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Music in Alternative Spaces

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Music in artist-run alternative spaces in Dublin: an interview.

[Seán Mac Erlaine – Music]

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When asked to write about music in Dublin and its future, I had no interest in trying to see whether someone in Dublin is going to invent a new scale or whether ‘the lost chord’ will be uncovered in a Dublin suburb in fifteen year’s time! So, rather than talking about the fabric of music itself or suggesting who might be making great music into the future, perhaps the means of production, where people play and these social factors are the stuff of real importance and where significant change is taking place and will continue for people making music and their audiences. I talked with the organisers of three alternative art spaces where music, among other things, is presented. These alternative spaces are, for me, a really good example of a new avenue for music performance (not all music may suit this arrangement, sure) and they represent a very positive development in terms of bypassing the dominant licensed venue model, which doesn’t always serve the music as good as it could. I choose these particular spaces because I believe they each represent a new working model of how music is being performed today in Dublin and they raise questions as to whether this model may become more and more favoured into the future and what implications that scenario holds. I talked with Jack Phelan and Erin Michelle from Hello Operator, in Dublin’s North Inner City; Miranda Driscoll and Feargal Ward from The Joinery, in Arbour Hill, Dublin 7; and Ian Oliver and Monika Sapielak from The Centre For Creative Practices in the heart of Dublin’s traditional Georgian business district. Although the interviews were recorded on three separate occasions in the three spaces, the texts were treated as an audio collage (as many similar topics were touched upon) and transcribed into the format below.

History

Seán: Although there is a longer history to artist-run spaces in Dublin, it seems that over the last four years or so, more and more independent alternative spaces have appeared in Dublin. There’s a couple of myths surrounding their formation: the first is to see these as a result of the property crash, with artists snapping up cheap warehouse spaces. The other temptation has been to lump these spaces together under a common banner, implying a movement of sorts. But your spaces debunk these ideas, don’t they?

Miranda: We started up 2008, early 2008, so pre-recession. So no, it wasn't as a response to the recession. But it was a response to challenging the accepted norms for progress for the artist after graduation and into their career. So, as a non-commercial space it takes out the representation of the artist by a gallery. In a place like this, artists can get stuck into showing their own work and not wait around to be shown by somebody else.

It started for us when we were looking for a place to work in and we came across this building. And then, in terms of the music we were just approached by an improvising musician initially and then very quickly we saw that musicians, even more so than visual artists, were really excited about places that were challenging the traditional venue approach. Other than that there isn't an agenda or sense of being part of a movement of artists setting up spaces.

Ian: We started the Centre For Creative Practice (CFCP) in September 2009. I had been working for the Irish Writers Centre and had been taking music photographs for a number of years for independent bands right through to RTÉ performing groups and most stops in between. When the funding was cut to the Writers Centre, we (with my partner Monika) decided we were going to start somewhere that was basically geared towards literature, maybe with a mix of genres but mostly to do with courses and education.

It soon became very apparent that courses weren't necessarily going to be the way that we were going to pay the rent let alone pay ourselves, which we still don't do, but we do pay the rent these days! So we started looking at events and what sort of things we could do and being friends with some musicians, music became part of that while literature took a back step. So music, visual arts, photography and film became very important.

Seán: Can you give an outline of how the economics of running a space works out? Do you receive funding or how do you cover costs?

Ian: Basically we get seven grand from outside sources, which is two grand from Dublin City Council, five grand from the Arts Council which has to go on our programme – we are not allowed to use it for core costs. But, for instance, if you bring a quartet over from the UK you are looking at a grand straight away, so it doesn't go very far. And that's not just towards music, it's towards visual art, it's toward

photography, film, everything. So, one of the big problems is funding. It's difficult because, ok we don't get paid but we want the artists to get paid. And guys doing stuff for nothing: it's not helping creativity at all in any particular genre. Y'know there's very, very few full time musicians in Ireland, most of them do something else other than making music.

Monika: So we are 98% independent, of course we do get a little bit of funding but it's just really a handshake.

Erin: We did apply a few times for funding, but have never gotten any. But in a way it's a good thing, it has forced us to have our own survival strategy. And you know, if next month things don't work out, they don't work out! And we are prepared to walk away from it and do something else. We try to balance it so that a commercial TV shoot can in effect subsidise somebody else being here banging on glasses or whatever.

