on her '{poem.py}' project, which playfully evaluates poetic works on how much Google would charge to place each word at the top of its search results. The partnership culminated in 'Newspeak': a piece which saw the entire text of George Orwell's 1984 evaluated word-by-word and projected on Inspace's giant City Screen during the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2019. 'Newspeak' has since shown up at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, the Electromagnetic Field Festival and the University of Edinburgh,

“I think we’re moving away from an object focused consumer society”

and Pip continues to work with Ray Interactive on interventions including gamified spoken-word slams and machine-generated poetry.

An intriguing work in progress Ray Interactive are persevering with, in spite of challenges around gaining access to a data set swathed in bureaucratic red tape, is a Creative Informatics Challenge Project set by Edinburgh’s St. Giles Cathedral, to create a site-specific installation focused on the genealogy of the Scottish diaspora. “We’re super, super stoked about this,” says McCarthy. “We’re going to put a touchscreen interface in the cathedral loaded with hundreds of years of data from the National Records of Scotland. Visitors will be able to type in a Scottish surname and intuitively explore aggregated archive data related to the family lineage, where the earliest records of the name appeared, density in population over time, most common first names, etc... We also hope to get access to the rich visual data set of heraldic symbols currently gathering digital dust at the Court of the Lord Lyon, but negotiations with the NRS are slow and ongoing...”

Where once McCarthy would have worked heavily on the visual and design side of projects while Healy took care of all the coding, their roles have evolved and overlapped over the years thanks to new tools such as visual development platform TouchDesigner. “Using tools like this,” says Healy, “they blur that line, as it should be blurred. The most interesting projects we’ve done, the ones with the most successful results, are the ones where we’ve been able to collaborate in a space that combines the creative and the technological.”

For a studio so enraptured by the idea of tech as a conduit to IRL experiences, the pandemic was a testing time for Ray Interactive and all which they stand for. “Apart from the obvious kind of weird stuff that it did to everyone’s psyche,” says Healy, “one real frustration for us was that we had to go back to doing things that were just purely online. “As you may imagine from all we’ve said,” he adds, “we’re not crazy super-duper mega fans of the metaverse and all that it entails.”

On the flip side, since lockdowns lifted and the great surge began towards people once again embracing real world experiences, Ray Interactive have found people more receptive than ever to the kind of work they do. “I think we’re moving away from an object focused consumer society,” says McCarthy, “into an experience focused society, where it’s less about objects and owning things, and more about having shared experiences.”

Ray Interactive’s ultimate, if still somewhat hazy dream as a studio is to one day bring all of their ideas to bear in one space – a great sandbox of experimentation, joy and enlightenment at the intersection of the physical and digital worlds. “We kind of see a future where we will be able to combine all these things that we’ve been learning over the last few years into some sort of immersive experience or immersive show,” muses McCarthy. “Our own event or production that leverages all of the things we love.”

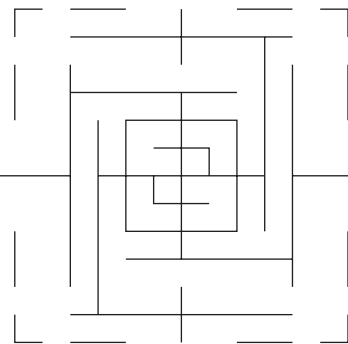
Imagine a party around a giant drum machine.

But make it bigger.



DESIGN AS A SOCIETAL NEED:

FUNDING, MARKETING AND GROWING THE UK'S BURGEONING FREELANCE NETWORK



KERSTIN STUTTERHEIM

KERSTIN STUTTERHEIM is an academic, author, dramaturg and filmmaker. She joined SACI in September 2021. Before this, she was both Rector [principal] and Professor of Artistic Research at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne – KHM [Germany]; and visiting professor at Bournemouth University. In 2019 her monograph, 'Modern Film Dramaturgy – An Introduction,' was published with Peter Lang. From 2015 to 2020, at Bournemouth University, she was Professor for Media and Cultural Studies and the director of the Centre of Film & TV research. At Film University Babelsberg she was Professor for aesthetics and dramaturgy of audio-visual media and founding director of the Institute of Artistic Research, 2009-2015. As guest professor she taught 2012-2016 at HTW Berlin, Game Design Department. In 1999, she was awarded with a Doctor Philosophae from Humboldt-University Berlin, Faculty of Philosophy III. She is a well known filmmaker and dramaturg, author and artist.

This morning, at one of the weekend markets so typical to our city – though neither in Edinburgh nor in Scotland – I noticed the minimalist stall of a young woman who had arranged her collection of slightly unusual jewellery in such a way that each piece had enough space to make its mark. There were circa 20-25 pieces. I asked her if this was her collection, to which she proudly replied, ‘yes.’ So I asked further. I asked her if she could make a living as a freelancer. She then told me that she was actually a designer and had worked for clients until the pandemic hit. During lockdown, she started making and selling jewellery alongside her day job. Since the end of lockdown, she has been selling it at markets and can now make a living from it. Her jewellery is markedly different to that normally on offer at markets of this kind – she has found a style that appeals to many. The form of presentation also draws customers to look more closely. Slowly, she is building up an internet presence, she says. The new independence is pleasing to her, she adds, alongside the fact that it feels good to sell one’s own work.

Thus, the pandemic has enabled this young woman to make a happy change. What stands out in her case, as in all those portrayed within these pages, is the fact that community is vital in order to work freelance and earn a sufficient living. The pandemic forced a break for many. It brought both minor and significant changes that have lingering effects. For example, fewer people went to the cinema in Edinburgh; presumably, fewer people returned to the markets. Instead, people tended to look online when they needed – or sometimes didn’t need – something to own or gift.

What is striking is that communities are also relevant to designers who are more likely to be present online, digitally, than at weekly markets. Nowadays, self-employed people rely more than ever on communities to make a living. Alongside the obvious reasons for this, the pandemic has led to a surge in mass-produced goods that are easy and convenient to order online, cheap and quick to deliver, and – sadly – often preferred by many people to individually crafted products. Pushing back against this and banding together to support freelancers and makers is how new forms of communities are found, or collaborations are formed.

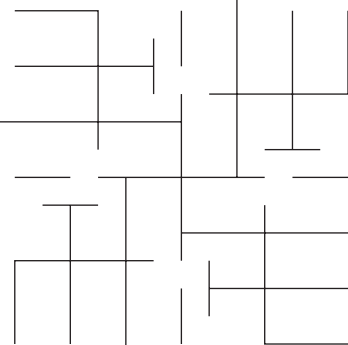
Many freelancers report how much they work with their community, listening to their wishes: whether larger, regional or loosely interest-based. Others seek out clients or partners for whom they tailor their offerings to specifically. Others appear in collaborative networks, another form of community. Often this is the only way to generate a sufficient income. Designers have had, and continue to have, a relatively hard time getting funding – especially when they combine technical innovations with artisanal and artistic practices. In our Western, neo-liberal societies, funding opportunities have also shifted to fall in line with formatted conservative patterns.

Like the film culture destroying, overrated and misunderstood audience research, success studies appear to dominate funding criteria in a backwards looking way by setting yesterday’s successes as benchmarks for future projects and personalities. Thus, multi-talented people with innovative and sometimes experimental projects often have a hard time getting support for ideas more complex or unique than the standard fare. These innovative designers often need to bend and flex to fit into the tick-box success mechanisms built from completed, past projects.

How good, then, on the one hand, that research funding makes such collaborations and support possible as a scope. In this way, innovative people and their projects can be supported – much like those presented within this publication – before coming full circle to appear within academic research. On the other hand, only some of these projects would be classified as ‘academic research,’ as the protagonists themselves do not see their work as such, creating further barriers to support.

This complex situation in turn exacerbates itself, partly due to the complicated, imprecise and often confusing language used in the UK concerning artistic research. This area of artistic research, in both design and other similar disciplines, has thus found it particularly difficult to establish itself as acceptable in the UK. Nevertheless, we who work in academic institutions and conduct academic research should also seek and maintain exchange and collaboration with innovative freelancers. We can only mutually benefit from such an exchange, as the narratives presented here convey, and furthermore enjoy aesthetically well-designed objects and processes. Aesthetics, as well as ethics, are central to a democratic and forward looking society – much more so than standardised, mass-produced goods, as many philosophers have repeatedly emphasised.

PRODUCT TO PROCESS



Claire Sawers interviews Custom Loop's Jeni Allison to understand how she's reimagining the process of knitwear design and production; photography by Wojtek Kutyla and Jeni Allison



“I think people would hold onto things for much longer if they’d had a hand in designing them,” says Jeni Allison, a textile designer who has recently branched out by making her very own knitwear app.

“Choosing your own colours, adding a set of initials – it makes that thing more special to you. When people are really proud of an item, I think they are less likely to send it to landfill or hand it in to a charity shop.”

The Edinburgh based designer says there are two sides to her work which weave together perfectly in the new app – design and teaching. Since graduating from Glasgow School of Art over a decade ago, Jeni has designed items for dance, performance and visual art projects. She has worked on product development for big fashion brands including Sonia Rykiel and Chanel, who create luxury items through Barrie Knitwear, the Chanel-owned textiles factory in Hawick. Running art and design workshops has become an important part of her practice, too – Jeni regularly hosts events in galleries and museums and teams up with the outreach charity Art in Healthcare to improve health and wellbeing through creativity.

“My brand is moving away from having products in stock towards engaging others and helping them become creative. It’s an exciting place to be,” she says with a smile.

Jeni’s work began moving in a very new direction when she received funding from Creative Informatics in the summer of 2021. “I’d applied for support from Creative Informatics after I had this idea about making knitwear cheaper to manufacture and less time consuming.”

While working at Barrie Knitwear, Jeni prepared a lot of the artwork for major brands as she converted images to make them compatible with knitting machines.

“You can’t feed a jpeg into a knitting machine,

that doesn’t work,” she explains. “So you have to make the images ‘knittable’ manually. It takes a long time, so it costs a lot. I could see that an app would speed everything up and make the whole process more sustainable. When it’s a big run of just one design, a lot goes to waste and ends up in landfill. An app would allow for short runs and one-off designs.”

When Jeni got the green light for her project, she began working with a UX designer on the first prototype of her app.

“I’m not a coder or a developer and I had no clue about building an app. I was pretty worried but the UX designer was great and reassured me.”

Despite having only a vague idea in mind of what she wanted the app to do, after six months of collaboration with a developer, a phase of user testing, then a period when Jeni was on maternity leave, the Custom Loop app was finally ready to launch in October 2022.

Custom Loop allows users to visit Jeni’s website and select colours, motifs and shapes from a selection of presets, layer them up, then build their own luxury scarf or blanket.

“It’s not a totally blank canvas. Feedback told us that some users found that overwhelming. There are guardrails in place, a bit like on the Nike website for example, where you can customise a pair of trainers. They ensure it will all work and be aesthetically pleasing. It’s really inspiring actually seeing how people use the app and what the customer behaviour is.”

It was a pragmatic decision to make blankets and scarves through the app, as opposed to say, polo neck jumpers or kimono cardigans, which Jeni has made in the past. Blankets and scarves all come in the same size, which simplified the process.

To tie in with a workshop that Jeni was presenting at Edinburgh’s Dovecot Studio as part of

**“I’M NOW
DESIGNING
A PROCESS
RATHER
THAN THE
PRODUCTS
THEMSELVES”**



their KNITWEAR: Chanel to Westwood exhibition, Custom Loop was available for visitors to explore in the Dovecot shop.

“Just before Christmas it got pretty popular; that’s traditionally a busy time for knitwear sales. People would design their own patterned lambswool blanket or scarf on an iPad in Dovecot then pay for it at the till. Customised baby blankets seemed especially popular.”

Once Jeni receives the designs, she sends them to Dundee to be knitted at Knit Shop Scotland, an independent knit factory established by Donna Wilson, the homewares and knitwear designer from Aberdeenshire, now based in London. “We knit everything in Scotland,” says Jeni, who is proud that her app meets Scotland’s Net Zero goals, aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2045.

“The project wouldn’t have been possible without funding,” Jeni shares. “I couldn’t have paid a developer myself. Then it took me a while to understand the complexities and limitations of coding. The developer and I spoke different languages at the start – fashion and tech. But there were a lot of video calls and we worked our way together towards the first working prototypes.”

The process wasn’t without its glitches of course, and Jeni remembers nearly wiping months of work one day by accident.

“I didn’t subscribe to some terms and conditions and the entire database auto deleted! Luckily the developer had a back up. After a small panic, it was fine. That’s life, isn’t it? The important thing was that it got fixed.”

Jeni was also grateful that Creative Informatics were very supportive during her pregnancy and

maternity leave, when she cared for her daughter Vaila, now one. “That was very reassuring – everyone was very flexible about me taking an unplanned break during the project. I now work part-time, and my partner is also freelance and flexible, so it works out well. Becoming a mum, I think it makes you more efficient! You find ways to do things more quickly.”

Jeni is delighted with the new direction in which the app has taken her and is keen to see where she will go with it next. She owns the intellectual property for the app’s code and appearance but would love for a major brand to adopt her technology one day. Hand knitters could design patterns on the app or factories could use it for machine knitting on a larger scale; she sees plenty of scope for expansion in the future.

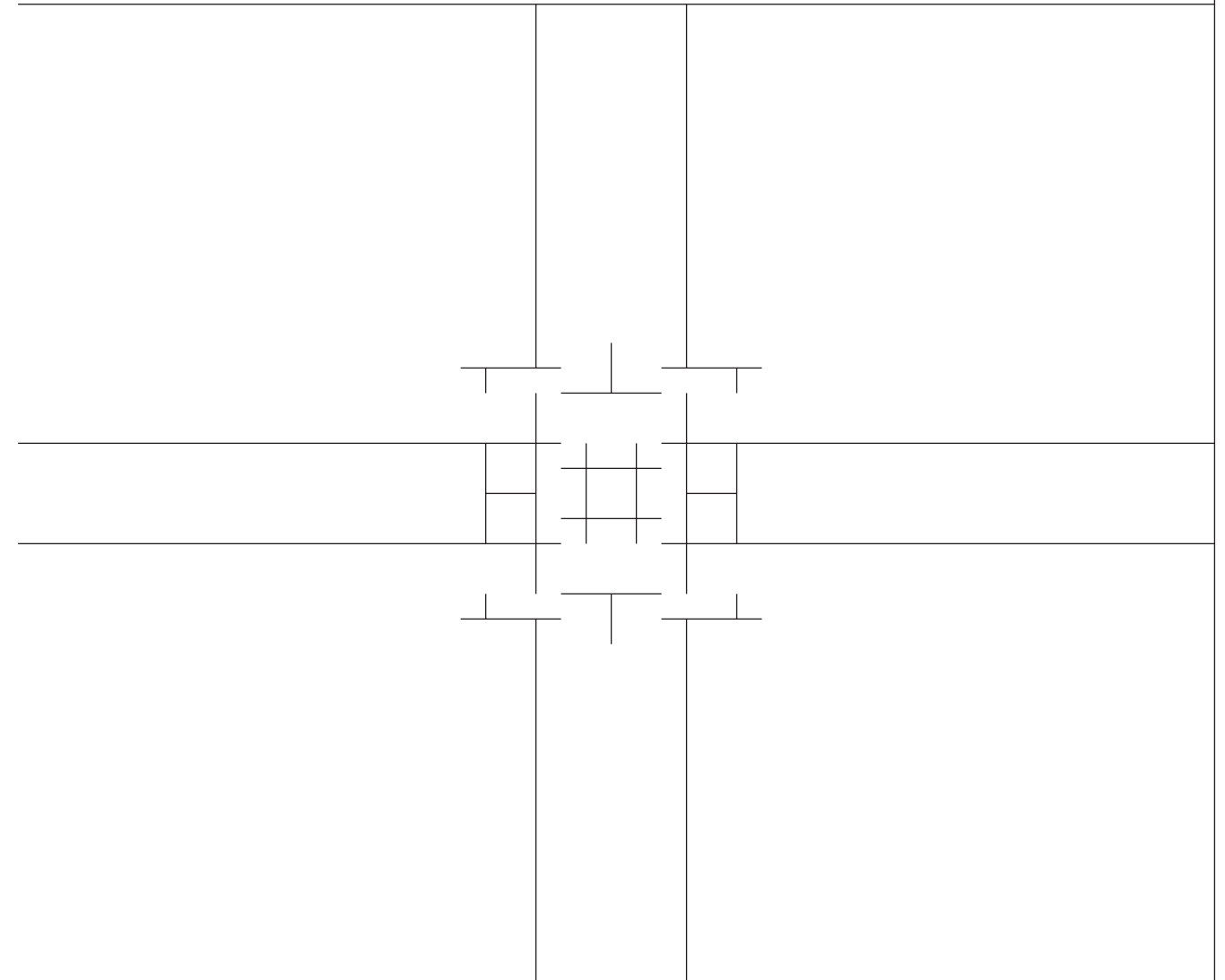
“There is traditionally a lull in knitwear sales during the summer which makes it a perfect time for me to develop the app further, think about improvements and look closely at some of the designs we’ve already made.”

