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Interview with Brian Hand

Brian Hand studied sculpture at National College of Art and Design, Dublin (NCAD), and media at the Slade School of Fine Art, London. He is currently lecturer and Head of Sculpture and Expanded Practice Department at NCAD. Most of his works are site-specific and research-based; they explore history from a postcolonial and interdisciplinary perspective. In 2003, Brian Hand was curator of the Arts Council's Critical Voices programme. He has long been interested in collaborative practices and was a founding member of several art groups (Blue Funk, The Fire Dept., 147, Entre Chien et Loup). He has written extensively on Irish artists (Anne Tallentire, Noel Sheridan, Daphne Wright, Dorothy Cross) and contributed essays to collective volumes.

Artist's website: <http://brianhand.ie>

Valérie Morisson: You have been a member of several collective art projects. You co-created Blue Funk in 1990 to seek funding for a dedicated studio for time-based art and promote political / social praxis through contemporary art. How would you situate Blue Funk and other collaborative entities you have formed like 147 in the context and history of collaborative based practice in Ireland?

Brian Hand: When I think back to 30-35 years ago, I probably have a partial and biased memory. Collaborative art practices were not mainstream in the Irish art world in that period. When I was at NCAD in the 1980s I was lucky to have a dynamic group of peers in my class. Art school then was an informal experience over five years so students could forge strong bonds around shared concerns. This learning environment was very significant and particular to the formation of Blue Funk. I think I held conflicted opinions back then whether artists / public intellectuals or cutting edge critically minded artists should work closely or at a distance from broad social and political groups. Certainly political / social life in Ireland in the 1980s was fraught and challenging, almost as if Ireland was a third-world country inside first-world Europe. To my memory, the praxis of resistance was very fragmented in the cultural sphere, though responding to insularity, provincialism and gentrification did create common ground in the visual arts. The 1980s' literary world had Field Day, which professed a shared manifesto; there were interesting new experimental spaces in the 1980s like the Grapevine (later the City Arts Centre); there were activist events like the Parade of Innocence (supporting the Birmingham Six and other innocent prisoners in the United Kingdom) and student fees protests which I and other artists were active in. Blue Funk did not start as a collaborative art entity, it was a slower evolution from agitation to more agit-prop

events like *A State of Great Terror* at Douglas Hyde Gallery in 1993¹. I remember in 1990 we wrote irritated letters to *CIRCA* art magazine criticising an essay on postmodernism in Ireland by John Hutchinson and the ways the arguments flowed from letter to letter exposed our common purpose to find a voice. I remember that we were antagonistic to a new collaborative group established by/ under the then Sculptor's Society of Ireland called Random Access because they presented themselves disingenuously as an organic or artist-led group at arms-length from an establishment arts administration. Random Access, to their credit, did go on to spawn a break-away group, Critical Access, led by Jackie Malcolm and Martin McCabe with others and they hosted a great conference on Littoral art in the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), Dún Laoghaire in 1998, exploring and analysing activist art. Blue Funk was all over by then and that might be a relevant point today, namely that collaborative groups do not and should not last forever. 147 was a looser artist-led group in Dublin in the end of the 1990s making projects around the controversial mismanagement of the Project Arts Centre.

VM: How seminal was Field Day and to what extent did it spur new engagement and practices among visual artists?

BH: Field Day were very dynamic in the literary and drama spheres though as the 1980s developed I began to see how lopsided and exclusionary culture on the island was against visual cultures, feminism, republicanism, experimental attitudes, etc. The burden of canonical literary modernism from Yeats, Joyce and Beckett was then and continues to be suffocating on new directions and alternative art/ social practices. Pat Murphy's films *Maeve* (1981), *Anne Devlin* (1984) or David Fox's documentary *Trouble the Calm* (1989) stand out as beacons of alternative approaches. But Seamus Deane was a theorist I read a lot and I went to his public lectures which were always extraordinary. I remember my peer group really engaging with the Field Day pamphlets and essays by Said, Eagleton and Jameson. It was sort of like international legitimacy for the often perceived insular Irish cultural and political challenges. Plus we had read these writers in our Marxism/ feminist/ post-structuralist reading group. I was very interested in the writing of W. J. McCormack who had critiqued Heaney and wrote about art, abstraction and Marxist aesthetics in *CIRCA* and elsewhere. Bill McCormack also presented to our reading group, later he was an editor on the *Field Day Anthology* and Blue Funk commissioned him as

1. The Douglas Hyde Gallery was the first public contemporary art gallery in Ireland. It was founded in 1978 by the Arts Council of Ireland and Trinity College. *A State of Great Terror* featured collaborative and audio-visual multi-media works by members of Blue Funk (Evelyn Byrne, Valerie Conor, Brian Cross, Tom Green, Brian Hand, Jaki Irvine, Kevin Kelly) referring to the political situation. In "Screen and Screen Again", *CIRCA*, no. 100, summer 2002, p. 42-49, Shirley MacWilliam reviews the show and writes: "Blue Funk couched their aims within the broader ideological agenda of relationships between art production, institutions, and political and theoretical discourses. They refer to the potential of time-based work to be issue-based and site-specific and they extol the experimental, the contextual and the discursive as necessary dimensions of the endeavour" (<https://circaartmagazine.website/backissues/summer-2002-c100-screen-and-screen-again>).