Jack: We see it first as a performance space and the rental thing as secondly, but it's not always that way around money wise. As long as it's going well and we are enjoying it and bringing something unusual and exciting to the city then it's great. If not – gone – we'll do something else. The few collective approach things we have been to have seemed pretty fruitless because you end up realising that the reason you started up a space like that was not to be part of something else! And periodically people represent it that way, or someone thinks that it would be a good idea to have a collective of everyone...

Music in visual spaces:

Seán: Every visual artist *has* to have a studio: it's an amazing tradition they have developed compared to musicians. Shouldn't musicians all have their own studios as well? So far, to my knowledge, there has been no group of musicians who have organised and created a performance space, like you guys have or the general visual art community has for generations now in this town. So although none of these spaces have been set up by musicians, we are fortunate that you are all interested in hosting live music but us musicians are really all piggybacking on you guys.

Miranda: Right, I have never thought about it like that actually. I guess most visual artists would strive to have a separate space to work in that's not their house and perhaps that comes from having a space in art college. But I don't know why musicians don't do this, why is that?

Seán: I would put it down to a cultural inertia! But maybe in the future musicians in Dublin might now be more inclined to do this themselves, to have a performance space. It seems like a really important thing.

Ian: I wonder if it's because musicians have this feeling that, well we are always poor for a start so spending money on a space is not seen as feasible and if I got a piano or something that needs moving I might need to carry it around because I am playing a gig and actually I've got a bedroom, that'll do. Also the majority of music gigs will take place in pubs, whereas art exhibitions tend not to take place in pubs. So if a musician is looking for a space he'd almost be looking for a space in a pub.

Jack: When we set up our first space, Red Space, in 2007, we did see it as a place where the bands who needed the rehearsal room there could also perform there. So we could run gigs there but we called it a gallery, or a very flexible gallery that could function as anything, but it really was more of a performance space.

Seán: So how did musicians react to it? Did people respond to it?

Jack: Yeah, we did a really great job on the room with the resources that we had. It was very well sound-proofed and had a nice size. But we found that the bands that would be interested and *need* a sound proof room would be loud bands. They tended to be indie rock and if at certain points in the year we were desperate to get bands in to fill up a slot to cover some of the rent and we started not caring about what kind of music they were playing. And of course it became tough then as property prices began falling and some bands took the attitude that they shouldn't need to pay a certain price for a rehearsal space.

Erin: But at the same time, there was more and more interest in the performances rather than rehearsals, happening in that room, so that was what was getting attention and people seemed to be interested in this. So then when we moved to Hello Operator we just said, y'know, we're not going to call it a gallery. First and foremost it's not for exhibitions necessarily, although we do still visual work – there's art work on the walls but it's not the first purpose of the space now.

Curating the space

Seán: So there's an interesting thing that came up there: you said you weren't into the music that some groups were playing. Is there a curatorial role then? Do you vet what happens?

Erin: Yeah, people do come to us with proposals and we turn them away. There is definitely a sort of thing that we really want to support. So things that can't happen in a nightclub or...

Jack: It's not very well defined. I mean there's nowhere where we have a document that says "we will accept the following..."! You see, this space tends to dictate a lot of that for us which is really nice because we were very attracted to it when we saw it first. It acts like an amazing passive filter because people who want to do something that wouldn't suit here tend not to like it when they see it. They come up here and say "hmm, no, it's not quite right" and then we go "phew!" They will usually make the decision themselves. Or when people see it and say "oh, it has to happen here", then we tend to really like the idea in the first place. So with a place like this which demands a certain thing really, in a way, it makes things very easy. It curates for us.

Erin: We always meet and talk with everyone who wants to use the space to find out what their ideas are and how do you want to use the space. I definitely think that personal thing is important and we put a lot of our selves into whatever happens here, if something is on we are always here.

Ian: Yes, we do put on our own stuff. There is a room for hire, but there is also a way that we curate stuff as well. Because we think that Dublin possibly needs it, or needs a space like it.

Seán: In The Joinery will certain bands say "we wanna play here" and you'll say "it's not right for you...?"