The Custom Loop project has been a steep learning curve for Jeni and she is delighted to report that the changes to her working practice have been really positive.

“I’ve designed and developed for years, but I love that I’m now designing a process rather than the products themselves. I’m democratising the process in a way, using technology. I love collaborating with others so this app really suits the way that I work – I get to spark other people’s creativity.” Harking back to the beginning of our conversation, Jeni concludes by noting, “I love bringing people back that connection to [the] textiles. Instead of disposable, mass produced items, these are things they can feel a real personal connection with.”



COMPUTING SOUND



For Úna Monaghan, combining traditional Irish music with live electronics is paving the way for a whole new sound – as explained to Frank Delaney; photography by Elaine Hill

Úna Monaghan is a harper, composer, researcher and sound artist from Belfast. Her work combines experimental, traditional Irish and improvised music and live electronics. She has held artist residencies at the Centre Culturel Irlandais Paris, the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas Montréal, and Atlantic Music Festival, Maine, USA. Úna also works as a sound engineer, specialising in Irish traditional music, and experimental, live electronic and multichannel music – a role in which she travels worldwide.

She performs with harp and electronics. In 2018, she released an album of her compositions titled “For.” Her compositions feature on television and radio, theatre productions and at international festivals and conferences, with recent performances by Red Note Ensemble and Crash Ensemble.

Úna was awarded a PhD from the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen’s University Belfast in 2015, and held the Rosamund Harding Research Fellowship in Music at Newnham College, University of Cambridge from 2016-2019. Her research examines the intersections between Irish traditional music, experimental music practices, improvisation and interactive technologies. In 2019 she received the inaugural Liam O’Flynn Award from the Arts Council of Ireland and the National Concert Hall Dublin, and in 2020 a BAN BAM award from Moving On Music and Improvised Music Company.

Her new album, ‘Aonaracht,’ was released in January 2023 – a groundbreaking combination of Irish traditional and experimental electronic music, brought to life by a combination of solo traditional musicians and computers. Within its tracks, a completely new sound world is created by Úna and recorded by six of Ireland’s foremost traditional music performers. Each piece is a unique combination of the traditional musician, their instrument and electronics.

Úna explains, “I was interested in looking at the instruments of traditional music and what would happen if I combined electronics with each of those. ‘Aonaracht’ is an Irish word and can be thought of as a combination of three words in English: solitude, soloism and singleness. There’s the instrument, there’s the musician, there’s the electronics; those three things run in parallel and then there’s the concept of the piece. I’m seeing this first collection of six works as the first part, and I’m hoping that there will be a second collection that will feature six other instruments. For this first one, I have taken the fiddle, pipes, concertina, harp, voice and piano.”

Úna grew up in West Belfast and began playing traditional Irish music from a young age; she played concerts and performed with various groups through her teenage years. It wasn’t long before she became curious to explore what else the harp could be capable of. Electronic music was blooming and technology was becoming more and more accessible to musicians. It wasn’t long before electronics, sound processing and its possibilities in Irish music became an irresistible interest to her. She began to explore its possibilities.

“I played Irish traditional harp when I was really young. As I grew older, I became interested in music technology and sound engineering as well, and I looked at both of those things in parallel for a while. Then in 2005 I joined the masters programme at the Sonics Arts Research Centre at Queen’s University Belfast, and there I was able to learn about experimental music, about electroacoustic music and about sound design. At that time I was starting to write exploratory and experimental tape pieces, and I was doing that while playing traditional music, but separately. I really became interested in what overlap there was between the two. Then, for the next while I started to develop pieces for live performance with traditional harp and electronics.

“There was this whole world of possibility that involved using sound and sensors to control computers, then there were aesthetics and thoughts around what the computers should actually do and what you should do as a musician while that’s happening. That was so broad, and the possibilities were so endless, it occupied me for a few years... just doing that for harp, just developing pieces that I played myself. In 2018 I made an album that I called ‘For,’ which was just harp and electronics. After that, I felt able to then expand further, with other traditional musicians. And that’s when the ‘Aonaracht’ project came about. I worked with specific musicians for each instrument.”

Úna’s creative process is focussed, and often anchored to ideas and rules she might impose on herself. She builds out themes and musical ideas from tenets she creates for herself and then adds layers of concept and thought into her work.

“When I’m writing, I have three things that run in parallel. There’s always something musical – for example a harp melody – then there’s what the electronics do. How am I interacting with the computer? Why am I introducing these sounds? What are they adding? And then the third strand is the theme. Is there a topic? Is there a message? Is there something that the piece is about from a human or a political or an emotional point of view? And all of those three strands then come into each of these pieces of music. In ‘Aonaracht,’ for example, each of the pieces has a theme and a computer interaction developed with that, and a relationship with the performer for each instrument. Paddy Glackin on fiddle, Tiarnán Ó Duinnchinn was the pipes, Saileog Ní Cheannabháin on piano, I did the harp piece, Jack Talty played the concertina piece and Pauline Scannon did the one for voice. And all those performers are brilliant in their own right. Traditional music is such a rich tradition and so much centred on people, and so it’s very interesting to me how we overlap technology and computers with people, be that the musician who’s playing or the topics that you’re addressing. In Pauline Scanlon’s piece for voice, “What Haven’t We Heard?,” I was looking at the voices that are missing from traditional music and the fact that historically,

those visible in traditional music have been mostly men. I worked with a poet on that piece, Maureen Boyle, who had written a poem about forced adoption and mother and baby homes from the point of view of a pregnant woman who was going to have to give up her child. I put that to music and Pauline sang it.

“But the second half of that piece then draws on the Irish traditional music repertoire of the singer and asks her to pinpoint and reproduce lines from all of the songs in her repertoire that reference women. It explores how women are represented across this tradition; as the subject of someone else’s love or as a representation of Ireland or, you know, as a wife, or a mother, or a hag... all of these stereotypes. It is very interesting to me how traditional music and technology overlaps with society.”

Over the last decade Úna has taken the traditional harp and has augmented its sound. She uses various pieces of electronic equipment, hardware and software to alter, embellish and extend the sound of the traditional harp.

“I tend to have three ways of controlling the computer and electronic sounds in my live gigs, plus a fixed tape media part. I use a motion sensor to capture my body movements, which connects via WiFi to the computer, and that collects accelerometer, gyroscope and magnetometer information all the time. It captures three axes of each and with that I can capture some of my damping movements on the harp. If I damp strings, it immediately knows that I’ve done that. I also have a microphone that acts as a gate, so it tells the computer when I’m playing and when I’m not. That can be really useful so that the computer only sounds with me... it immediately marries the computer sounds with the harp sounds so that when the harp sounds the computer is going, and when it’s not, the computer is not. It helps the audience see them as a melded entity. I also have a MIDI controller that has buttons and faders that I can use to manually create and alter sounds. I usually have three contact microphones on the harp, too. Some act as a silence gate and some take the sound for processing. I have a motion sensor that captures gestures and I have a controller that I can use to process things manually. In short, I’m looking for ways to combine traditional music with technology.”

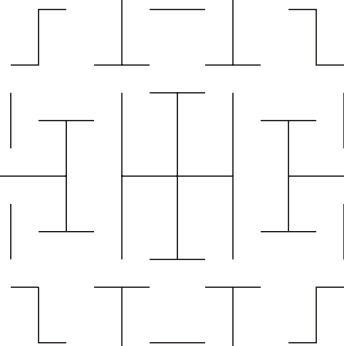
Úna’s musicality and artistic work is clearly defined and driven by curiosity; she is constantly looking at how music is made and can be made. She examines conventions and explores what music is, how it’s performed and how it’s communicated. I’m finding myself curious about her curiosity, and wondering what she is exploring for her next work.

“I’ve been writing pieces for contemporary classical ensembles recently, and in that work, I’m interested in how people’s background and training affects what they produce when they’re asked to work in a different environment or genre of music, because there are different rules and

expectations in different musical worlds. If you come from a certain musical world and you write in it, that may produce one thing, but if you come from a different musical world and write in another, then it’s interesting to me what changes there are in that for the musician. I’m also interested in the role of the conductor and the audience in finished music, and how that works. In traditional music we don’t have a conductor in the sense that classical music does. In these new pieces that I’m writing, the conductor has a role for some of the sections and not for others. And if you combine musicians with different trainings, it can be differently acceptable to each, whether they have a conductor or not. So, I’m interested, I guess, in the characteristics of various musical communities and what it means when we overlap that with others – be that classical music, experimental music or traditional music.”



BELFAST HAS THE REASON(S)



JOHN
D'ARCY

DR. JOHN D'ARCY is an artist-researcher based at the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's University Belfast. His research involves technology-mediated live performance, voice-based intermedia artwork and participatory song making. John directs experimental vocal ensemble HIVE Choir and curates sound art events and exhibitions at Sonorities Festival Belfast. He was a member of the Steering Group for Belfast's successful bid for UNESCO City of Music status and currently sits on the Belfast Region Music Board.

“New York has the haircuts, London has the trousers, but Belfast has the reason” – that was Terri Hooley’s summary of the 1970s punk music scenes across three cities. While Belfast might not usually be mentioned in the same breath as London and New York, its punk rock scene of the late 1970s garnered a cult following. Bands such as Stiff Little Fingers, The Undertones, Rudi and The Outcasts went on to influence international artists through subsequent decades, with at least some of their notoriety no doubt due to the unique situation of Northern Ireland at the time: the very ‘reason’ Hooley alluded to.

Hooley ran Good Vibrations – the Belfast record shop, turned record label, turned ‘way of life,’ as described in the titular biographical movie of Hooley’s life released in 2012. I return to the ‘Belfast has the reason’ quote because it’s Hooley’s proclamation in the emotional climax of the Good Vibrations movie, whose live theatre adaptation has just been restaged at Belfast’s Grand Opera House, around 45 years since the initial creative explosion of punk in Belfast.

Whilst, on the surface, Hooley’s quote might seem a pithy swipe at the perceived powerhouses of punk music, on closer examination it speaks to music’s entanglement with its neighbouring art forms – design, fashion and visual arts – and the wider socio-political concerns of the artists involved. We could say that music scenes inherently influence and are influenced by the surrounding circles of artists who aren’t playing the instruments. But perhaps it’s more apt to describe a music scene as an interdisciplinary network of artists responding to a collective provocation, a problem or, as Hooley put it, a ‘reason.’

“BUT LOOKING BEYOND THE BIG HITTERS, WHAT BROADER MOVEMENTS HAVE BEEN SHAPING MUSIC MAKING AND CREATIVE COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND?”

The ‘reason’ back then was The Troubles. The Conflict. The civil war that plagued Northern Ireland throughout the late 20th Century. The punk music scene created an alternative lifestyle aside from the sectarian conflict, and created a space for creative collaboration across the divide. As global music trends evolved, so too did Belfast’s, and the punk scene would eventually lose its momentum. Sectarian violence would, too, with a flurry of political cooperation in the late 1990s that led to the Good Friday Agreement for peace in Northern Ireland.

So what is Belfast’s reason now?

In 2023, Belfast was awarded UNESCO City of Music status; the third in the UK following on from Glasgow and Liverpool. It might seem more fitting to mention Belfast in the same breath as these cities, as opposed to New York and London, but even still,

Belfast trails behind in music industry infrastructure and public funding in comparison with its closer UNESCO recognised neighbours.

The relative lack of resources is often framed as a strength by locals. Anecdotally, I have lost count of the number of times I’ve heard that we ‘punch above our weight’ in terms of our creative musical outputs. Just think of the songwriters emerging from the wider region of Northern Ireland: Van Morrison, Phil Coulter, Tim Wheeler [Ash], Neil Hannon [Divine Comedy] and Gary Lightbody [Snow Patrol].

But looking beyond the big hitters, what broader movements have been shaping music making and creative communities in Northern Ireland, and particularly Belfast, since the conflict?

“IN THE EARLY 2020s, A CLUSTER OF ROCK ACTS IN BELFAST BEGAN TACKLING CONTEMPORARY LOCAL SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES THROUGH THEIR LYRICS”

For the punk inclined, the closest stylistic successor might be the resurgent indie and heavy rock music scene of the late 2000s. This was bolstered by a growth in local music industry mentoring and support from organisations like the Northern Irish Music Industry Commission and the Oh Yeah Music Centre, alongside a trend of bars and other venues willing to host small, local, original music concerts with local promoters.

The ‘reason’ here seemed to be a post-Troubles turn of Belfast-centrism. The years prior had instilled a feeling that musicians had to leave Belfast to ‘make it,’ but this scene gathered and nurtured a new generation who stayed put. Of those who returned, some would gather with this new generation to create an energetic boom of weekly club nights with interchangeable lineups, where plenty of the artists made up the crowds for each other’s shows. This community spirit peaked with the appropriately titled ‘A Little Solidarity’ concert and festival series, and laid the groundwork for a more professionalised rock and pop music industry across the city.

Today, the rock scene is rather more dispersed, but perhaps the most interesting manifestations are coming from the artists with the most potent reasons. In the early 2020s, a cluster of rock acts in Belfast began tackling contemporary local socio-political issues through their lyrics. Problem Patterns and Strange New Places are two bands who lean on punk and indie musical styles, lacing their lyrics with commentary on gender identity politics and women’s rights in Northern Ireland. This direct activism, delivered through the music itself, is echoed in a number of emergent initiatives to change the musical ecosystem in Belfast. These include Women’s Work, who organise talks and concerts to promote representation of female and non-binary artists, whilst

Safe in Sound NI advocates for anti-harassment in the local music industry and Reclaim the Night Belfast advocates against gender based violence.

Jumping from distorted guitar chords to dissonant opera, themes of gender and sexuality are also channelled through local libretto in Conor Mitchell's 'Abomination – A DUP Opera.' In this work, the lyrics come verbatim from a controversial local radio interview and the musical setting satires homophobia and hate speech against the backdrop of Northern Ireland's slow adoption of equality legislation in comparison to the rest of the UK.

In other musical genres, Belfast's artists seem to find their reasons in a variety of forms. The electronic scene has exploded with a plethora of concerts and festivals that place local DJs and producers alongside international artists in immersive high-production audiovisual setups. AVA festival and David Holmes's God's Waiting Room series have cultivated scenes that find their purpose through spectacle, immersion and connection through beat.

The traditional music scene finds itself in continual resurgence through inventive approaches to the genre. Improvisation and technological intervention are at play in the captivating works of Una Monaghan and trio McAuley/ McKeown/ McCullagh. With these artists, a driving force seems to be a desire to reimagine embedded local musical histories through contemporary critical and creative approaches.

Other approaches involve merging local traditional music together with traditional music from elsewhere. Groups like Beyond Skin are exemplary in bringing together musicians from diverse backgrounds to explore connections both socially and sonically. Recent projects involving migrant communities in Belfast are a vital piece in the larger network of solutions to help social integration amongst locals and newcomers.

Another aspect of the complex local cultural fabric of Northern Ireland is the use of the Irish language. Typically most strongly associated with traditional music, it is now raising conversations through rap. Belfast hip hop group Kneecap are using the Irish language in their lyrics, and have built a massive following both locally and nationally with their socio-political commentary and satire amidst the context of growing movements advocating for Irish language legislation in Northern Ireland. At time of writing, the group are producing a quasi-biographic film that they say will be the biggest Irish language movie ever made.