Hugh Maxton for a text in the Sonsbeek 1993 catalogue². Sometimes back in this period we found it very awkward to listen to writers or literary critics address and show a lack of knowledge about contemporary visual art. I was intolerant of (the rare) instances when examples of established artists were being shoehorned into a supplementary argument or position.

VM: What angered you in Hutchinson's paper on postmodernism? Did he and *CIRCA* seem out of touch with the political and social situation at that time?

BH: Well the letters speak for themselves and I would recommend people to read them if they are curious. The intensity of this debate about modernism/postmodernism needs to be seen in a fraught context of intellectual/political/social debate happening back then³. *CIRCA* was not out of touch, in my opinion but it was more often too safe. I was certainly an avid reader of *CIRCA*, it was so important then. John Hutchinson's writing and position was paternalistic and occupying an imaginary position of the transcendent critic. It was simply not credible to police this complex debate, in a flowing logic or discursive argument about the absence of European modernity or other necessary structural conditions.

VM: You said that you weren't too sure, back in the 1990s, whether artists/public intellectuals or critically minded artists should work closely or at a distance from broad social and political groups. What were the risks? Has the situation changed now and do you hold different opinions?

BH: Yes, the situation today is different and there has been much movement away from the tight traditional power bases. The celebrated victories of marriage equality and lifting the ban on abortion have instilled a new confidence and broad appeal to organised progressive change. Artists like Alice Maher, Cecily Brennan and Rachel Fallon deserve great credit for campaigning the message of Repeal the 8th through art practice/praxis. In our local town myself and my wife had erected posters to counter really graphic anti-repeal images next to the church and our kid's school which would be the voting station. Though I went to vote on repeal with a pessimistic feeling, it turned out that I had completely misjudged my neighbours. Our rural town and county were bang in line with the decisive swing. Sinn Féin seems to have capitalised on this groundswell in the recent election results and I welcome that but I have reservations about the party and the possibilities of

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2. In the 1970s the Sonsbeek Park exhibitions, Arnhem, promoted progressive and experimental shows. The 1993 edition was curated by the American curator Valery Smith and tackled identity, transparency and process. Forty-eight artists were commissioned site-specific works. The 1993 edition is remembered as promoting a social practice of art.
 3. John Hutchinson, "Postmodernism in Ireland: Notes and Propositions", *CIRCA*, no. 48, November-December 1989, p. 23-27. See also Lucy Cotter, "Globalisation + Irish Art =?", *Third Text*, vol. 19, no. 1, January 2005, p. 16-26; Seamus Deane, "The Artist in Ireland", in *A Sense of Ireland*, exhibition catalogue, Dublin, A Sense of Ireland, 1980, p. 35-38; Valérie Morisson, "CIRCA: une aventure éditoriale au-delà des frontières", *LISA*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2014, p. 73-86.

significant democratic change to our capitalist system of government at national and EU level. I remember in the 1980s debating about whether to join Sinn Féin and going to an *Ard Fheis* in the pre-ceasefire mid-1980s to see if I could attend and listen to the debate about their policy of abstentionism to the Dáil. I remember I had to pass a group of police and detectives outside the Mansion House as you walked in; inside, you were searched by Sinn Féin security and questioned by them as to why you were there since I was not a delegate and then on the way out I was stopped by the guards and asked for my name address and what I was up to. Politics was, back then, a challenge to your comfort zone. In more recent years my political engagement/praxis is outside the party-political sphere. I have found a new role to my teaching and that is to work with my students and grassroots community development organisations to build bridges between 3rd level campuses and the local networks and make new long-term collaborations, new social learning and insights into social justice for students, staff and citizens.

VM: Some artists have lamented the recent shift from community arts to collaborative arts or participatory arts arguing that the political agendas and practices are not the same, less political to some extent. Would you similarly make a difference between these practices and labels?

