Chicken Lane

A walk through Stoneybatter

Adrian Duncan

Adult thought … should measure itself more honestly against the darkness and difficulty of human life and without losing sight of the irrational roots of this life.

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*

I live on St. Mary's Terrace, Stoneybatter. It is more a square than a terrace and there are twelve houses in it. My girlfriend and I live with our dog Gypsy in No. 2. Our house, which we rent, was built about a hundred years ago. It is constructed with artisan brick, has a pitched roof and timber first floor with two upstairs bedrooms. The rear bedroom is used as a study. We dismantled the bed and lifted the mattress up so that it leans against the wall, and I sit at my desk, in this room, which has good light, every day, reading and writing. The other bedroom faces out onto the square, and at night Niamh likes to leave the window open. The fresh air is nice, but the

surrounding area is quite noisy: dogs barking, distant helicopters, horses pounding stable doors, sirens, cars, shouting… so I ram two dirty old earplugs into my ears.

The walls on either side of our house are shared with neighbours. On the right hand side, No. 1, there live between two and eight noisy Georgians and a parrot, and on the other side, No. 3, there lives a doctor, whom I hear taking showers at what seem like odd hours of the day. I know this because I can hear her electric shower erupt and roar each time. The people who live in house numbers 4 to 8 are a relatively unknown to me. I used to meet the family from No. 6 in the grounds of the church up the road, in the middle of the day, when I was throwing a ball to our dog, Gypsy, and sucking on a takeout coffee.

To the rear of these church grounds there is a very high brick wall, on the other side of which there is Arbour Hill prison, mostly full of white-collar criminals and pederasts. The grounds of the church are very well kept. Two gardeners work there; one spends much of his day retelling his history of the place to whomever walks by, and the other is simple. The latter is very fond of Gypsy, and she of he. Along the wall to the side, which separates the prisoners from the church grounds, there is an enclosure of beautifully mown grass, in which you can find an old military graveyard. There are hundreds of large old headstones and tombs. Some are upright and self-supporting. Others lean back against the surrounding wall. Many have sunk into

the soil. Often, a small, plump, balding man of about forty rolls up and parks his bicycle against the small upstand wall that runs to one side of the enclosure. He takes a tennis ball out from between the wheel spokes, then a tennis racket, which sticks like a tail out of the spring-loaded catch at the back of his bike, and he begins to play tennis up against the prison wall. It is the gentlest game of tennis in the world.

I should say, before this goes any further, that I trained and worked as a structural engineer for over a decade but returned to study fine art at the age of thirty. I now make and write about art, though I still do small engineering jobs in little hinterlands of the one-time booming construction trade. What is left of this construction trade brings me to the backs of people's houses looking at possible extensions, up in people's attics advising on how to extend into it, in planning de-

partments in county council offices talking to undead people about demarcations and dates.

Last February I gave a sculpture workshop to a class of second-year students at the UCD School of Architecture. It was a short elective course called "Structure through Sculpture." Students were asked to create sculptures in the class, then to think of those sculptures as structures. First play, then analysis. I gave the students a sheet of cardboard and a knife and asked them to make a sculpture. Some of the students asked me what the brief was. Others went to their notebooks and started to design their sculptures. I had wanted these students to pick up the material, play with it, manipulate it, and see how it responded. I'd wanted to prove to them the value of the unforeseen.

And it is this designlessness – broadly and in fine detail – that I witness on and around the street I live, and which I want to study – not only to observe and record these street-level improvisations, but to forge improvisation in myself.

Even though Nos 9 to 12 are directly across the square from me, I have no real idea who lives in Nos 10 or 11. I think a taxi driver lives in one of them. A Romanian family with between three and five kids lives in No. 12. The man of the house – who is thick-set and black-haired – loves his car, a silver Mercedes Benz E200. He cleans it, or has his children clean it, almost every day.