Miranda: Yes, yes we do and more so now. At the beginning it was easy, people were emailing us all the time wanting to play, we'd listen to their music and simply say yes or no. It was really simple. I would have to say, at this point, that I have learnt so much about music over the last few years and that I really didn't have any ideas about music before then. So I am learning as I go along. I think if the music is more suited to a more traditional venue they would be better off just going and playing in Whelan's. So we definitely try to find more unorthodox stuff, the more 'out there' at times the

better! It keeps us on our toes a little bit. But now since the start of this year, we have started inviting musicians to play. There is still a bit of both, but it's mostly us scouting around more now. The only curatorial role, and I would use that term carefully, that we play would be that we might invite someone and then think of putting them alongside somebody else – what happens if we put them together and maybe that's an influence from the gallery space. So that's been fun. Often with a cross of mediums as well. So we feel a bit braver about having more input now.

Feargal: We have a call for submissions out now, trying to unearth new musicians and sound artists that might think that their stuff is a bit too abstract or obscure or bedroom-ridden to try it out here. So we are just trying to break into that, perhaps with people who haven't performed in front of an audience before. So they have to submit and we listen to their work and see. It's interesting to see what we might unearth with that.

Seán: Does that mean you see yourselves as having a developmental role? Are you interested in influencing things? It sounds like you are giving people a chance or a helping hand.

Feargal: Yes, but also to get something back, I think it's a flow and return thing though. We want to see people in here doing stuff that we haven't seen because we can work that into what's happening in the front of the gallery. That has already happened loads with musicians here; I work on documentary films and musicians who have played here have ended up sound tracking these films. And the same editor has used these musicians for bigger feature films...we are creative people so the idea of just being a facilitator or a developer - I wouldn't have much interest in that. So the flow and return thing has been really good.

Leaving the bar behind:

Seán: Experience has shown musicians that when performing in an unsubsidised licensed room, at the end of the night the bottom line is always the barman's till. So it seems to me that, working in these kinds of spaces, there's much more flexibility and sensitivity to musicians, there's an element of the musicians, the venue and the audience all being on the same side of the fence. These spaces provide a safe place for performance which is unique in a non-subsidised environment where the promoter (quite often the performers themselves) is freed from the proprietor's concerns about

selling alcohol. The vast majority of Dublin's music venues rely on alcohol sales as an important part of the economic equation to make the space work financially.

Ian: Yeah, we're not interested in what goes into the bar till because we don't have a bar. And if people want to come, they come because they want to listen.

Seán: Leaving simple economics aside, there are so many other complexities with traditional performance spaces that's why so many musicians are interested in playing in a room like this. If you don't have the make-or-break factor of having to deal with the barman's till at the end of the night and you can work with people like yourselves instead, you have a much more sympathetic and symbiotic interaction.

Miranda: Yes, and at the end of it you are dealing with a person, not an institution or a place or a bar. And although it's BYOB [bring your own beer] here, in three and a half years we have never had any drunken scenes. Once you take the bar out and people throwing money behind a bar the night becomes about what's happening in the room. That's the only reason people will be here. And the people who are performing really feel and sense that from the audience that is here.

Seán: For me, it's inspiring that this model is now changing. The local Dublin music scene is just at the start of working with this new model of no bar, no institution, an informal space whose *raison d'être* (at that moment during the gig) is to act as a listening space. With low overheads, a DIY approach and, in the main, voluntary workers these spaces aren't blown about by the ill winds of national bankruptcy. The music continues regardless. But it does rely on the generosity and the spirit of the people to make it happen. It already has changed for certain groups of musicians and into the future this path will become more popular, it's also the cheapest way of putting a performance on and, yet, sometimes the most rewarding for makers and listeners alike.

Feargal: I think the best thing about The Joinery or any of the other spaces is taking the performance out of its 'comfortable home'. Yet, it's funny because I don't think music has a comfortable home in the traditional venues or in the bars. The bar, the drink, the night out, the loudness... music in a lot of venues is secondary, it's almost like it's relegated to something over to one side. But with small intimate spaces with no P.A., the idea is that everyone is coming here to listen to music.

Miranda: I have become quite intolerant when I go to a gig now in a established venue. It's quite you know...it's shit! If everyone's talking over the music, and then combined with the lack of intimacy...

Seán: It's a paradox, isn't it that people can pay twenty euro into a gig and then talk their way through it, but if it's a donation affair or a five euro hit, people can be absolutely respectful to the performers and listen to every note.

Feargal: Absolutely. I think that this kind of space or set up is a more natural home for music. It seems to work on so many levels. We've had thousands of people through here for gigs of all kinds, and we have never had a drunk person. But in town, you can easily pick a venue where you'll regularly have at least ten people screaming, fighting, drunk... There's a weird kind of self-regulation here when you take away all those systems – bar, pub, ticket, exchange, vend – people really get it. They seem to relax, they don't shout and they just drink what they want.