BH: Well quite simply at ground level, nothing stays static or fixed, the fields are always shifting but the broad direction can be seen, as you say, to shift away from the political grassroots activist base to a “tamer” institutional, sanctioned social engagement templates and this shift has been well critiqued by Gregory Sholette, an artist and writer I greatly admire and have known well since the mid-1990s in New York⁴. There are intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for this. The community development sector and the arts sector have been drastically cut in funding since 2008 and after the crash many grassroots community-led development programmes were controversially disbanded and a new model of tendering for funding under the local/national government has established development companies as “businesses” to deliver/manage services. This new layer of bureaucracy dis-encourages social activism over stealth taxes or evictions for example. Solidarity, spontaneity and conscientisation can diminish in a climate of managed programmes with the hollow language of social enterprise and social regeneration. I welcome the new emphasis in higher education for social and community engagement in art and design though universities have still to do much much more. I also see the staggering power/control of authoritarian digital surveillance platforms as a keen threat to liberatory grassroots social/artistic movements.

4. Gregory Sholette (b. 1956, Philadelphia) published many texts on politically engaged art and was a member of collectives of artists and activists. Among his many books are *Art as Social Action* (New York, Allworth Press, 2018), *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London, PlutoPress, 2017) and *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London, PlutoPress, 2010).

VM: You teach “expanded sculpture” at NCAD. Has the teaching of sculpture changed a lot over the last decades and since you were an art student yourself?

BH: On the surface yes there are many dramatic changes and new debates in the field, but deeper down maybe not enough has changed. Back in the 1980s I remember, I hope not too romantically, the sculpture department at NCAD (no expanded practice in the title then) as a place for new thinking and practices (well new enough to Ireland) mostly coming from students and progressive staff with some great visiting artists, like James Coleman, Pat Murphy, John Roberts, Les Levine, Terry Atkinson and Robert Crumb. There was a fervour of intersectional debates about postmodernist theory, video art, feminism, Marxism and censorship amongst other things. Our student reading group organised by future members of Blue Funk was like our version of 1960s teach-ins. On the downside NCAD was small and higher education was exclusive and unrepresentative of the national demographic. Today there are fine art degree courses all around Ireland but the sector is struggling to find a relevance and the career choice of artist is losing attractiveness to school leavers. NCAD continues to attract great students, the institution is really only now coming out of a turbulent decade of government cuts from the economic crash that derailed its governance and leadership. I came back to NCAD in 2017 physically: the department’s workshops and studios were eerily the same. The hierarchy of the studio over the workshop was also intact. However, I’ve seen great potential alongside a realism in the delivery of high quality third level art education through undergraduate and graduate programmes in a city that is now hugely unattractive to students on tight budgets. Our newest programmes are ones that partner with off campus organisations and the Sculpture and Expanded Practice Department is running a dynamic year-long residency programme for students to develop their work with a grassroots community organisation (Rialto Youth Project) and a contemporary art centre (Rua Red) supported by Create (the national development agency for collaborative arts). We are also working on a new ecological-based learning year and a Master of Fine Arts Social Imagination programme to teach the next generation of socially engaged artists, designers, alternative educators and activists. Not surprisingly, given how poor art education has been taught at second level in Ireland (until the recent upheaval to the 40-year-old curriculum!) medium specificity and traditional individualist conceptions of what an artist is still hold sway amongst students. The greater ethnic and social diversity in Irish society has also been slow to appear at NCAD again for many reasons. Finally, the new paradigm of surveillance capitalism is a significant threat to progressive art education. The possibilities of thinking other to the social engineering agendas of today’s tech giants is an urgent new skill set to be taught. As is art, its materials and ecological thinking. Robots aside, sculpture at its heart is an embodied practice.

VM: How much of your creation is dependent on commissions? Are commissions for sculptures more abundant now than twenty years ago? Is it easier now for sculptors or artists devising installations to get sufficient support?

BH: Most of my larger scale work has been supported by commissions, project awards and self-financed. I don't make work for a private gallery or agent. Sculptures, even temporary, are expensive. Yes, more and more commissions are available through percent for art funding associated with infrastructural public projects, like schools, roads and utilities. But that is not a typical source for me as I do not make formalist permanent work and I usually select very specific contexts / situations / opportunities relevant to what I am working on. I have also been unsuccessful a number of times, which leaves a project proposal in suspended animation or worse. We have had a well-run National Campaign for the arts here trying to convince right wing governments to change direction and invest in the arts. The climate is tough, rents, inadequate studio provision, etc. but certainly it is not like the culture wars of the 1980s, very diverse forms of work are thankfully now supported.

VM: Site-specificity entails forms of improvisation. Is that a word that would describe your practice?