Across the street from the square, on Arbour Place, there is a Muay

Thai boxing club. The boxers meet two or three times a week, and the square is filled with parked cars, and for an hour or so one can hear the muted hoots, thumps and shouts that come from the club. Beside the boxing club there is a house, which has been diced up into apartments. The external façade is brick, not old soot-stained brick, but new red shiny brick, and it looks preposterous. Beside that is a large, squat and shoddy wooden door, where a wild-looking group of young men and boys congregate. Behind the door are a number of stables. The group of young men and boys keep horses and ponies there and sometimes rig them up to a small steel racing trap and veer them around the streets of Stoneybatter. I have been walking past this group of young men and boys each day for more than two years now, and our greetings, though pleasant, are always brief. "'Story bud," they say. "Alright?" I say back.

Beside this stable entrance is a run-down house with signs that state "FOR SALE" over the smashed windows. Beside that is a marginally less run-down house that a sound engineer lives in. I think his name is Paul. According to my friend Feargal, the man who lived in that house before Paul constructed homemade house alarms for his home. If you were to look up under the front eaves, you could see one of them still. It is constructed from what looks like an electric hand drier casing, a blue light from a siren, green insulation tape, some wires, and across the small wooden plaque screwed to the front of it, the word "ALERT" is hand-written, in now-faded red paint. Ap-

parently, before this he made a fake CCTV camera with a shoebox and a piece of tubing and mounted it on the side of his house and trained it to the front door. The fake camera is no longer there, but the rigging is.

Within any creative process I believe there should be a period of blind and *useless* play. Ways of thinking should not be designated to specific practices. The age of disciplines, though economically embedded, is in an alienating intellectual ruin, through an inherent lack of communicability. Within the broader discipline of building, for example, you find disciplines like architecture and engineering, and within engineering you find disciplines like civil engineering, structural, mechanical, chemical, hydraulic, electrical, electronic, computer, etc. The first principles of engineering are generally retained, however the more specific the disciplines become, the more separate they become. Nowadays, a chemical engineer using the language of chemical engineering is not understandable to a structural or civil engineer. The same, to a lesser degree, can be said of fine art today, and in particular the language used to engage with fine art. I do not want to suggest that specialization in engineering is leading us to build bridges, sewers, and hydroelectric generators that will not work – or, in fact, that will work less efficiently than the same things built by less specialized engineers. What I am suggesting is that a period of play is a kind of pre-linguistic phase of creation in which disciplines converge.

Across the street from the sound engineer's house is the house where my friend Feargal lives. He is a lanky, laid-back photographer, and I would say that he is an exemplary fellow. He co-founded (with Miranda Driscoll) and helps run the Joinery, an artist space, gallery, and music venue located nearby on Arbour Hill. The corner of the house where Feargal lives also forms the corner of Arbour Place. It is a tight dogleg. Arbour Place has had a number of names, one of which was Chicken Lane, and according to the mechanics a few yards up the road, Patrick Kavanagh would often come up to the corner and sit on the milestone there and write, or piss, or do whatever it was that Kavanagh did. The milestone forms one side of an entrance to more stables. The wild-looking group of young men and boys move their horses and ponies from one stable to the other. It seems to be all they do. There is something truly strange about lying in bed, half asleep, and hearing, in the middle of a city, the sound of the arrhythmic clop of horses' hooves on asphalt.

On the few days leading up to the first Sunday of each month, that corner becomes very active. The horses and ponies are exercised rigorously and groomed in preparation for the Smithfield horse market. If the group of young men and boys come back from this market with a new horse or pony that is not accustomed to cars and traffic, they tie the horse or pony to a downpipe in a crook in the street and ask people driving by to do them the favour of beeping their horns at them. A father and a son who own a truck park adjacent to these stables. They are referred to as "truck man and truck boy," and I know nothing more about them, except that they are always together, either sitting in their truck and looking out of their truck or standing outside of their truck and looking at their truck.