On the fringes, Belfast has a bubbling community of experimentalists based at the Sonic Arts Research Centre, part of Queen's University Belfast. Here, improvisers, instrument makers and audiologists create sound and music in response to an ever-evolving set of 'reasons,' here often framed as 'research questions.'

Recently, a core theme has been the intersection of sound, music and healthcare, with examples such as Isaac Gibson's end-of-life sonic memory box project, Pedro Rebelo's sound installations that share the auditory perspectives of voice hearers, Paul Stapleton's audio theatre sound design that creatively interprets the lived experience of

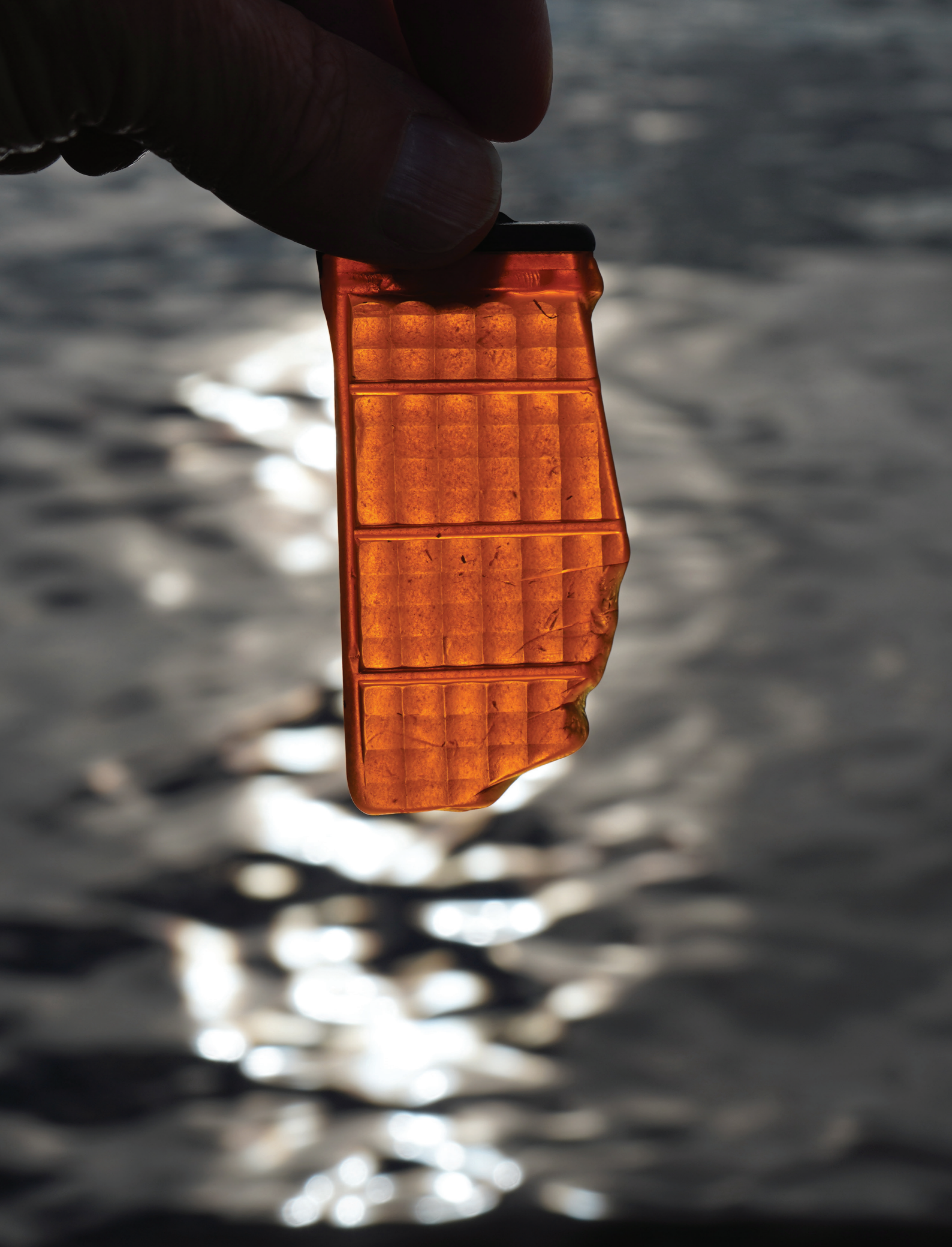
brain injury and surgery, and my own project, 'Do You Hear What I Hear,' that attempts to communicate the spectrum diversity of aural experiences amongst the general public.

An interesting project in terms of scene-making is the Performance Without Barriers research cluster at SARC, which explores the use of technology and, particularly, immersive media in creating accessible music-making opportunities for individuals with diverse physical and neurological needs.

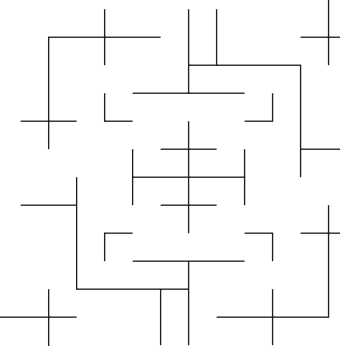
At this point, it seems clear that the 'reasons' for creative musicking in Belfast today are broad, but recurring themes are community building, inclusion and challenging presumed norms. It appears that these reasons go hand in hand with each other to push for a more progressive society in Belfast, and perhaps echo that very reason I quoted to begin.

So, what will our reasons be in the future? It seems that there is still plenty of work to do in community building, inclusion and challenging those persistent norms. Belfast's artists will continue to use music to critique and provoke. A recent example is local composer James Joy's pseudonym Adjunct Ensemble's album, 'Sovereign Bodies/ Ritual Taxonomies,' which brings together international musicians through jazz and electroacoustic styles to tackle issues surrounding asylum and migration post-Brexit.

Next up for Belfast's musicians are issues such as the lack of studio space and venues, whilst the city has an inordinate amount of disused buildings. Or how about the transport system that divides the city's districts and communities into impermeable quadrants? How about making venues and events accessible? And diverse? How about creating a truly intercultural scene in Belfast? As we consider our collective future, please add your own reasons to taste.



TURNING TIME INTO SPACE



Frank Delaney speaks to artist Locky Morris to uncover the importance of peripheries and edges to his practice; photography by Locky Morris and Mervyn Marshall

Locky Morris is a Derry-based artist, born and raised in the city he continues to work in and around. Renowned for his early work that looked at the conflict in Northern Ireland, most notably from a socially embedded perspective, he has since gone on to develop another working vocabulary – one that moves fluidly between personal, public and political. Locky's work is informed by the complexities and intricacies of his immediate landscape, and now extends across photography, video and gallery installation, incorporating Instagram as a platform to disseminate his ideas. Locky's current practice is marked by a visual playfulness that feels distinctly his own, and was born out of a fascination for what confronts him in the often chaotic details of the everyday – incorporating often overlooked objects he comes across around Derry's coastlines.

Locky's work requires being outside, being in the world. His process involves seeing, photographing and video recording 'fragments' of the world around him. He is drawn to areas and places that are mostly overlooked; here he finds objects, moments, patterns of light, movements of water and pieces that are often discarded and overlooked. For Locky, walking, travelling and being outside is the inspiration so pivotal to his current work.

"It's mostly connected to the water, I think, and the periphery of things and the edges of stuff; where the modern world butts up against the natural environment. I walk every day and I also drive to certain places; some places have got a special attachment to me, and I often don't understand why or what it is, but I will keep on going back there and discover something new each time. Even though the light might change, the time of day changes, it might be different... but something always happens. Walking is a big part of it, walking and wandering – making things in the moment, really. The locations are often near dumps or waste grounds, nearly always by or near the water. I'm going along the edges of the river quite a lot and also along the edges of the coast. It's mostly connected to the water, on the periphery of things, on the edges of stuff. I love places like Culmore Point or Quigley's Point, where the modern world butts up against the natural environment. It's not the prettiness or the naturalness of the landscape that interests me, more these edges of things and the periphery, the modern world in contrast to the landscape in not a very nice way, a lot of times... I'm making things around these edges."

For Locky, this way of working is freeing – it frees him from the studio and from being tied to technology and computers. The movement of travelling and walking inspires him and enlivens his mind; in this state, he finds inspiration and produces work he finds exciting.

"I've developed a practice that's closer to what I want to be doing. It's an observational thing, I guess, to begin with. I remember thinking, years ago, 'I wish I had a camera' [when I was out walking]. I think it's the years of concentrated looking that's possibly contributed to this way

of working. I'm looking at things in a particular way, a lot of the time attracted to small, slight or seemingly insignificant things, and it's finding its way into the work. So that's kind of my thing. That's what I do now. And it's interesting."

For Locky, the work is as much about noticing and seeing as it is about making. He is interested in everyday objects, moments and events that are off the beaten track – tucked away, often hidden and overlooked. However, he emphasises that looking is only part of the work: it's not a case of simply finding and recording images. Images are made, not just found.

"You have to make the photograph or video. You have to make it. You have to do something with the framing, the colour, the light, the lens, for instance. That's a really important part of it. It's not just photographing, and that's what's so good about using the phone – the cameras are so good now, it feels closer to what my eye sees than other cameras I've used. It's the opposite to the way I found myself working in the studio. I think it might be a reaction to the tightness and restriction that I often felt in the studio where, at times, I'd be tying myself up in excruciating conceptual knots. This [new] way of working induces a kind of freedom or openness to ideas, or creativity or curiosity. I'm able to get into a flow, I'm finding rather than forcing."

Whilst Locky's mode of working frees him from technology, at the same time he embraces it. As well as using a mobile phone camera for still and video photography, he has also embraced social media as a platform to show his work. Instagram extends the gallery space for Locky: he sees Instagram as a portfolio and gallery platform, and through it he is creating a global following.

"It [Instagram] is kind of like a gallery. There's a portfolio element to it. I started it six years ago. Someone recommended it to me, an artist photographer friend of mine. They said, 'you should have a look at Instagram because I think it might suit your practice.' I spent ages looking at it, thinking, wondering, panicking even... I was initially reluctant, thinking, 'am I giving my work away by doing this?' I was very uptight about it at the start. Then I thought I could look at it as a form of practice, a daily thing, and it started getting traction and then people began communicating with me, sending messages about different images or video clips. I would get lots of nice people messaging me; it's mostly positive. Of course there are times when I get a message and think, 'I don't want to have a communication like that.' Or you start to wonder, 'what's this going to be about?' You have to be careful. But mostly, it's people that are genuinely communicating with me.

"A lot of people who comment or get in touch are artists, so they're getting to see aspects of my work and I'm also getting to see some of what they're doing. And then, sometimes, people you really admire

connect and like things about the work. And so, there is a really fruitful aspect to it and an educational aspect, also. Now I see it as a positive thing, there's a lightness to it. There's depth to it. I like the fact that it's less mediated, you can get an idea, an image across – straight into someone's eyes and brain. It's the quickest way of getting a sense of some of what I do. That's what I would say to people."

Through Instagram, Locky's work is now attracting global attention and appreciation and he is being seen in broader fields than he has been used to. Of course, Locky still exhibits in physical gallery spaces nationally and internationally, and has recently exhibited in Dublin and Derry in a collaborative project with Dublin artist Jaki Irvine. However, his embracing of social media has been helping him break free of certain expectations and restrictions. As an artist from Northern Ireland who has previously responded to the Northern Irish conflict through his art, Locky often talks about how it's easy to be pigeonholed. He discusses how people often have certain expectations of his work that are connected to his, and Northern Ireland's, recent history.

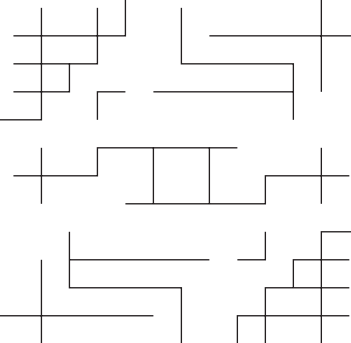
"Aspects of that became problematic for me. The expectation. 'This is what you do.' And people are expecting that's what you're still going to be doing. It still happens, occasionally. Sometimes it feels like I'm not fulfilling the expectation they have, in some way. There's a thesis that needs to be illustrated about what's happening in Northern Ireland, about what's happening around here, what's happening artistically in respect to the conflict or issues around the conflict. It's easy to get boxed into that, or swayed by that. It took me a long time to break free and find a different path – one that was not defined by solely being from here, or somehow representative of here. I'm not denying here, or denying my Northern Irishness, in any way; I just didn't want to be solely defined by it as if that's your only contribution! All kinds of things are really important to me. Life's rich and broad and there's all kinds of things that I'm interested in. That the work doesn't have to be completely reliant on being from here, or doesn't have to be defined by this place, is important to me – even though I really like living here and I get a lot of inspiration and make work from here."

Freedom is vitally important to Locky. His current way of working allows randomness and chance to play a part in his work, which he loves; for him it keeps things fresh, alive, unknown and in the moment. Every day he goes out, he has no idea what will happen.

"But something always does. Something happens outside, I'll just go here, I'll do this there and follow that here... and something else happens... something happens in that process. It might only happen on the way home, but something always happens. That's what's really hopeful about it. Just by going out every day, at different times, and following hunches... surprising things always happen along the edges."



IN THE LOOP



How might the latest climate impact assessment software better our world? Malcolm Jack interviews Looper's Dr Shashwat Ganguly and Yiqiang Zhao to find out; photography by Wojtek Kutyla





When asked to explain the big idea behind the next-generation climate impact assessment software which he has jointly pioneered, Looper co-founder and CTO Dr Shashwat Ganguly references his favourite Marvel movie superhero and his all-knowing AI sidekick. “We want to be like what J.A.R.V.I.S. is to Iron Man,” Ganguly muses with a smile, “with Iron Man being this world. Like, when Iron Man says ‘what’s the possibility of something?’, and then J.A.R.V.I.S. says, ‘oh, the possibility is 0.4, and it’s coming from this, this and this evidence.’ It’s a number based on lots of evidence study.”

By speeding up and simplifying the climate impact assessment process, Ganguly hopes Looper can encourage users to think of it not merely as a box ticking exercise – or “homework,” as he puts it – but something thought provoking and meaningful. “Like, ‘oh I didn’t realise that diesel in my process map has that much carbon footprint!’,” he says. ‘What happens if I change it to E.V.? Oh, my carbon number drops by that. Oh, wow, that’s really interesting.’ We want to bring that kind of engagement, that spirit, rather than it being a homework kind of thing.”

Ganguly’s fellow Looper co-founder and CEO, Yiqiang Zhao, gives a rather more matter-of-factual response to the same question regarding the company’s mission. “In short, Looper is a lifecycle designer to help manufacturers calculate the climate impact of their products,” he replies, full stop. Ganguly laughs. “That pretty much sums up how we work at Looper. I jibber jabber for half an hour. And then Yiqiang is really efficient. A crisp one line answer!”

The dynamic duo’s sales pitch is well practised from long days of back-to-back video meetings, preaching the gospel for a product which is already being enthusiastically trialled by a number of major organisations up and down the UK – including HS2, Heathrow Airport via global sustainable infrastructure operator

Ferrovial, and South of Scotland Enterprise, a development agency supporting thousands of SMEs throughout Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. With a full-time team of five staff and counting, and sky high ambitions to help make space stations more sustainable within the next five years [“if people don’t get on board with Looper to save the planet then we need to do something to help build infrastructure in space,” jokes Ganguly], the future looks bright for the young Edinburgh founded start-up. In turn, the future for the environment looks that little bit less dark.

But reaching this point required a vital boost from Creative Informatics to help Ganguly and Zhao get their business plan straight, and get their complex tech start-up off the ground in a crowded and competitive field.