Miranda: It's also to do with the way the space seems like an extension of someone's place. It generates a natural sense of respect.

Seán: It seems to me that the whole sense of the ritual of music is much easier to pick apart and to look at in a space like this than a venue with a high stage, a sound man waiting for you to start and a large P.A. It's easier to build a community around the music in an honest way. Obviously you can do great things in a big purpose built room with good lighting too, it's just a different thing. It has been a very rewarding thing for all the musicians I have ever seen playing here. And that's true because otherwise we wouldn't keep coming back – we are not in it for the money!

Location:

Seán: The Centre For Contemporary Practice is located in Dublin 2's Georgian business district; Hello Operator is in Rutland Place, an alleyway off Parnell Square; and The Joinery is in Arbour Hill. How much does the location affect what happens in the space?

Ian: I think in some respects the location picked *is* more than anything else in particular. It's wouldn't be, geographically, my ideal location, it's a very business-y area, here just off Baggot Street. During the weekend and the evening footfall outside the front door is practically nil. This time of day it's pretty busy but who wants to go to a

gig at three o'clock in the afternoon? That is an issue, if we were in Temple Bar, for instance, that's an ideal location.

Jack: The location has affected us both good and bad. If this space as is was on the southside you could get a hell of a lot more business in terms of rental. Where we are tucked down an alley way, there is zero visibility and probably negative footfall!

Erin: But, in a way that's nice because there's that air of the undiscovered. People are thinking "where am I going? Should I even be going down here." And I like that. When they come in the door they are still not sure what is going to be inside and that's why people get upstairs and say "oh wow, it's clean!" And that's a progression – it's a second generation space after Red Space. I think the building that you're in and its location is really important and has a huge effect on your outlook and what you do.

Miranda: The Joinery is not in the city and there's a bit of an effort to get here, but there is a sense of community here and we have both lived here in the area on and off for years. We have got to know a lot of people who live around here and a lot of the artists and musicians who live locally have played in here.

Feargal: You can leave the front door open when a gig is on and that's really nice, a couple of hundred metres down the road we would need to have security guys on the door, it changes so quickly in Dublin. It's a bit of an oasis here, it's a unique little pocket.

Seán: It will be interesting to see if more of these spaces open more centrally to see how that would work. Or would it work at all I wonder?

Feargal: Well anything that's off the mainstream should be off the main road. I mean by having it on Dame Street, how would it work?

Who plays here & who listens?

Seán: Which musicians uses these spaces? And who comes out to listen to them?

Ian: We didn't want just to be a white box gallery, we wanted people to come in and interact with the space, so hence we have beanbags on the floor rather than chairs and it's great for doing smaller intimate events. We do lots of experimental music, electro-acoustic stuff, contemporary classical. The one thing we tend to shy away from is rock

and indie, purely because the space isn't set up for it, we don't have a licence, although we have no problem with people bringing their own booze but it's not really the way the space needs to develop. There are so many spaces catering for that in town.

Seán: What about the idea of Dublin today with recording industry expiring and the industry now getting more and more involved with live music. So we see the resurrection of bands who haven't done anything for twenty years playing in Dublin. With this kind of a commercial push does this resurgence in attending live music trickle down to spaces like these? And are musicians more interested now in getting out there and playing instead of sitting in their bedrooms and producing tracks?

Jack: I am a little out of touch to be honest, but being here is great because the music comes to us. And I have really become very interested in improv music and hybrid-jazz-electro-whatever and since we have been involved in the space we have come across the best that Dublin has to offer. But I do get the feeling that among more mainstream-tending bands and musicians that they are more and more aware that you need to have a great live act. So I think a good bit of that does trickle down to electronic music for instance where you have to think about your live show and I think that's a good thing.

Erin: But from the point of view of, say, a band who are trying to make the next big leap, I don't think the space like Hello Operator appeals to them. They want to play commercial venues and have posters all around town and do a certain thing which is not really the way we work. But then we do get audiences in who might not know what they are going to see...

Seán: Or what they just saw! Because, yes, it's not a big room, there's space for forty to fifty seats, maybe seventy standing. So that eliminates a lot of peoples' ambitions!

Jack: It does seem that the people who play here, either tend towards smaller spaces or else it's used for peoples' side projects. This space is informal and friendly and so people feel free to try out works-in-progress.