BH: Not a word I use much. In a generic sense I suppose the word is suitable for the audience encounter who have to assemble the work as they engage with the multiple elements and streams flowing through a piece. I once had an invited commission to consider making a "moving image work" and this resulted in a temporary work *The Car Called the Manager* (2001) and the piece was a night time drive through work on a derelict site so that it was a moving audience who made the moving images (fig. 1). The audience arrived in their cars and were offered a choice of an audio cassette described only by the numbers 1-9 to accompany their experience. So the experience was potentially quite different depending on your choice of number and the number of passengers in the car, etc. But this is perhaps uncertainty or chance based which is a strong element in making work rather than a strictly improvisational method. My site-specific work is usually well rehearsed, planned, edited and executed. Collaborative work can be richly improvisational because of so many personalities and intentions. Recently I edited and represented a 20-year-old 16mm film documenting the last days of the Project Arts Centre, Dublin and that work was quite different in approach for me and more improvisational in tone and attitude (fig. 2).

VM: Site-specific installations are often ephemeral. How do you perceive this specific temporality of the works?

BH: Ephemeral can mean temporality but more specifically I think of ephemerality in terms of materials that disintegrate and things of low value so I never called the work ephemeral. Time-based and temporary are adjectives I am more comfortable with. The works are documented and this is mostly just done for a "straight" record and not for any sense of new meaning. I work with a very good photographer Ros Kavanagh to document the work. For *Little War* in 2008 (fig. 3) I also worked with an ex-student Ann Madigan who was very skilled with pinhole photography to capture the piece in a very different way. Temporality can also allude to unfolding time sometimes pleasantly revealing new aspects or a new relevance to a work or exhibition from the past.

Fig. 1 – Brian Hand, *The Car Called the Manager*, temporary installation, audio and single channel video at College Farm, Carlow, 2001.

Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh.

Fig. 2 – Brian Hand, *Under the One Roof*, five channel video at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2019.

Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh.

Fig. 3 – Brian Hand, *Little War*,
temporary installation / performance at Ormonde Castle, Kilkenny, 2008.

Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh.

VM: You have regularly collaborated with other artists proposing multi-media works such as the installation and sound sculpture you created at GPO Witness History with Alanna O’Kelly, and Orla Ryan in 2016. How are such collaborations initiated? Are they the results of long exchanges and friendly connections with your partners that may be encouraged by art groups or institutions for instance? How do artists come and learn to work together?

BH: The collaboration with Orla has happened through many projects and we live together and share a studio. I have known and taught with Alanna for many years and out of a discussion about the commemoration of the 1916 Rising she suggested us all working together to explore what we might do. We found a very strong common theme around the metaphor of the Stormy Petrel and initially applied for an Arts Council award but were unsuccessful then we re-directed our energies to a commission at the GPO which we got. From that, we made a large scale work elements of which were then shown in Hanoi, Vietnam at the CUC Gallery, Vietnamese Women’s Museum and in Visual, Carlow and Rua Red, Dublin (fig. 4). Out of a conversation in early 2015 we had a journey with our new group Stormy Petrel / Guairdeall for two and a half years. Artists come together to share the conversation and I suppose if you are excited by the same things like sound and women’s hidden history you can see how together we could make something bigger than the sum of its parts. Our initial aims were modest but we discovered so much rich material it just grew into a large scale work with sound, sculpture, performance, archive film, newspapers, and an artist book.

VM: You opted for collaboration very early on. When did it become an obvious choice for you?

BH: Yes I suppose I can see the strengths above the weakness of collaboration. I enjoy the discussion and development of work, yes there are conflicts and break ups and I

Fig. 4 – Stormy Petrel/Guairedeall (Orla Ryan, Alanna O'Kelly and Brian Hand), *Mother Operated on Successfully*, performance, temporary installation at GPO Witness History, Dublin, 2016.

Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh.

can understand how people maybe on the outside can see more problems than there are. I've always tried to maintain my individual practice throughout collaborative working. But sharing a co-created work can really increase the value and depth of the work because everything is relational in the context of collaboration. You have to not be too precious and bring a sense of humour with you. Most art of scale is made by a production team in today's world and much of the most interesting art history was made by groups rather than individuals. In literature editors really should be called co-authors for example Gordon Lish and Raymond Carver or Ezra Pound and Vivienne Haigh-Woods editing of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

VM: You have a strong interest in history, as is the case of many Irish artists. Are young practitioners equally drawn to the past or do you feel they try to move beyond history and are reluctant to ground their works in an Irish context?

BH: From my experience, some younger artists are interested in Irish history, some from the angle of women's history of oppression and some in terms of a queer archive. History is not an obligatory subject in second level and as recent experience of Brexit has shown many young British people are completely unaware about the history of the British Empire, the Irish border, etc. We are now in the aftermath of a very surprising election in which Sinn Féin has received a record vote driven by a youth vote and I've been inquiring amongst students what they feel. Something has shifted they say and they long for change to the establishment.

Interview carried out between December 2019 and February 2020.

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