The pair first met back in 2018 after being connected by Ganguly’s PhD supervisor, who recognised a crossover in their areas of academic interest and expertise, figuring they might collaborate well together. Originally from India, Ganguly’s background is in electronics and computer science and he was, at that time, studying sustainable building design at Edinburgh’s Heriot-Watt University. Zhao, who is Chinese, was meanwhile teaching at the University of Edinburgh, giving thermal comfort lectures and tutorials to second year undergraduate architecture students.

“I think we both saw there was a spark and synergy in our thoughts,” remembers Ganguly, of their first encounter. “We found out about our shared interest in commercialisation of our research ideas.” After more meetings, and a lot of coffee, they developed a plan to burst out of the academic bubble and launch a start-up which might let them apply things they’d learned through their studies to building a commercial product. “Sash and me, we are like two soldiers together,” says Zhao. “We are on the same boat.” “Mercenaries,” Ganguly adds, at which they both laugh.

But their adventure together didn't get off to the best start. They soon discovered that they didn't know nearly enough about how to convert a complex tech concept into a viable business proposition, and secure the funding required to let it flourish. "At that time, we tried to make a weather app which could tell you what kind of clothes to wear," explains Zhao. "It was personalised, there was some machine learning AI there.

"Because our background is focused on teaching and academia," he goes on, "we didn't understand the concept of questions such as, what is the market? Who is the customer? Customer, user; what's the difference?

"We always thought about technology first," explains Zhao, "rather than who uses it, and

product which they felt confident customers would want to pay for, in the shape of a "carbon calculator," as Zhao calls it, initially intended for use in the building sector. Creative Informatics was able to give Looper some funding through their Resident Entrepreneur programme, while the University of Edinburgh provided Zhao and Ganguly with the visa endorsements they needed as non-UK citizens. "Finally, I think at the end of 2020 we could start our start-up," says Zhao.

Highly visual, interactive and easy to understand, Looper is essentially a whiteboard which allows users to drag and drop various elements to create carbon footprint process maps, and undertake in a simple and intuitive way what previously would have been done by tediously pumping numbers into an Excel spreadsheet.

“We want to bring that kind of engagement, that spirit, rather than it being a homework kind of thing”

what value they receive." After three or four failed applications for funding, the weather app idea was scrapped. In the disillusioning midst of Covid-19, Ganguly and Zhao went their separate ways for a while, Ganguly returning to India in the wake of a family tragedy. But in the summer of 2020, the pair sensed prospect of a fresh start in the form of Creative Informatics' Creative Bridge – a free course for creatives in Edinburgh and the surrounding areas run by CodeBase, designed to demystify the tech world and its jargon and share the building blocks of digital product development.

"They teach you everything from marketing and sales to R&D and finance," says Zhao. "Finally, we know all the right ways to do things." It helped Zhao and Ganguly at last effectively channel all of their energies into building a

While it was originally shaped as a tool for architects to find the cheapest way to fit their projects' energy efficiency protocols at an early design stage, Zhao and Ganguly have shown that Looper can be useful to all sorts of other organisations. Be it in the building sector or beyond, from construction manufacturers to food and drink producers, even farmers – the Looper market grows as the team's understanding of the marketplace evolves.

They use the example of a pre-cast concrete to demonstrate on the Looper whiteboard how it's possible to programme in all the different stages of manufacturing into the process map – from mixing to moulding and curing – together with all of the materials and energy sources associated with each stage, to build up a "holistic" view of the carbon footprint generated. By

adjusting any of these many variables, users are able to instantaneously see the different ways in which changes large or small can affect the quantities of harmful emissions released by the process. "They can make informed decisions based on this software," says Ganguly.

Looper furthermore gives users the tools they need to think about the circularity of these processes. "Because we are also a lifecycle designer," says Zhao, "users can design everything from the beginning of the manufacturing process to the end of life of the different products."

Reports generated by Looper are sent for third party verification to ISO standards, giving users all the airtight assurance they need that the numbers stack up. In a world of greenwash-

guy and one Indian guy coming and telling them how to do material efficiency. 'Oh, you guys are going to teach me how to do things in rural Scotland, are you?,' was the response," Ganguly laughs.

But after some initial scepticism, the clients were won over. "They're working closely with us," says Ganguly, proudly. "So that's a big win for us. And we can learn a lot of things from that."

To know that Looper's software is elsewhere a part of some of the biggest infrastructure projects in Europe right now – including the expansion of Heathrow, and the building of HS2, the brand new high-speed railway between London and Birmingham – is hugely satisfying and rewarding for Zhao and Ganguly in what is still early days for the

“What if we won't have another 20 years to save the world?”

ing and unverified carbon footprint statistics plucked from thin air, Looper clients can not only feel reassured about satisfying any carbon reduction demands placed upon them from above, but also evaluate ground-up benefits of doing greener business. This may be through reducing costs over the long term by phasing in more efficient technology and techniques, or by strengthening their social cachet.

Through South of Scotland Enterprise, Looper works with agricultural producers including a large vegetable farmer. It's one of several studies which have helped Zhao and Ganguly see how their product fares in the real world, in a sector not necessarily instantly amenable to innovative digital tech solutions. "One of the site visits was to a farm in a really remote area," remembers Ganguly. "They saw one Chinese

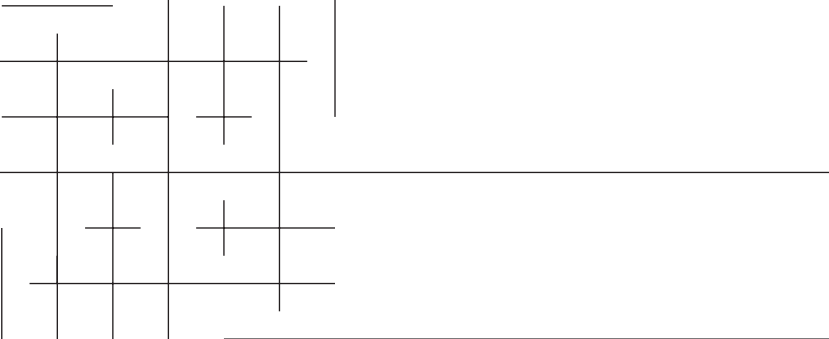
start-up. It gives them great hope in continuing to build their product and brand.

The best thing of all about running Looper? Like Ganguly's Marvel comics superhero idol Iron Man, they might just help save the world. "When we were kids," says Zhao, "every day we heard on the news, 'oh, the world is getting bad, plastic pollution and so on.' Then we always heard the follow-up of, 'company A is working on that problem, a better world is coming.' 20 years later the Earth is still getting worse. Now we want to contribute, rather than just listen to the news."

"What if we won't have another 20 years to save the world?" adds Ganguly starkly. "What if it's irreversible by then? We don't want to be in that place."

WALKING THE LINE:

DESIGN’S RELATIONSHIP WITH MEASUREMENT



CHRIS
SPEED

PROF. CHRIS SPEED is Chair of Design Informatics at the University of Edinburgh, where he collaborates with a wide variety of partners to explore how design provides methods to adapt and create products and services within a networked society. Chris directs the Institute for Design Informatics, home to a combination of researchers working across the fields of interaction design, temporal design, anthropology, software engineering and digital architecture – as well as the PhD, MA/MFA and MSc and Advanced MSc programmes. Chris is Director of the £6mil Creative Informatics R&D Partnership, one of the nine AHRC funded Creative Industries Clusters in the UK. In 2020 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

**MEASUREMENT WAS ALWAYS
A SOCIAL PRACTICE THAT IS
SHAPED BY POWER RELATIONS
AND CULTURAL NORMS.**

This essay is inspired by the work of creatives who are increasingly designing with the material of scientists: data. Whether the outcomes are aesthetic, participatory or highly applied products and services, they appear to be becoming very adept at walking a line between the various ways in which we know and understand the world.

On the one hand, certain forms of design stay very close to experiences in which people, materials and environments inform the development of any artefact or system – demonstrating and embodying a sensibility for the ‘other’ and their circumstances. On the other hand sits design motivated to demonstrate and facilitate measurable changes that enhance the cultural, social, economic and environmental conditions for people. This, in contrast, requires a focus upon the objective. In walking this tightrope between subject and object, design straddles two theoretical and practical cultures – the non-representational, and the representational.

Non-representational practices challenge established scientific assumptions that knowledge about the world is based on representations, e.g. numeric or linguistic images that correspond to external reality. Knowledge for non-representational theory is generated through an engagement with the world – through being within it. It is not a matter of representing it as though it was external to ourselves. Emphasis is placed upon the importance of embodied experiences, affect and materiality in the production of knowledge. It centres around the belief that our understanding of the world is always situated and shaped through complex social, cultural and historical contexts, bodily sensations, emotions and material environments. These ‘non-rep’ practices offer a critical and alternative perspective on knowledge production that challenges the dominant epistemological assumptions of representation and correspondence that the hard sciences are defined by.

As you might imagine, the opposite of non-representational theory and practice could be considered as representational. This can be described as the prevailing legacy of the enlightenment that assumes that our knowledge of the world is based on representational practices. Numeric, linguistic and logical languages tend to prioritise abstract thought over embodied experiences and assume that there is a clear separation between subject and object – and that the subject can gain objective knowledge of the world through representation. Without seeking to juxtapose these two frameworks to exacerbate any opposition, design seems to be a rare animal that [when done well] occupies both spaces, and treads carefully between them.

Certainly, as we consider the increasing use of data within design, it becomes apparent that creatives are entwining highly situated, social and material practices with digital datasets that have often been gathered through representational means. Data-science, after all, can be described as a representational practice in which instruments are designed to identify and collect abstractions of the world in order to make sense of aspects of it – in particular at scale, through the use of big data.

So what does it mean to ‘walk the line’ between non-representational and representational practices? In the context of non-rep theory and practice, design continues to develop suites of highly sensitive tools and processes that aim to acknowledge and include the voice and experience of everyone and everything. It is

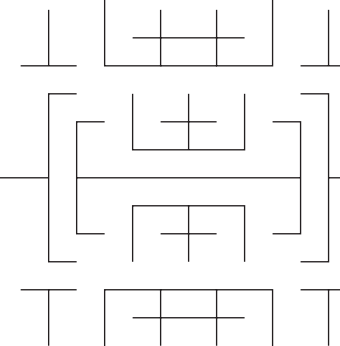
quick to adopt all manner of materials from the ‘extracted’ and processed – including everything from paper, wood, metal, ceramics and plastics to pixels, living urban and rural ecologies – as mediums with which to know the world. It also has a long reputation of aligning itself with engineers that expect much of design to ensure that ‘solutions’ are arrived at through measurement and are defensible through the presentation of evidence. Often, this is required to demonstrate that something is safer than a previous model, or that it uses less energy than another product or service.

However, walking the line is a challenging choice. If design slips towards non-rep practices and remains in the social, material and environmental ‘here and now,’ does it lose the ability to understand ‘the big pictures,’ such as the average increase in global warming, that are arrived at through globally distributed instruments? In contrast, if it relies too heavily on the selective abstractions of the world gathered through instruments that were designed to prove particular scientific theories, then who and what is left out of the picture? Or, worse, misrepresented?

Design, therefore, must carefully tread the line between non-representational and representational practices, holding the two epistemological perspectives together; think not of walking the tightrope, but instead of holding the tightrope between the two. Pulling them towards each other to encourage understanding, and often holding on to one another to prevent them from turning away. As data-driven technologies continue to march through every aspect of our lives, increasingly arguing that measurement and objectivity offer us solutions to best manage our resources, designers will need to stay informed to remind scientists that measurement is neither neutral or objective. Measurement was always a social practice that is shaped by power relations and cultural norms. If design can ‘walk the line’ by holding the line, we may well find it becomes a vital discipline in retaining the joy in life, whilst addressing global challenges.



ART IN THE IN-BETWEEN



The Array Collective's exploration of socio-political issues are shining a spotlight on Northern Irish arts, as Frank Delaney hears; photography by Jon Beer, augmented using Photoshop Beta Generative Fill

The Array Collective are a group of Belfast based artists who joined together to create collaborative actions in response to the socio-political issues affecting Northern Ireland. Array's studio and project space in the city centre acts as a base for the collective.

The Array studio space was established in 1994 by a group of early career artists intent on making a difference to the world of visual art in Belfast. Over the past 20 years the space has seen a vast number of artists come through the doors; some stay for a short time while others settle in for longer. In 2016 a group of six artists from the studio, alongside a number of co-conspirators, formed the Array Collective. The members are Sighle Bhreathnach-Cashell, Sinéad Bhreathnach-Cashell, Jane Butler, Emma Campbell, Alessia Cargnelli, Mitch Conlon, Clodagh Lavelle, Grace McMurray, Stephen Millar, Laura O'Connor and Thomas Wells.

The work produced by the Array Collective is diverse, and through collaborations with a wide variety of other artists both in Northern Ireland and further afield, they create work that uses performance, video, sculpture, sound, painting, print, drawing, ceramics, photography and everything in between. Array's work focuses on, and directly addresses, issues around Northern Ireland's social politics. In 2021 the Collective won the prestigious Turner Prize for a work titled 'The Druthaib's Ball.' The installation centred on an imagined shebeen – an illicit drinking den – with a floating roof made from banners created for protests and demonstrations. It hosted a film created from a Belfast activist event along with archive footage of Belfast from Northern Ireland Screen's Digital Film Archive. Approached through a circle of flag poles referencing ancient Irish ceremonial sites and contemporary issues, it was described as "a place to gather outside the sectarian divides." The piece has many layers and the collective collaborated with and invited other artists, friends and activists to contribute to the piece in a community minded spirit. The finished work was highly emotive, highly humorous and, at the same time, absurd.

"We are a Belfast based activist and artist group that have been working with social and political issues affecting the North of Ireland since 2016. Our kind of work came about mainly through us attending rallies and protests where we would come along and bring a bit of colour and humour to events that addressed tough themes, and issues that were affecting all of us at that time. I guess, at the start, we didn't really see ourselves as a fully formed collective. It happened quite organically from that point."

The collective grew out of the studio space in time; they evolved into an artistic voice through the activities that took place in the Array studio space in central Belfast.

"We have six studio spaces, so there's six people in the collective that have studios. And we have a communal area, too; we're based in the city

centre so we would always open the space up for researchers or PhD students or artists to use as temporary studio spaces. We would also have exhibitions during late night art events in Belfast and have people in, so it was like a project space, but also a workshop space. It was a space where people could put their bags if there was a protest – they could come, make a banner, go out onto the street, do all of that and then come back to base. So the group kind of formalised through the same people coming back all the time. The collective grew out of that kind of community and also through friends that we were working with on different projects and people who were more involved in the studios."

Array's interest is to create conversations about the social politics they see and experience around them. Their work sows seeds of thought and starts conversations in a colourful, fun, engaging and powerful way.

"The most obvious is the background of the recent conflict and the fact – the very simple fact – that the North is still part of the United Kingdom and the South isn't. And all that comes with being an 'in between state' – so we're partly Irish, we're partly British, we're partly neither, we're partly both. But on top of that, there's a lot of urgency about other social issues. We [Northern Ireland] are one of the most economically deprived areas of the whole of the UK and Ireland. And what normally happens in a conflict is that social issues are held back because they become of secondary importance to the urgent civil conflict, and that was very true here. In particular women's issues, feminist issues and queer issues were left behind... they come quite far down in political circles. There's the common refrain of, 'we can get the revolution first, and then we'll worry about those things.' So there's all of that playing into our thinking and our work."

The community minded ethos of Array Collective plays out not only in their work itself but, indeed, in how they work: collectively, individually and collaboratively. Each member continues to make their own work as individual artists as well as producing work together as the Array Collective. In addition, as a collective they collaborate with other artists.

"There is both the collective aspect and the collaborative practice. I think we have both these aspects at the same time. There are many studio and artist-led spaces and initiatives in Belfast that work as a collective so there is a strong self-organising culture here, and we embrace this way of working. We keep a flat structure where we all try to perceive ourselves as equal. We also collaborate with other artists and creatives, for example if you see our work 'Druthaib's Ball,' you will see that there is a very long list of collaborators. That's something that was always part of our way of working, even when we weren't a collective. Over the years lots of people came through the Array studios and people joined protest marches with us and made work with us. And so, we always tried

“WOMEN’S ISSUES, FEMINIST ISSUES AND QUEER ISSUES WERE LEFT BEHIND”

to keep that collaborative nature as well as our collective nature. It’s a strong community theme that runs through how we work.”