A couple of years ago Feargal took a blade to a gate perpendicular to where this truck is usually parked and scored the name Tadgh into its blue-grey paint. Tadgh is an old friend of Feargal's – he edits films and apparently is very highly thought of in the trade. He and Feargal have made films about the area, for example *Boxing*, a film about a local boxing club (not the Thai boxing one I just mentioned, another one, a local, traditional boxing club), and *Bow Street*, a film about nearby Bow Street. Until fairly recently you could still see Feargal's inscription, but now all of these gates on this street have been painted over. The workmen from Dublin City Council who repainted these gates only painted up as far as they could reach, so some of the gates look like two-tone swatches. The new paint has given these gates a crumpled, glossy look. I photographed them all.

Further up the street there is the garage where the mechanics work – those mechanics who told me about Kavanagh. They are two brothers, both in their fifties or early sixties. A tall man works for them; he reminds me of Feargal. He is pleasant and affable, and often, when I walk by the garage doors with Gypsy, he stops and talks to me about nothing in particular. The two brothers are shorter, one stocky and the other slight. The stocky one looks clever; the slight

one looks nervous. I don't speak much to either of them. During business hours the flanks of the street fill up with cars, and driving down the centre becomes difficult. By six in the evening they start putting the cars away, into the yard alongside the garage. If you were to look up and across the stables from the front gate of the mechanics' yard you would see an unfinished roof extension. The first-floor windows below this skeletal extension reveal rooms with walls full of nothing but books. The ground floor, which you can't see from the front gate of the mechanics' garage, is Lilliput Press, one of the best-known small book publishers in Europe. When I take Gypsy out for her late-night stool I often see that the lights are on, up there in the library – it must be Antony Farrell, the publisher, reading a book, or entertaining.

To the right of the garage entrance, as you look at it, are two low-roofed cottages. I know that sometimes, one of the families in these cottages would put out food for the cats, of which there are many on this street. There was a period of time, a few months ago, when someone was putting out cat food on the street with poison in it. Niamh told me that she saw three old ladies shooing Gypsy away from some food they had just put down. A few days later the street was littered with dead cats, and Gypsy became very ill but recovered. I don't tend to like animals but I am fond of Gypsy. I like watching her chase around the park after a scent. There is something unreasonably militant in the way in which she pursues a smell, head down,

zig-zag, learning, then discarding and following another. By this I mean that she has a transient but earnest fidelity to the initial scent, followed by the chasing of it down until another scent of different colour and intensity re-ruptures her pursuit, and how all of these iterations amount to seemingly nothing, or at least not what was set out for.

Recently I brought my video camera, Gypsy, and a ball to the back of the park that I mentioned earlier. There were a lot of leaves on the ground, some had been gathered in clumps. From a certain angle the trees make a corridor of sorts. Here I videoed gypsy chasing after the ball that Niamh would throw. I was interested in the intensity with which Gypsy pursued the ball, and how once she had the ball in her mouth, her behaviour switched. The ball, I realized, is an object of desire that occupies positions in the world exterior to her. If the ball is stationary it occupies a position that Gypsy pursues directly. If the ball is moving when she comes upon it, Gypsy has to anticipate and snap at where it will be when she will be satisfied, then when this place is in her mouth, the ball is in her mouth – she can feel it in her mouth, and she shudders to a halt (leaves flying). She carries this place of sated desire away with her, wagging her tail, head bent, until her senses are ruptured by something new, usually a scent. Not long after that day of filming Gypsy, I found a venetian blind in the middle of a mound of dumped rubbish along the side of our road. I brought the blind to my studio and took it apart. I bound the bottom

half of the slats together with a piece of ribbon, stood them upright, and on the last slat I bent the free end outward and stuck a pin between it and the next slat to hold this separation, thus producing a curve in the outermost slat. The ribbon binding the slats was horizontal, the slots in the slats were horizontal, the top ends of the slats drew an approximately horizontal line, the pin was held horizontally too, then I thought, here we have a brief history of the horizontal. The slats in this venetian style first appeared centuries ago, drawing horizontal lines across the world one might peer out upon, and they still do, but here in this situation these slats are standing vertically, and are being used to hold a pin horizontally, a pin that in turn expresses the “bendiness” of one particular slat on the end, which I bent. Its shape is a function of my interaction with its material. The material is a function of this moment in historical development, which is a function of the usage, which is function of aesthetics, ergonomics, economics, geography, geo-economics, etc. If you run your finger along the slat’s curve you feel the geometry it offers you. You run your finger along its curve until the material stops, then there is nothing to resist your touch - the secrets of its material become distant and feeble lies.