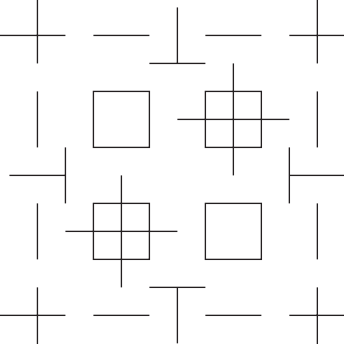
In 2021 Array Collective won the prestigious Turner prize; the first time Northern Irish artists have won the award. The prize has brought international attention to the collective, placing a focus on them as artists, and therefore to the subjects and issues they address in their work. What does winning an award like this mean to them?

“It’s definitely put a spotlight on what we were doing anyway. We were thrust under international gaze in a very short space of time. When it happened, the decision [as a collective] was how can we make an award like this work for us? Clearly, because we care about the issues we speak about, we were thinking this is a chance to help these issues reach a wider audience. It gives us a chance to speak more about them, and to a wider audience – to make them more universal. We took it as a ‘let’s just go for it, people are watching now’ moment.

“It’s also a question of visibility, and it’s beyond the eleven artists. It’s more like the visibility of the work, which can speak for itself. As we were touching on earlier, coming from a place where we feel ‘in between’ and being a bit forgotten meant this was a great, new opportunity to have a voice on such a well known platform.

“It has also helped put a spotlight on the arts in Northern Ireland [as a whole]. The North has been underfunded for years and years, and funding is cut more and more every year; funding per head for artists in the South is over £26 per head and in Northern Ireland it’s only £4.75. In England and Wales it’s around £16 or £17 per head. So there’s a huge disparity, and so this was a good way for us to prove that good work is being made here and show that it’s important to support art practices and artist-led initiatives in the North. There are many powerful, interesting and nuanced voices in the North, so there’s no reason not to fund it adequately. So, even opening up space for that discussion is useful.”

PUTTING INSPIRATION FIRST



Eleanor Pender speaks with Caspar Wilson to better understand the importance of connecting and collaborating with community; photography by Wojtek Kutyla and Caspar Wilson



Upon hearing the words ‘research survey,’ our minds often jump to tick boxes, figures in hi-vis with clipboards, or starkly soulless online forms. In our data driven society, giving feedback is rarely considered enticing.

“Doing a survey, it can be quite a mundane thing. You want to change the feeling of it,” says Caspar Wilson. “Find these different spaces that might seem utilitarian, spaces where creativity wouldn’t usually reside, and then fill them all up with a creative output. I think it’s about trying to not box off creativity.”

Wilson is the driving force behind Edinburgh based Studio Caspar. With an arts background motivated by social engagement, all of Wilson’s practice involves working with other people and collaborating with communities. Over the years, Wilson has created a wide range of work, from sculpture trails to wayfinding, with all kinds of community groups.

Against an ever changing backdrop of media, materials and methods, for Wilson and Studio Caspar, community is a constant throughout the process of every project. When leading contemporary art gallery, Fruitmarket, sought to redesign their approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, Studio Caspar responded to the commission with a team of experts with diverse backgrounds.

“A key part [of the project] was capturing broader voices, and part of that is trying to have a broader conversation on both sides of the table. The team working with me on that project all brought different identities to it. This was very important so that they would be able to have a sensitivity to things that were not necessarily part of my own lived experience.”

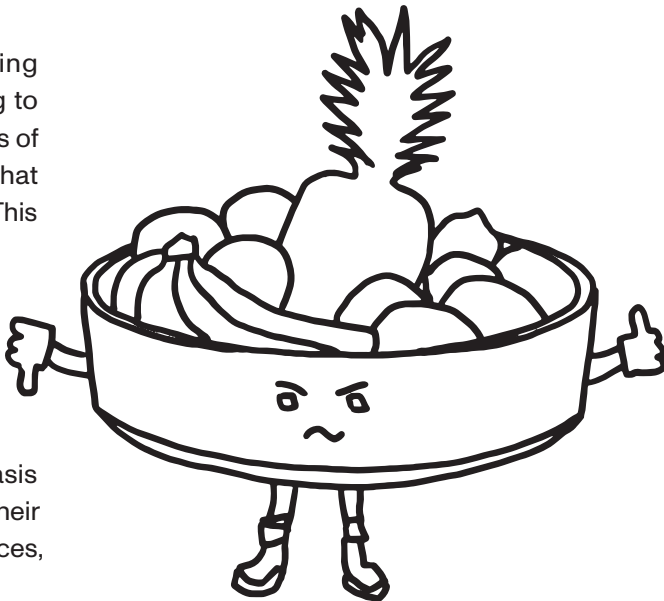
Gaining insight into the full breadth and depth of their audience was a big emphasis for the Fruitmarket, alongside expanding their reach as far as possible. To hear those voices,

Wilson and his team hosted in-person events, created hand-drawn surveys and invited people into the space to talk about their identities and offer their own descriptions.

“In any community, you want to hear people’s voices, rather than make assumptions. The idea was to give space and a creative platform to each voice. I had individual conversations with people, and we took over a window of the gallery to share their thoughts in a very tangible way. It wasn’t abstract like a form, and no assumptions were made – it came from people talking to you, in their own words. People made their own mark in a different way, and it changed the feeling of it. Something can seem simple, like something hand-drawn, but by using their hand to communicate something really impactful and personal – people pick up on that straightaway. It has that human touch.”

Discovering not just who a piece of work is for, but also the right space and place for people to share and engage with it, is at the heart of the work of Studio Caspar. It is this translation from conversation to artistic presentation that has a guiding hand in Wilson’s work and delineates the role of the creative within socially engaged work.

“One of the things I always say is, people love to go to a party – they don’t want to arrange a



party. People want to do the fun stuff. They want to do the most inspiring and most interesting things. But that’s why you want the work that you do with the public to be that point of inspiration. People provide inspiration and insight into what you’re going to work on. You want it to be something exciting and different, and it’s all about finding different ways of doing that.”

The intersection between identity and space, conversation and process reach across each project and draw in the maker and the audience; what you do with the results is one of the many points where the creative comes in.

“When you do socially engaged work, the hand of the artist is always the big question. How much of the artist is going to come through?

“The pandemic was definitely a point of change for me. I finished a partnership working in built environment work around Scotland and started working more independently with Studio Caspar. I had quite a large studio in Glasgow on a corner of this beautiful building. It was a large space with five windows, and that all changed.”

With work that is intrinsically woven into communities, Wilson is clear that location does not define their work. The last few years saw them move from Glasgow to Edinburgh, adding to the shift in their way of working.

“These days, I work out of my flat in Portobello. It’s a completely different way of working compared to a studio. My life and my work become blurred anyway, but then it can become even more

“When you do socially engaged work, the hand of the artist is always the big question. How much of the artist is going to come through?”

For me, it’s important to have that as part of the work, because that’s why I’m there. I see myself as engaging, then understanding what people think and feel and are interested in, and then communicating that through a piece of work.”

Wilson’s background is in design and photography. While their medium and context changes with each project, principles within graphic design and mark-making have a clear influence throughout. Over their career, Wilson has worked all over Scotland – living in Elgin in Moray for nearly two years, and also working in Fife, Aberdeen and all over Glasgow. It was here where they spent the pandemic, which impacted their way of working alongside their growing exploration as an artist.

blurred. In a practical sense, I’ve had to buy shelving and everyday things that would have been in the studio space. Going from a large studio to working in your flat is a real change.”

Studio Caspar has collaborated with many partners, including local authorities, individual artists and public sector spaces. Alongside the shift in working, there has been a shift in collaboration – one that feels different in recent years.

“One beautiful thing about collaboration and maintaining the value of working together is that there’s always that community of people who are on that journey with you. After the pandemic, people are still willing to collaborate. I would say, for me, it’s about being patient and being considerate with partners. Particularly in



the public sector, you can see the strain and pressure they are under. What people are carrying with them... their threshold has changed. It's about being understanding of that. It's really a human thing."

Currently, Wilson is working on a COVID memorial with Remembering Together, a Scotland-wide initiative led by greenspace scotland. Over 2023 and 2024, Remembering Together has commissioned artists to co-create with communities in all 32 local authority areas, honouring those lost throughout the pandemic and finding ways to remember them. Working in the Central Belt, Wilson is travelling around Falkirk and visiting primary and secondary schools, disability centres and public spaces all over the region to hear from different kinds of people of all ages. Working with widespread communities on a topic with personal impact, the project hosted workshops using collage and drawing to depict what a memorial could look like and, along the way, has broadened the skills of the participants.

"With Remembering Together, we went into a sensory centre which works with people who

are visually impaired and hearing impaired, and held a flower arranging session. I brought in this huge variety of flowers, and we all made individual flower arrangements. Then I talked to people, asking them about the memorial and took notes on what they would like to see. Flowers felt appropriate as a way to remember those who have died. It also allowed everyone to do something individual and create their own beautiful bouquet. Each of the arrangements were unique, and the room was full of the aromas, and it was tactile, with tissue, paper wrapping and ribbons. Everyone could participate and take their flowers home."

It can be these approaches, taking the space and the people fully into account, that makes all the difference when reaching out to communities for their input.

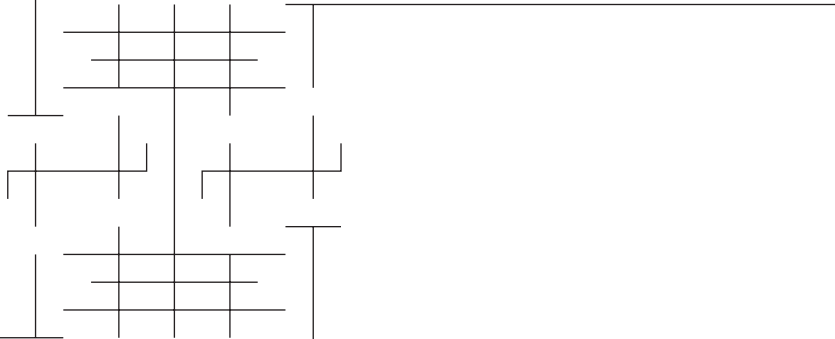
"It's putting inspiration first, and then letting everything else flow from that. Rather than saying, 'I'm here to gather information,' you set the stage with a creative activity and place a form of creative expression in front of people. In that space, they're more willing to discuss things and you, as the artist, have that point of inspiration. Finding those ways to discover that inspiration is the way to approach socially engaged work."

Speaking with communities and gathering their thoughts and feelings is vital for development and understanding. As Studio Caspar sets the example, finding that innovative creative approach means looking for that point of inspiration, those spaces where creativity might reside.

We invite you to sit, start a conversation, share a moment with those around you, and lead the way.



A COLLECTIVE UNFORGETTING



JACK
COLE

JACK STEPHEN COLE is an Irish essayist from Belfast. He is undertaking doctoral research in visual culture and political change at Nottingham Trent University, having previously completed the MA Art in the Contemporary World at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin [2017-19]. He was appointed as Co-Director of Platform Arts, Belfast [2016-18] upon his graduation from Hereford College of Arts [2016]. Throughout, he has fondly served his time working in the pub trade. He currently lives and works between County Down and the Midlands.

The year 2021 saw Belfast-based Array Collective receive the illustrious Turner Prize, making them the first winners of the award from Northern Ireland throughout its near 40 year history. Array’s winning installation, ‘The Druithaib’s Ball’ – a sabin hosting a commemorative wake for the centenary of Ireland’s partition – offered a refined psychotropic synthesis of their work as artists in the media of activism.

Array’s win also marked the second time in three years that the Turner Prize has been awarded for artwork relating to civil rights activity in Northern Ireland. In 2019, London based artist Helen Cammock was jointly awarded the prize for her film ‘The Long Note’ [2018], which observed the role of women during the Northern Irish civil rights movement of the late 1960s. Cammock’s piece was originally commissioned by Void Gallery in Derry as part of a solo exhibition to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association [NICRA] march to Derry in 1968. The four Turner nominees on this occasion, including Cammock, requested the award be given to them as a collective, in an effort to bolster social cohesiveness in a tumultuous post-Brexit environment.

While the 2021 edition of the Turner Prize was officially opened up to established artist collectives for the first time, Array obviously represents more than a cursory moment of solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their success serves as evidence of an upward trend towards collectivism in Northern Irish visual arts evident since the 2016 EU referendum. Array’s now national prominence brings attention to the question of social reform in Northern Ireland through the lens of activism, collectivity

**IT FOLLOWS THAT GROUND-UP MODELS OF ORGANISATION
ARE BETTER SUITED TO FACILITATE COLLECTIVE
PRACTICES AT A PUBLIC LEVEL**

and artistic practices. Not since the 1998 Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement, or indeed the 1968 civil rights movement, have such transitional conditions been aligned in the public discourse.

A current strand of academic discussion observes how Northern Ireland’s 1968 marked a divergence in comparison to its global equivalents, with the conditions of social reform – somewhat antithetically – having been marginalised in Northern Ireland by the violent atrocities of the Troubles. Chris Reynolds [Professor of Contemporary European History and Memory Studies at Nottingham Trent University] believes that our current socio-political context “provides the grounds for a recalibration of the memory of this time... to write Northern Ireland into the transnational narrative.” Northern Ireland’s superposition between Great Britain and Ireland, UK and EU, reveals valuable opportunities to explore agonistic processes through collectivity, beyond established cultural parameters.

On top of this, the widespread apathy of Northern Irish citizens towards the current political model leads Reynolds to the point that “it is hardly without surprise that the general public seeks to explore alternative means through which to understand the present, the past and the possibilities for the future.” These alternative means can be found in the resilient and kaleidoscopic mission of groups like Array, who serve to circumvent any deep-rooted delusions of what Northern Ireland can, and should, be. The late cultural theorist Mark Fisher considered this, too – albeit with wider scope. Fisher wrote, in his posthumously released essay ‘Acid Communism,’ that such a reconfiguration of collective thought must refer to “actual historical developments and to a virtual confluence that has not yet come together in actuality.” The historical moments Fisher refers to are those which occurred in the counterculture of the 1960s and were subdued by the near global monopoly of neoliberalism. The virtual confluence is the project of recalling these vibrant forms of collectivity to contest this model, which continues to influence political and economic policy at the expense of public wellbeing.

**THE OBJECTIVE HERE BEING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
A PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL AESTHETIC BEYOND THE
LIMITATIONS OF A GALLERY OR MUSEUM SETTING**

By recalling radical collectivist patterns of thought from the 1960s civil rights movements, Fisher’s suggestion is that stagnant hegemonic structures can be challenged through a gradual process of ‘unforgetting.’ This would preposition Northern Ireland’s 1968, for example, as convergent with the post-Brexit socio-political environment. The ‘acid’ of acid communism, then, implies a divergent social imagination recognising, as Fisher argues, that “the material conditions for such a revolution are more in place in the twenty first century than they were,” say, in 1968.

With a localised application, Ulster Museum’s engagement with the ‘Voices of 68’ exhibition [curated by Prof. Reynolds and Karen Logan in 2018], and the Museum’s purchase of ‘The Druithaib’s Ball’ in early 2023, suggests that the radical collectivity of the Northern Irish 1960s moment is beginning to be unforgotten on a fundamental cultural level. It is clear that the convergent qualities of collective practices are pushing towards what Fisher called “an unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life.” The objective here being the implementation of a progressive social aesthetic beyond the limitations of a gallery or museum setting.

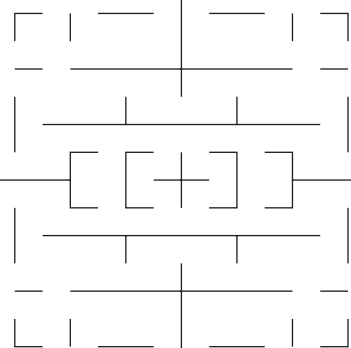
It follows that ground-up models of organisation – found locally in artist-led setups such as Catalyst, Platform and PS2, all with their distinct associations with artists from Array – are better suited to facilitate collective practices at a public level. These models invert top-down structural approaches through implementation of visual presentation, oral histories and ritual activities, and suggest politically agonistic

perspectives rather than a reductive historical binary of communities. It is certainly correlative that the impetus for collectivism is beginning to peak, if not at least burgeoning, due to Brexit's dramatic socio-political weight. In the case of Northern Ireland, asking the question of social reform comes at a time when broader social cohesion has all but eroded due to political posturing.

Although Array's presentation as an artist/ activist collective may not conjure any feeling of innovation when it comes to entrenched ideas of the artist collective or artist-as-activist, what is potent about their work is their dedication to the pursuit of civil rights in the contemporary Northern Irish setting. Their advocacy reaches across categories and through generations by recalling the muted successes of the NICRA movement, obscured by the spectre of the conflict. While their penchant for the absurd and their empowerment of the deprecating local temperament mediates the severity of the prevalent social concerns at stake, Array crucially does not overlook the moment of revolution as 'past,' – nor a phase of wishful thinking – but a discernible cyclical movement in need of a collective unforgetting.

STAGNANT HEGEMONIC STRUCTURES CAN BE CHALLENGED THROUGH A GRADUAL PROCESS OF 'UNFORGETTING'

STORIES WITHIN SPREAD- SHEETS



How might you visualise environmental data?
Ploterre's Rebecca Kaye speaks to Laura Hamilton to
explain how she paints with formulas to do just that;
photography by Wojtek Kutyla





“My curiosity stems from the natural world. There’s a visual language in nature,” explains Rebecca Kaye, the brains behind Ploterre, which creates handcrafted prints from environmental data visualisations. The natural world – and Rebecca’s personal relationship with it – underpins her entire creative practice. She’s fascinated by what she discovers when she’s outdoors, from the information held within tree rings to the most common bird hue, and uses her data analysis skills to informatively deep dive into how nature works. This inspires an output which is decidedly artistic, yet her background is not in fine art – instead in mathematics and design. While she prints onto a range of material (mostly paper and textiles), Rebecca’s medium is data itself: she paints with formulas.

“In some ways, I’d feel uncomfortable calling myself an artist. I do feel like I have developed a skill, which is why I’m more comfortable using the word ‘craft.’ I care about every process,” she says. “I’m not replicating a scene. The data makes me think – and hopefully makes someone else think.” An artist’s creative process can often be a hidden – yet integral – aspect of their work, but for Rebecca, the process, which includes in depth research, has a direct impact on the end product. There is an element of discovery to her work: she either sees something when she’s exploring nature that makes her curious – such as the tree rings she’s come to be known for exploring – and tries to recreate it visually with data that’s related to it; or she purposefully chooses an image, such as an umbrella, and creates it with associated information – such as rainfall data.

Whilst using data to create her art is a part of the process, it begins within the pages of a physical sketchbook. Rebecca uses her sketches to decide what she wants an artwork to look like, figuring out how the data will create her vision and thinking through the geometry of the image with a pen and paper before she turns to her computer.

Rebecca’s digital canvas is processing.org, an open-source tool which acts like a “software sketchbook,” allowing the user to create an image through computer code. She transforms her chosen dataset into sine waves – her brushstrokes – before painting them into an image determined by formulas written into her code. “It’s a tool that links the sketching and idea,” she explains. Rebecca uses code to shape the data, the colours, the shapes and the lines to look like a certain structure – a feather, for example – before the software visualises the data. Once the data is pulled into the structure she’s created, she can control the shape of the image through how she inputs this. For Rebecca, this is akin to a woodworker carving wood, whereby the grain of the wood forces the carver to go in certain directions. In her case, the wood is replaced with data, and she uses formulas in place of a carving knife.

If she has an idea of what she wants her work to look like, she manipulates the data to roughly create her desired pattern. “It’s my job to create formulas to make data look like the pattern I want. There’s a sculptural aspect, the crafting aspect – working with data as a material to craft it into what I want it to do,” she explains.

“I do feel like I have developed a skill, which is why I’m more comfortable using the word ‘craft.’ I care about every process.”

Her interest in the environment is a personal love, rather than an area of expertise. It's a form of discovery that leads to creating an artwork.

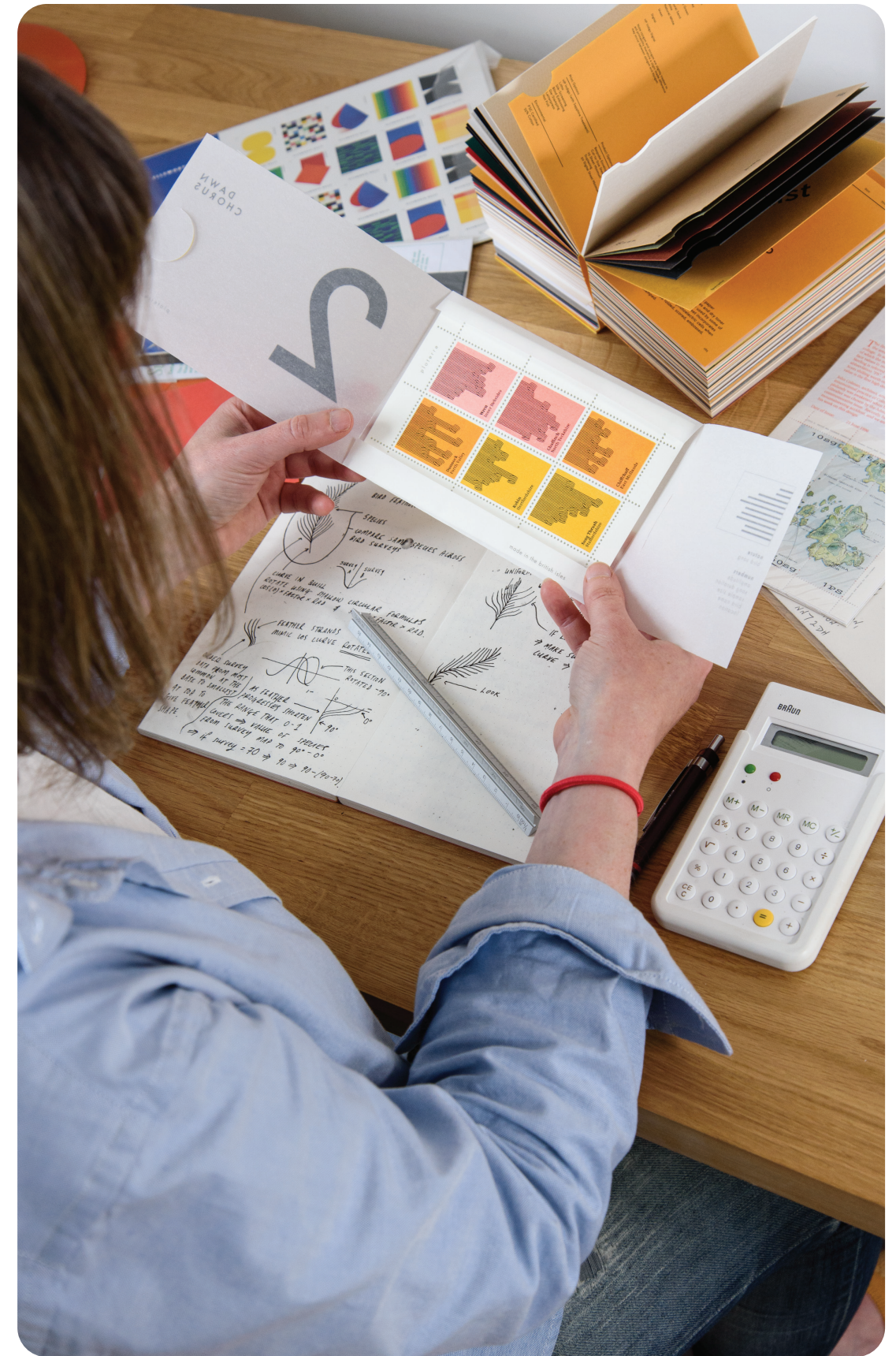
Before Ploterre, her day job was in data visualisation, and by night she was creating screenprints that focussed on cycling (another passion). “I was doing what I’m doing now, but half was during the day, and half was at night, and they didn’t really meet,” she explains. But when she received funding from Creative Informatics, she was able to commit full-time to her practice and that’s when she decided to focus on another love – the environment – which opened up a world of possibilities. She started Ploterre in March 2020; soon after, the pandemic hit. But the transition from a collaborative working space in tech hub CodeBase to her own private studio in her home on the outskirts of Edinburgh gave her the quiet that she was craving. “COVID gave us permission to live how we want. It was quite a selfish experience for me; I did exactly what I wanted,” she says.

She spent the pandemic getting to know herself a bit more. “It feels OK to say ‘no’ to things now, because we had to say no so often,” she says. “I know myself now. I need space to recharge, and I think I am keener on collaboration because I have the luxury of much time to myself. I like the fact that I can spend a lot of time doing exactly what I want, researching the areas that I want, and creating the work that looks how I want it to look. Then, when I work with someone else, I get their insight, their process, and their ideas and influences – and I really like being pushed out of my comfort zone, too.”

Her interest in the environment is a personal love, rather than an area of expertise. It’s a form of discovery that leads to creating an artwork. It’s all based on personal responses – “I spend

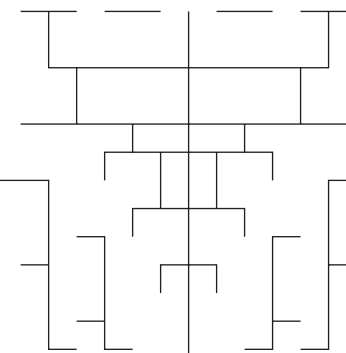
so much time in the outdoors, there’s a lot of imagery I’m familiar with that I can communicate the topic with,” she says. What interests Rebecca is the interplay between mathematics and the beauty of nature – and how she can explain it through data. “The way I look at it, there are patterns in nature, and patterns in data, and I translate one to another,” she says. For Rebecca, data is visual, and there is fascinating – and beautiful – information hidden in spreadsheets. A lot of artists are interested in maths and science, even if their artwork itself doesn’t look like it’s been directly informed by data. Rebecca cites geometrical art and craft and design, in particular, as purely mathematical – the association is simply more transparent within her own work. “The data is a little less hidden in my work – I make more of “a thing” of it. I use the data to create the marks.”

She’s also passionate about transparency around her process: there’s so much appetite for people understanding what’s behind the prints that she is constantly asked about it at design markets. A print may look simple, but it is anything but. “It takes a month’s worth of work to create something, and you get a print at the end of it,” she says. “I wanted to show how much work went into it. It’s not just about the final piece; there’s the inspiration, and the data as well – there’s that balance between having something that people like to put on their wall, and not having too much text explaining it.” As with all of Rebecca’s work, it’s fair to say that the devil is most definitely in the detail – and the true joy for the beholder is appreciating and uncovering the stories within the spreadsheets for themselves.





ENGAGING IN DANCE



Dylan Quinn's approach to the medium of dance interweaves influences of place, heritage and community, as Frank Delaney discovers; photography by Mervyn Marshall

Dylan Quinn is a choreographer and the Artistic Director of the Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre. His unusual mix of dance, coupled with an interest in, and an awareness of, peace, conflict and community development, ensure his work leans towards performance art as well as dance. He has worked as a professional dance artist for over 27 years. Having trained at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds, England, and then after working for numerous leading and innovative dance companies – such as Ludus – and touring nationally and internationally, Dylan returned to Northern Ireland to found his namesake theatre with Hannah Curr. Based in Enniskillen, together they create and produce inspiring work that addresses issues such as place, community, conflict, legacy and history.

Since 2009 the company has established an extensive programme of community participation and education work across Fermanagh and beyond. As well as ten professional commissions, they have created and produced numerous productions in and around Enniskillen. Dylan has presented four national tours, along with work at Dublin Fringe and Dublin Dance Festivals, Happy Days International Beckett Festival and Spring Loaded. He has undertaken British Council supported work in India and Hong Kong, alongside Culture Ireland supported work in France, Germany and the US. Dylan's passion for dance is as strong today as it was when he started, and he continues to fuel his passion through education, community work and the creation of innovative and 'storyful' dance and performance art productions.

He says, "I have a strong desire to live and make quality work here in Co. Fermanagh, which I am doing. Most of my work explores some sort of social and political context. There's something about helping to shape the culture, language and narratives about our culture, and narratives about who we are in this place. For example, we have a show that we're doing at the Mac Theatre in Belfast in September which is called 'Questions of a Man.' It looks at issues of masculinity and negative presentations of masculinity alongside issues of consent and other similar topics. That's a physical theatre piece I'll be doing with German dancer Jenny Ecke, who I work with on a regular basis.

"The last piece that I performed was called 'The Cairn,' which was about people who died or were killed in Fermanagh and its hinterland from 1920 to 1921. That was a site-specific piece which consisted of a roll call of their names and the context of their death; as I called out the names, I was building this cairn as I did so. I built a six foot cairn out of local stone, and then there was also a washing of these stones. It was in Pollnagollum Caves Boho, and the audience sat in a semicircle around it. It was later called an 'anti-commemoration commemoration performance.' The next piece we're doing is called 'My Grandfather's House.' It looks at my grandfather coming back from the war in 1948 and returning to a divided society, feeling very much a bit of a divided man: a British soldier who's also an Irish man, and set to marry the daughter of a Republican. The show is also about how that culture ended up informing my thinking about this place."

Dylan's work is consistently informed by place. The history of a place, what happened in that place, and how that informs how this place is now. His concern is the people within a place.

"Place is all of us. Community. What is this? Who are we? Why are we? What are we? All of that seems to be rolled up somehow in this. It is active and politically aware. It's quite complicated, how the culture that they created back then ended up informing my thinking about this place. And so my work is quite politically active; however, political with a small 'p' because I'm not involved in any party politics – more questioning party's politics and, of course, social politics. I'm fascinated with the fact I was born in 1974, the same year the Sunningdale Agreement was agreed and the year the Sunningdale Agreement collapsed. My entire life has been shaped by a further 25 years of conflict and by the narrative of what happened during that time.

"My question is: what was it all for? What did it all achieve? My grandfather thought exactly the same of the war. And they [that generation] created this environment. So, most of my work delves into these kinds of issues – not specifically just about Northern Ireland, or about masculinity. It's the subjects I'm interested in, the rootedness. It's rooted in community and a sense of belonging."

Dylan's dance company produces a broad spectrum of work. This is varied, yet there are common themes: everything is very much grounded in community, it's grounded in being of a place.

"It's actually my mantra in terms of funding: if you're supporting funding, you're going to support people in a place... and people of a place. It's all about engagement with people."

Dylan spent years away from Northern Ireland, firstly learning his craft of dance, then working internationally with various dance companies. He undertook a master degree in Peace and Development Studies in Bradford and Spain before returning to Northern Ireland. He is now firmly established and rooted in Enniskillen. I can't help but wonder if maintaining his artistic ethos and also maintaining artistic funding is difficult in a rural setting.

"John Hume always said, 'one of the best things you can do in Northern Ireland is to leave it and then come back.' And I couldn't agree more with that. It was a case of me going away, thinking, 'OK, what I do is actually of value... and then I come back here with that thinking. In a way, the hardest part of that is finding the funding. I've been talking recently about the difference between North and South in terms of funding, and it ends up boiling down to the issue of money an awful lot of the time; but it's not really about money, it's about value. In the South, because you can identify what brand Ireland is, you can sell it – so you can fund

it, you can support it, because you can say ‘we know what this is and we want to sell it.’ Of course in the North, we can’t agree what culture is, or what cultural identity is, so we can’t really invest in it in that way because we’re a bit afraid of what some part of that is. This all ties in to something about being an outsider in that environment.”

The cultural question of Irishness, of Ireland, and of what Ireland is and can be, is central to Dylan’s thinking and work. It’s always close to home for him.

“I think that question veers very much into the political questioning because I have a real problem with this sense of Irish identity. I identify very clearly, culturally, as Irish. And I’ve always had a real problem with the idea that Irishness is held by certain communities and certain ideologies. And I don’t know why, but I’m fascinated to understand why. I can remember thinking from a very young age, you don’t own what this Irishness is. You don’t own what that sense of being here is. It is multiple. And I’ve become fascinated with this.