When disciplines converge, they converge differently for different individuals. To locate the points of compatibility between disciplines is not important. What is important is the way in which the points of compatibility are described by the individuals who perceive them.

No two individuals will ever describe a shared activity between two or more disciplines in the same way. For example, I found – or realized – recently, that an “understanding” of the Navier Stokes

Existence and Smoothness problem – an unsolved mathematical mystery within fluid dynamics, was curiously compatible with Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* as well as section 6.54 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – this compatibility is the subject of another essay I've written since starting this one. Not only did these instances share a description of an inherent sense of suspension, but that the modes by which the description was made, i.e. geometry, photography and language, were being exposed as insufficient methods of inquiry into their own natures. This linkage was accidental, in flux, solipsistic, and inter-subjective. It is of play, and I believe the urge to link these perceived cross-discipline points of compatibility is courageous, optimistic, cacophonous. It is also subversive, because there is no intention toward a teleological end-point, or a definition of a thing that is synonymous with *what the thing does*. It is a behavioural form of disavowing reason. It is using reason to be un-reasonable. It is subjugating reason to the position of memory in a rationally blind activity. This play offers an individual view of the fragmented consciousness of society that is in turn made further chaotic by each new individual contribution. These contributions pile to form a structure of failure.

Near to the place where I picked up that discarded venetian blind, Arbour Place comes to an end and meets Arbour Hill. If you were to turn around at the end of the street and look back up it, you are offered a continuous view of the ad-hoc and designless unfolding of it, the wobble, the range of colours and finishes on the walls, brick,

plaster, PVC, timber, render, pebble-dash, bare block, painted block, cut stone, rubble, concrete, steel gate posts, and so on. Along the top of the walls that flank the street there is either broken and embedded glinting glass, upturned nails, or helixes of barbed wire with shreds of material caught in them and above the walls and roofs; wires of different thicknesses draw limp lines in the sky.

The street itself is cobbled at the sides and covered with tar down the centre and is filthy – oil, petrol, diesel, horseshit, catshit, dogshit, glass, food, plastic bags, computer screens, bones, fridges, urine, booze, blood, rust, cans, jars, TVs, and it strikes me that I live in a time of animals, machines and a virtual and awful decadence. This virtual decadence I see stems from a hidden redundancy in design that renders everything manufactured for everyday use fat, *squat and fat*. And inscrutable. This redundancy is hidden and inscrutable, because everything you enter, pick up, sit on, use, is overdesigned beyond reasonable risk. This cultural insulation from the actual strength of stuff has an effect on the mind, and makes behaviour and speaking couched. It is a mindset based on factors of safety, and of fear. Fear of an I being misunderstood, humiliated, harmed, sued, jailed. This fear transgresses the public spheres of art, science and politics. I want to make two-footed lunges into these systems, into these spheres of influence, these spheres of fear, and I only want to do this with play and rigour and the inclusion of disciplines, because there are disciplines and the intention should be that they are blended, blurred, and out

of reach, by this I mean that the intention to blend should only inform the direction of the effort, by this I mean that the direction of the effort to blend should arise from a range of speculations, a range of effort traces. When activities harden they become disciplines that can be formally built upon, and across these disciplines there are any number of points of compatibility that can exist for a moment and are legible. It is between these points of compatibility that the individual resides. The bearing, bias, or colour with which this relation is described is how he or she can be discerned.

Adrian Duncan is co-editor of *Paper Visual Art*.

Images:

1. *Gypsy*, hd video still, 2011, Adrian Duncan

2. Detail of *A Brief History of the Horizontal*, found venetian blind slats, ribbon & pins, 2011, Adrian Duncan

Some Blind Alleys