“We made a dance piece called ‘The Fifth Province’ centering around the Irish tradition of the Fifth Province, and this Irish tradition of otherness – of the acceptance of otherness and the multiplicity of identities. You can be all and none, and one... and all at the same time. And there’s something about that I find really interesting, and I don’t think society or education [in the North] really caters to that very well. I do think the culture sector can do that, when it’s aware of itself, and it can do that very well. I’m really interested in how we go forward in the next ten, fifteen, twenty years; I’m interested in the questions that arise on this island, constitutionally. What role does the cultural sector play in allowing those conversations to happen? Otherwise, they exist only in the academic and the political spheres, and I think that’s really destructive. I think there’s a space to think culturally, and we should be questioning that. We should dive into the grey and the muckiness and the muddiness of it, rather than the binary of a yes or a no, or a right or a wrong. This idea very much informs the type of work I do.”

Dylan’s company is very much part of the fabric of Enniskillen: they teach, they do community work, they create shows with professionals and with local communities and they are very much part of Eniskillen life.

“The work that we do at the Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre is very clear. When people come to the website, they see contemporary work and then they see their engagement work; they see classes and they see us in the community doing classes, or various forms of community work. It might be the other way around, but the point is, they see those things going together. I think we’ve continually fought hard to try and keep that going, show that you can be the oddball and still be very much part of the community. So, in terms of the structure of the company:

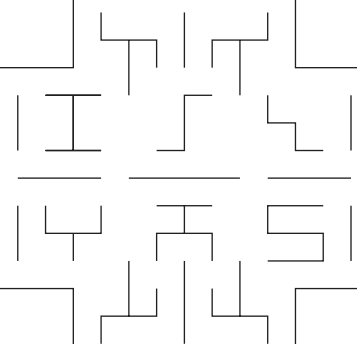
we do education, we do community and we do professional work, and there’s a deliberateness to that.”

Dylan’s work stems from a participatory ethos; he believes everyone, in all communities, need to talk and need to work together for change to happen. To incite both local and national improvement, he firmly believes conversation, talking and working together are vital to enable people to help each other.

“My big thing, particularly for Northern Ireland, is in order to fix the situation that we have on this island, we all need to be engaged in it. I like to try and make work that says something about the world within which we live. And I think, in every part of it, that’s what I’m trying to do.”



GRAPHIC NORTHERN IRELAND



BEN CROTHERS

BEN CROTHERS is a Belfast-based curator, currently working as Curator and Collections Manager at the Naughton Gallery at Queen's University Belfast. His main areas of curatorial research centre around comics and illustration, sport and the LGBTQ+ community. Ben has curated exhibitions at a range of galleries in Northern Ireland in addition to working internationally with venues including Ex Elettrofonica [Rome], SOHO20 [New York], Comic Arts Brooklyn [New York] and the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State University [Columbus].

Northern Ireland has an undeniably varied and dynamic visual arts scene, with both emerging and established artists working successfully across a range of media, exhibiting their work locally and internationally. Some of the region's finest artistic talents, however, have relatively limited gallery exposure due to the media in which they work. Northern Ireland's illustrators, cartoonists and street artists play an instrumental role in the cultural fabric of the region, but their work is often overlooked by museums, galleries, critics and funders, not so obviously fitting into the accepted remit of "fine art." Even in their earliest forms and often on the fringe of pop culture, comic strips and illustration tackled important cultural and societal issues. The nuances of the medium have historically challenged categorisation, preconceptions and the status quo – in spite of this, many cast it aside as childish, unsophisticated and unworthy of critical inquiry.

Through my own curatorial programming at the Naughton Gallery, I have always strived to champion the work of illustrators and cartoonists in particular, showcasing leading international figures to local audiences whilst also platforming homegrown illustration talent. Based within Queen's University Belfast, the Naughton Gallery delivers a diverse and inclusive contemporary exhibition programme, with solo exhibitions and group shows featuring some of the most exciting international names in comics and illustration – including Jaime Hernandez, Walter Scott, Tom of Finland, Bianca Xunise and Harumi Yamaguchi – none of whom had exhibited in the region previously.

Alongside these leading figures in the medium, the Naughton Gallery also actively exhibits and commissions work from Northern Ireland's wealth of world class illustrators. Examples include illustration-centric exhibitions – such as 'Phlox' [2017], a group show which tackled gender inequality within the illustration industry; and 'I Know I've Been a Stranger Lately' [2022], which explored mental and physical health through the lens of comics and illustration – in addition to the wider gallery programme, where illustration plays an integral role. Audiences are invited to discover how issues relating to gender, race, politics, age, disability and more are addressed, critiqued, celebrated and unravelled through illustration and graphic storytelling.

No survey of Northern Ireland's illustration scene would be complete without discussing UsFolk, a Belfast-based illustration agency and creative studio which represents the best in local and international illustration talent. The Naughton Gallery and UsFolk are regular collaborators, working on a range of projects from commissions for exhibitions and printed matter to large scale projects with Schools across the University. Perhaps most notable is 'SCREEN/PRINT,' a long running film project which sees illustrators design new posters for a range of films to coincide with screenings at the Queen's Film Theatre, Northern Ireland's leading independent cinema.

Founded by Mel Carroll, UsFolk's contribution to Northern Ireland's illustration scene is second to none – representing over thirty illustrators and working with exhibition spaces, festivals and key strategic partners to fully embed illustration into the lives of people living and working in the region. Thomas Bannon, Jamie Beard, Stephen Maurice Graham, Fiona McDonnell and Jacky Sheridan are just a small portion of illustrators connected to UsFolk worthy of discussion, all of whom make a truly significant contribution to the arts in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Maurice Graham is a particularly exciting example of an illustrator who also works in the medium of comics. His first book, 'Michael' [Space Face Books, 2016], serves as a wonderful introduction to his work, with its animated personality, bold linework, attention grabbing colours and humorist slant. Fiona McDonnell is known for her commentary and self-reflection on music, film, people and politics, and is now synonymous with Ponyhawke – Belfast's popular queer underground club night – for which she designs their hugely anticipated event posters. McDonnell's recent collaboration with National Museums Northern Ireland on their revisionist feminist history project, 'Bad Bridget,' was one of her most ambitious installations to date, whilst Jacky Sheridan's solo exhibition, 'Were You Obsessed with Greek Mythology as Child or Did You Turn Out Normal?,' at Belfast's Black Box, was an illustration highlight of 2023.

Outside of the sphere of UsFolk, Laura Callaghan is another illustration powerhouse who now calls Belfast her home, having previously lived in London for a number of years. Originally from Dundalk, Co. Louth, Callaghan has firmly put Irish illustration on the map with her signature style and inimitable approach to the medium. Her work is largely hand-painted using watercolour, gouache and isograph pen, most often depicting women in colourful, maximalist environments. Part fashion illustration, part satire, Callaghan's images are ostensibly bright and beautiful, but simultaneously cultivate a sense of unease and humour. Callaghan's work was most notably exhibited in Northern Ireland in 'Natura Naturans,' her 2019-20 exhibition at the Naughton Gallery.

Beyond gallery and museum walls, illustrators have played a vital role in transforming Northern Ireland's streetscapes, firmly becoming part of the region's visual identity. Notable street artists including Holly Pereira, Wee Nuls and Zippy have primarily created large scale projects with 'Hit the North,' Ireland's largest street art festival, presented by Seedhead Arts. Established a decade ago as part of rejuvenation efforts in the North Street area of Belfast, Hit the North's influence and impact has grown significantly, credited for nurturing and developing Northern Ireland's street art industry. In the last ten years, the festival has welcomed over 200 artists from across the globe, helping to bring Northern Ireland's cultural heritage for mural art into the 21st century.

For some, artistic "acceptance" from peers and critics is often hindered by the commercial aspect of an illustrator's work, of which the art world is traditionally unfairly critical. Through commercial projects, however, we see the international platforming of art from Northern Ireland on a global scale, with local illustrators holding a roster of clients including Google, Coca Cola, Apple, VICE, Samsung, Nike, The New Yorker, Dazed and The Guardian. This aspect of an illustrator's work, which sits hand-in-hand with their more personal practice, is arguably intrinsic to the medium, with Stephen Maurice Graham perhaps putting it most succinctly: "My work tells stories, sells shoes, makes you laugh, wins awards, gives me a sense of enormous well-being and jumps around with jiggly lines."

To discount illustration, cartooning and street art in Northern Ireland would be to overlook one of the region's most vibrant artforms which, given the appropriate platforming and investment, can only gain greater recognition and acclaim, both at home and abroad.



MURMUR —ATIONS

HIVE Choir serves as a testing ground to push what's possible with vocals and acoustics, as John D'Arcy tells Frank Delaney; photography by Jonathan Porter

HIVE Choir is an experimental vocal ensemble based in Belfast. Inheriting its membership and ethos from recent experimental choral projects in the city [namely Bird on a Wire and Belfast City Choir], HIVE is a testing ground for alternative musical notation, text scores, vocal improvisation and sound games. Under the direction of John D'Arcy, HIVE creates music from found text and often uses verbal notation and audio technologies rather than traditional musical notation – inviting participation from non-expert performers and audience members.

Formed in 2017, HIVE has worked with National Museums Northern Ireland, Free-lands Foundation, Metropolitan Arts Centre Belfast, Belfast Film Festival, Household Belfast, Belfast Book Festival, Moving on Music, PS2 gallery, Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts Festival, Irish Sound Science and Technology Association, and were 'Artists in Resonance' at Open House Belfast 2018. The choir is based at the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's University Belfast. HIVE's membership is composed of musicians from a variety of stylistic backgrounds [including Irish traditional, pop and experimental], alongside dancers, writers and researchers.

In August 2019, HIVE were commissioned by Belfast City Council to produce a site-specific performance tour called 'Word on the Street,' composed of found texts from the city's published reports on cultural economy and community arts, along with a recent draft strategy for culture and arts in Northern Ireland. In late 2019, HIVE released a collection of live recordings, 'Songs and Games,' on net-label Quills That Whisper, accompanied by a limited edition 7" vinyl 'Song and Game.' During the COVID-19 pandemic, HIVE was commissioned by NI Screen to compose soundtracks for short film series, 'A Silent War.'

Speaking of their journey to this point, John D'Arcy explains, "HIVE first started in someone's living room. Me and Isobel Anderson were interested in experimental music and vocal sounds. We had this idea: we'll make weird music inspired by artists like Yoko Ono and Pauline Oliveiros. It would be less about the notes and less about music on the page and more about text scores and simple instructions that anybody can understand. It was a kind of anti-expert music. And let's get lots of people involved. You could kind of think of it almost as a collective. Different members would come and go.

"When I studied music in university, I really took a turn at one point when I realised that a lot of experimental music was made for an elite group of people who could understand it. I was still creating what you would loosely define as electroacoustic music – electronic music. And half the people sitting in the audience were other composers who made similar music; in fact, maybe 90% were. And so, I took a real hard turn off the motorway. I wanted to involve people who weren't included in that, and people like me, who weren't necessarily wanting to read standard musical notation and who were wanting to try something different. So, Isobel and I invited a bunch of friends together and we started with very simple vocal exercises – almost like meditation through singing, deep breathing, slow

breathing, almost a bit of yoga, but coming from a place of musicality. Fast forward a couple of months and we were starting to workshop lots of techniques for improvising together. And that became the focus. The question was: how can a group of people form a choir on the spot with a simple set of rules and instructions?"

The resulting set of 'rules' or 'protocols' became a sort of dogma for HIVE and subsequently became an integral part of the choir's identity.

"To give an example, let's say half of the group breathes in. Whilst they're breathing in, the other half of the group are going to let out a soft 'OOH' sound in sync. Then, you swap that; so the group that just breathed in then let out an 'OOH' sound and the other group starts to breathe in. Now, that sounds like a very simple exercise but if you get twelve people in a room you realise how hard it is for the group to self-organise so that everyone's breath is controlled, and no one is running out of breath. So we would set rules like this, then add five or six more, and we came up with this piece called 'Murmuration' which became a guide: a rulebook for creating a quick improvisation.

"So, there was our seesawing breath rule. There was another rule that was about making sounds with your mouth, like bird sounds, using all of the consonants in your voice. And then another one which was all about using the throat sounds, shaping your mouth to make different vowels. There was a rule about tuning very closely and making these 'beating' frequencies, where the frequencies of the voices create a physical phenomenon whereby when they get very close, you get this shuddering amplitude modulation effect. Another rule was to create a group vocal synthesiser, or granulator. We were trying to do granular synthesis with our voices, where we were all trying to think almost as if a computer was programming us to sing and deciding what the pitch was and how long the note would be. What we were doing at that early stage was akin to research and development of what the voice might be able to do, and how a group could work together in this way."

HIVE became popular quickly across Northern Ireland and were regularly commissioned for performances due to their unusual sound and their storytelling ability. Adding to their sonic experimentations, they also experimented with narrative and storytelling in their performances. They took subjects and stories and made specific work for each performance, tailored around their performance locations.

"The project began to be more geared towards doing site specific work: creating sound and music for a particular venue or public space, such as doing a sound walk or singing at a specific building and relating to the heritage of that place. We'd use interviews, oral histories and lots of archival texts and then turn those into songs and sing those at specific

places that had meaning. We'd pick a theme, a topic or story and then we'd delve into research and then come up with songs."

HIVE are very clear on what they do, and don't do. The experimentation continued, and even the storytelling and research elements developed their own rules and experimental conventions. Nothing in HIVE is straight forward.

"The songs weren't songs with a set text or a set melody. It always comes back to those sorts of improvisation tools and techniques we came up with over that early development period, where we came up with these sorts of little rules. We did a performance about the Good Friday Agreement, and we basically sang the original text of the Agreement, selecting different parts of different sections – musically interpreting the text to provide an alternative reading of the Agreement that I'm sure a lot of people haven't actually read prior. It might be new to them to hear this seminal peace-building manifesto from 1998 that helped bring peace to Northern Ireland in a fun way.

"When we use these archive texts as lyrical material, I think we're trying to thread that needle of fun and satire while also trying to be critical about it, too. Sometimes we do get laughs from the audience, but we're not doing it just to get laughs; it's usually intended to try and shine a light on something deeper within the text."

With HIVE established as experimental, unorthodox and intent on bringing fun and satire to discussions whilst still being critical, it's important to note that they also have a very practical side to their work.

"In the last couple of years we worked with the Northern Ireland Science Festival to do a series of concerts called 'HIVE-splaining' – HIVE explaining a certain topic. We did 'HIVE-splaining Your Ears,' talking about the science and the biology of the human ear. We did 'HIVE-splaining' birds, talking about different species of birds, how they became extinct and how they communicate with sound. We did 'HIVE-esplaining the Sea,' which was all about the ocean, sea creatures and sustainability, and looked at Ireland's relationship with the sea through mythology, fishing and folk songs. At our concerts it's clear that we are just a bunch of really nerdy people who find things that we care about and bring those subjects to people through music.

"We don't work with traditional musical scores or traditional text. A format we often work with is a one page text. One side of the page might be your text, your source text of what you could sing, but it's all hypothetical until you actually make the song happen. It's not like the actual lyrics that you have to sing, like a traditional score or song – it's more like a bank, a word bank where there are lots of phrases, and you can grab any one of these words or phrases off the shelf.

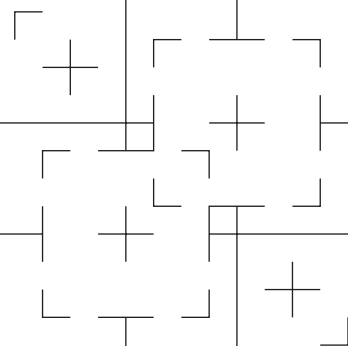
"And then on the other side of the page are the instructions to how you deal with that text. Do you speak it? Do you sing it? Do you whisper it? How do you listen to the other people? Do you echo them? Different members of the group might have slightly different instructions. Then, what comes out is this ecosystem of people responding to the text and the instructions and to each other live, creatively, in real time. It's less of a musical score like we'd imagine, where one composer has written it all with their artistic virtuosity and great imagination to craft the perfect finished piece for everyone to play. For us, it's like the pieces are almost hypothetical until we perform them. And then, each time we perform, it might be very different."

Seeing HIVE live is certainly an experience. It's a lighthearted and fun event that might [perhaps purposefully] avoid classification. So, how do HIVE see themselves now and how do they see their future?

"I hope it's a fun group. A music group, but not like a pop music group or a 'contemporary classical' ensemble. We don't really fit into those – I don't know how the algorithm would deal with us. We joke about calling it a 'weirdo choir' because we don't sing the things you'd expect a choir to sing. And maybe the group is actually too small to even call a 'choir.' But there's something about the word 'choir' that hints to this sense of community and connection, and I really like that.

"We're trying to find these issues that are interesting to us and that we think will be interesting to others locally and nationally and we give voice to them. What we're really interested in is using the group voice to creatively amplify conversations... quite literally. We're literally giving voice to these different stories and issues creatively, through sound."

TO MARKET, TO MARKET



Eleanor Pender learns how a product development agency are filling a niche with a strong focus on play, as she speaks to Playable Tech's Dr Ben Schogler; photography by Wojtek Kutyla



Technology has become an undeniably vital part of our everyday lives. The thinking behind each device, gadget or invention starts with an idea, driven by those behind the scenes as they workshop innovative solutions that can help solve problems and improve lives. Product and electronics agencies dedicate swathes of time to this process – yet, product development agency Playable Tech approaches things a little differently.

“So many entrepreneurs and businesses are product focused initially, because it’s about having the idea and wanting to deliver what you’ve come up with,” says Dr Ben Schogler, Creative Lead for Playable Tech. “You want to start with a more holistic approach. This is thinking about not only how you’re going to make the product, this great idea, and make it work, but also how you’re going to get it into people’s hands. You need to start thinking about the marketing, the messaging, the proposition, and how all these things fit together from the beginning.”

Playable Tech knows how to ensure a product finds its way onto shelves. They are the team behind Skoog, an inclusive cube shaped musical instrument developed and launched with Apple over a 15 year journey. “Our team evolved and acquired a lot of skills and knowledge over that time. As a result, our connections are deeply rooted in the process of getting to market, grounded in real life experience.”

With a background in psychology, music and educational development, Schogler has created innovative products that draw on all these areas of experience. “Our ethos is focused on children’s technology. Our sweet spot is a crossover between hands-on digital: that tactile interaction with digital in the play space. That can be in music, arts or games, blending with AR, XR or MR [mixed reality]; that’s really where we like to play around ourselves, drawing on our experience in sensory development.”

Working with Creative Informatics as a Resident Entrepreneur, Playable Tech developed ‘Beat Blocks,’ an app that enables children to build music in real-time with toy bricks, like Lego. The Beat Blocks concept was developed during COVID, a time that almost certainly impacted the team and their ways of working. “We were developing a hardware product and getting it into stores when the pandemic hit – and all the Apple stores closed. Factories closed down, and we were unable to make or ship electronics products. We had to take a hard look in the mirror and ask, ‘What am I going to do now?’”

Faced with time to develop new ideas but an inability to ship new products, Playable Tech focused on accessible software using platforms, materials and devices people – particularly families – had ready access to. Now in the app store, Beat Blocks launched in March 2023

Faced with time to develop new ideas but an inability to ship new products, Playable Tech focused on accessible software using platforms, materials and devices people – particularly families – had ready access to





at the annual conference and festival, SXSW in Austin, Texas.

“The core concept was to use what was in the home, repurposing what was already there to create a playful experience for families and children without the need to buy anything new. A lot of the team are parents and, while we love technology and new gadgets, at the same time we don’t want to buy more [products] that could potentially end up in landfill. The idea of using technology, MR or AR, to repurpose toys that children already have, and give them new life – that went down well.”

Considering the impact of COVID and the development of Beat Blocks, being able to take advantage of time to scope out new ideas

was a chance opportunity for Playable Tech, and one that may have changed their ways of working. “We’re able to be much more agile with clients or partners in our day-to-day work. This more flexible, agile approach suits us as a small agency. We’re able to change direction, move quickly, check-in on Zoom calls; that is a real benefit. It helps things move more quickly.”

Working through lockdowns, changing and adapting over the last few years has led to new processes and perspectives for the team: “A real impact for us was the realisation on the client side that you don’t have to meet in person, and that you can have a video call to catch-up. It really makes such a difference. Now, everyone is happy with Zoom calls and it’s brilliant. It really helps move things through

the process quicker and it’s easier to establish relations for clients.”

Further still, Schogler has seen flexibility in the workplace trickle through to the wider start-up sector, offering greater access to new and sought-after connections. “In the start-up and investment scene, we saw things change dramatically. You went from having to wait months to get an appointment with a VC, because their diaries are all booked up, to suddenly being able to get a Zoom call. They became much more accessible.”

Lockdown has left a mark that has bred a new willingness to try new things, so opening doors and creating fresh opportunities. “Lockdown made a bigger community of early adopters. People are more open minded to technology because they’re willing to give things a go.”

This willingness to be open minded and creative in approach is something Playable Tech welcomes in partnerships across the creative sector, and beyond. “You have to be willing to give things a try, and it seems that people are more up for that these days. We’ve worked this way for a long time within special education and assistive technology, in those circumstances where teachers, parents and practitioners have to be open minded and creative. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. It feels more achievable these days to float ideas and think through what we can try because people are more open to things; it’s an amazing space to work.”

Beyond the pandemic, creative change and a greater open mindedness is evidenced in adaptive working and ever evolving organisational developments. Playable Tech has strong ties to academia and the universities in Edinburgh, and Schogler has seen great strides being made in the academic community to support start-ups and develop innovative thinking. “In the last few years, we’ve seen the support and the approach of universities really change in a great way towards start-ups,

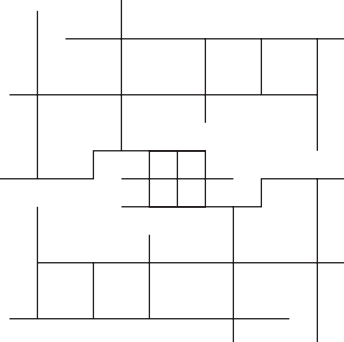
looking to help them try and do things with their ideas. This is a big, positive change in how universities support innovation. People are much more open, and it is much more encouraging.”

With two Edinburgh University alumni on the team, the agency has a good understanding of both sides of the relationship. Dr David Skulina, CTO at Playable Tech, specialised in Physics Data Research and Schogler taught for several years in the Psychology Department. As universities look to bring more ideas into actuality, there is an opportunity for the team to support both the academic community in their ideation and product development, and the start-up community in taking advantage of the research grounding and rigorous testing that a university can provide.

“David and I are Edinburgh University alumni; we both did our PhDs there. So, we come from there, and we understand both sides. For universities, these changes enable people like us more opportunity to help and be involved. For those looking to develop their ideas with us, we have an understanding of where they are in their journey, and how we can help them. That’s a real benefit.”

As a product development agency with a flexible approach and integrated creative thinking, Playable Tech flows easily between the creative industries and academic institutions – collaborating with artists and supporting new ideas and innovations. Behind it all is a collaborative, experienced team in a creative city, with an openness to new ideas. From conception to development to production, crafting a product that helps us go about our daily lives is an ongoing, iterative process – one that the team have honed throughout their specific approach. The next time you install a new app on your phone, bear this in mind and take a moment to think about the ideas and challenges it took to get it there, right into your hands ready for play.

CREATIVITY UNFOLDING



**OLA
WOJTKIEWICZ**

OLA WOJTKIEWICZ is the Executive Director at Creative Edinburgh, a social enterprise that supports 5,500+ members across Edinburgh’s creative industries to connect and thrive. She has over two decades of experience in various senior roles across the creative sector. Ola previously managed numerous multi-genre projects at the University of Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh International Book Festival and Edinburgh International Festival. She specialises in cultural development, creative engagement and multidisciplinary arts curation. She is a passionate and results-focussed cultural leader with an interest in diversity of thinking, civic debate and sustainability.

Since taking on the role of Executive Director at Creative Edinburgh in August 2021, I have had the privilege of meeting hundreds of creative practitioners at our events, networking sessions and various other memorable occasions across the city. Listening to creatives, discovering their practice and learning from them has been at the heart of what Creative Edinburgh is about for over a decade. Through our research, conversations, surveys, interviews, focus groups and digital communications we’ve been mapping out the incredible creative projects happening across our city’s studios, co-working spaces, community hubs and rented flats.

CREATIVES THEMSELVES STRIKE ME TO BE INCREASINGLY INTENTIONAL, THOUGHTFUL AND RESOURCEFUL

When asked to reflect on what creative practice looks like in 2023, I’m tempted to write my own book which would capture the multiplicity of approaches, voices, backgrounds, lived experiences and ideas which unfold around us. All of those voices coalesce and coexist in a rather curious and exhilarating way. The creative community of Edinburgh – and I suspect this might be similar in other Scottish cities – appears to be ever evolving, ever re-inventing itself. The sheer volume and variety of creative projects undertaken in the city is mindblowing: people seem to breathe creative ideas here.

Creatives themselves strike me to be increasingly intentional, thoughtful and resourceful. Many of those whom I have met have an acute understanding of the value of handmade, bespoke offerings and pay careful attention to the process of producing their work. Among those interviewed for this publication, Jeni Allison has championed innovation in the context of environmental sustainability particularly well. Her approach is not only deeply creative, by focusing on designing the process rather than the product, but also enables her customers to be taken on their own mindful co-production journey. Co-designing your clothes and accessories provides the rare thrill of immersing yourself fully in the creative process whilst being environmentally ethical. To me, that’s also a compelling example of artistic generosity.

Nature as a visual language has been explored by Rebecca Kaye from Ploterre with scientific rigour, whilst simultaneously imbued with subtle poetry. If there is one project which can convince a cynic about the infinite creative possibilities of working with data, it is this one. ‘Handcrafted prints from environmental data visualisations,’ as Rebecca defines some of her work, speaks to the beautiful relationship between design, mathematics and nature. I find this effortless fusion of the data driven process and the mystical detail found in nature not only aesthetically powerful, but completely irresistible from the conceptual point of view.

Rebecca’s work to use ‘software sketchbooks’ or ‘paint with formulas’ is certainly not a mainstream creative practice. However, I would argue that a growing number of makers, artists and creatives based in urban contexts are using nature as a point

of reference. The trend itself isn’t new, of course: escapism and universal emotions about the natural world have always played a part in creative practice. But the tools and language with which to amplify this are always shifting. Data serves as a crafting material, software replaces the brush and the boundary between the disciplines blurs.

The interplay between technology, academic research and play in Ben Schogler’s Playable Tech projects inspires reflection of yet another trend clearly present in the creative community of Edinburgh, which has been nurtured by the teams behind the Creative Informatics project. It is that of breaking the barriers to connecting with the academic community and joining forces with researchers, experts and data analysts to pursue creative projects. The pool of academic talent here has always been deep, diverse and international. This has recently opened up a myriad of tangible opportunities for local practitioners and they’ve responded in unexpected and exciting ways.

Brendan McCarthy and Sam Healy of Ray Interactive claim that ‘the sciences are a form of creativity, and the arts are a form of inquiry,’ and their projects are a living example of that conviction. A ‘dynamic blend of design and technical ability,’ to use their own words, encapsulates what other creatives based in the city have demonstrated. Using expertise from a particular area, like web design or robotics, to inform creative projects is becoming more common and sometimes results in mind blowing creations.

Caspar Wilson offers another example of practice informed by social engagement – shifting perceptions, intertwining expertise and at times turning a mundane tool into a creative output. Listening to others rather than making assumptions about their views is a simple but powerful principle to follow, and one that I have observed becoming more commonplace. The transgression from an artist to an activist appears to be yet another pattern gaining momentum.

The importance of understanding one’s community and efforts to deepen connections with one’s immediate locality should be added to the long list of commonalities pertinent to the creative community in Edinburgh and Scotland.

THE POOL OF ACADEMIC TALENT HERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN DEEP, DIVERSE AND INTERNATIONAL

Self reflections and mindful creative introspection have also emerged as a thread running through projects undertaken by creatives, from graphic designers and architects to poets and musicians.

Any reflection on what it means to be a creative in 2023 in Edinburgh has to be subjective. My own reading of the fascinating ecosystem on our doorstep is that of a community that is acutely responsive to the changing world, creatively resilient and fearlessly inventive. What an era to be witnessing.

CONCLUSION: COAST TO COAST

The interviews shared in this publication are a snapshot of creative practice from two regions of the UK in 2023: the Edinburgh region in Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Each participant showcased was selected to provide a diversity in terms of size and focus of their practice, and experience of working in the creative industries. What is most striking from these interviews are the shared themes that emerge across these regions – in particular, the inspirations and motivations that drive each practitioner's creative output.

While a sense of place undoubtedly shapes the creative responses of individual practices in terms of geography, politics and community, the overarching goals and aspirations of practitioners in both regions exhibit a reassuring synchronicity. For example, the ways in which they explore boundaries and borders – whether these are boundaries between disciplines and genres or borders that

demarcate spaces and places. Their work acknowledges, and at times draws explicit reference to, observations that interesting things have the potential to happen at borders; a point of friction between ideas and concepts. Art and design can create a point of contact and an opportunity to communicate; to see the world through the eyes of others, to experience shared hopes and dreams or to encounter the first flicker of commonality.

The interviews reveal an understanding that these endeavours hold the potential to make such edges porous and soft and, in so doing, reveal alternate narratives. Several of the practitioners interviewed emphasise the importance of place to their work, and their intimate connection with the landscape as an inspiration for storytelling – exploring how patterns in the environment, or discarded and forgotten objects, can inspire stories and, critically, how they might be re-combined in novel ways to speak to new generations.

Identity, in terms of being an artist/ practitioner, was a theme that emerged across both regions. It was acknowledged as being both a physical and social construct, rooted in space and time and intimately connected to a sense of belonging. The location and context where each of the individuals or groups work was seen to play a vital role in the production and process of creative output. Whether this was in the form of engaging people in the creative process through personalisation of products, or working with communities to amplify voices and articulate hopes and dreams, each served as a catalyst to begin conversations. Humour and playfulness cut across the work reported, sometimes as a way of approaching difficult and contentious topics or to provide a means whereby people might see the world through different eyes. In other cases, it was used to convey the sheer joy of making, to re-ignite that long lost visceral feeling in both the creator and the consumer.

What does pervade the work is the value of art and creative practice at an individual, community and societal level. But this raises a challenge about how value is ascribed to creative practice in general. Everyone enjoys good design, a film, going to a museum; however, when it comes to valuing artistic practices and funding them, there seems to be a disconnect. Is it really only if we were to take away all art and all design that we

would then be able to see what it contributes to our society? Or is it that we are entrenched in a commercial model where we only value activities that generate profit? And if so, will we ever be able to see the value in activities that don't necessarily generate profit in the traditional sense?

If the work reported here is to leave one overriding message, it should be that the contribution of art, creative practice and the wider creative industries is more than the sum of its parts and cannot be quantified by a single metric – its contribution is so much more. It is the fashion to talk about the quadruple bottom line of economic, social, environmental and cultural values; the challenge for the sector and policy makers is how to integrate these factors without causing the situation that we only care about what we can measure, or perpetuating the view that you are supposed to care about everything that is measured. Irrespective of how art and design is characterised, these are the factors that drive and motivate the practitioners who have contributed to this book and, critically, this is what will encourage and inspire the generations to come to be part of the creative industries; for that, they deserve and require our full support.

Michael Smyth

Frank Delaney

Custom Loop

Úna Monaghan

Ola Wojtkiewicz

Ploterre

Anushiya Sundaralingam

Kerstin Stutterheim

Looper

HIVE Choir

Chris Speed

Studio Caspar

Locky Morris

Jack Cole

Playable Tech

Array Collective

Ben Crothers

Ray Interactive

Dylan Quinn

John D'Arcy