Erin: And because we try to make it fair. So if it's a gig where we don't really know how the audience will be, it will be a split on the door. So they're not paying to rent a venue up front and all the pressure that that brings.

Miranda: For me, the interesting thing is the cross-over between visual art and music now. Whereas before they were very separate. There's an equal emphasis on both here, they work very differently and there's a lot more work involved, for us, in the gallery stuff. So with funding, there's a real problem there with the separation of these practices. The Arts Council model is an old fashioned model; I am really interested in where the two meet. People coming to gigs are exposed to the gallery and vice versa, and we have found that some interesting collaborations have taken place between sound artist, visual artists and musicians because of that. I don't think that happened so much before. Previously the gallery was seen as a pristine white space and having musicians there was a really strange idea.

Monika: What we try to do is mix audiences. Not to have a place where people only come to see an exhibition, no, just the opposite: people come to a concert and see the exhibition. People who come to an exhibition might stay for the gig. I think it keeps the place alive, because when you look at many galleries and venues, they suffer because for quite a substantial part of their opening hours they are empty. That's what we are trying to avoid in any possible way.

Seán: Talking about performing in a small space like this, in front of say fifty people, there is something for the audience and also for the musicians in terms of the amount of contact you can have. When you stop playing, put down your guitar, you are standing right in front of your audience. There's no backstage thing and the musicians are forced to present the music in a very honest manner. And I think that experience is an important thing, and I think it's going to become more and more important in the future. At this point, our lives are being channelled through the internet and basic human interaction is becoming a less common thing. Same goes for experiencing music up close and in the flesh. These spaces overcome this tendency and I can see this standing to them in the future.

Miranda: Pretty much all the gigs in The Joinery are busy now. It will be interesting to see what happens with our current call for submissions and if people are really emerging.

Seán: So it's interesting that people are coming here because it's The Joinery, sometimes without knowing what the music will be like.

Miranda: Yes, I think that's happening much more. And a lot of that audience comes from the visual side of things.

Feargal: Yeah, I think having an almost radical diversity in the programming, rather than having three noise acts and getting the noise crowd, that gets a bit insular, you can get a good mix.

Miranda: And now, here, there isn't that risk on paying twenty quid to see the music and expensive drinks, so people will come out and just see what's on.

Seán: And for people who don't drink, there's much less pressure there too. You're welcome to just show up, sit there and listen.

The space shapes the music:

Seán: Do you think the listening attitude changes the nature of the music practice itself?

Ian: I think it gives the musicians a bit more confidence. It might be a bit scary to start off with because "oh shit, these people have actually come to listen to us," there's no distraction. But I think that the musicians themselves think "we actually have an audience."

Seán: I am interested to see if the music can respond to the space in a meaningful way and I think it does. So the building and the architecture itself starts to govern what goes on and might even colour the fabric of the music itself. These influences will always be more obvious with improvised or experimental music which has room to adapt instantly to its surroundings.

Jack: It seems so. And the audience for sure does. This space can catch people off guard because perhaps they are expecting a warehouse interior and they can go very quiet, there's almost a church-like atmosphere. Their voices drop and that's an amazing thing for music and that's a product of the size and the features and the fact that it's so quiet in here as well. There's nobody else working here when there is music on. About an hour into a set of music, the audience kind of relaxes and you start seeing eyes looking up, drifting around the beams as they listen to the music, it's like visuals in a way.

Miranda: Also, it's kind of a funny little place, it can be an awkward room at times for the audience. There's that pillar there in the way and it's not a custom made space so you are working in the space that you have. Again, that interrupts the stage versus audience model.

Seán: If this alternative spaces model continues into the future (and we agree that that's likely) perhaps with momentum and continued practice each space may develop its own sound. I really like the idea that a 'Joinery sound' for instance could develop.

Feargal: You can see it the development of some groups in Dublin now. A lot of the experimental things that they now have ended up doing are informed by what they were doing in gallery type spaces. And it's stuff that they could never have tried out in the traditional venues; you just wouldn't go down on your knees and try out this trumpet stuff for 15 minutes until you got it right in front of an audience! It just wouldn't happen, but in here it's quite natural to do that. It's experimental to the point of work-in-progress, it's not just performance, it's musicians working.

Coda

At the time of writing in July 2011, these spaces and several other alternative, non-profit, artist-run spaces in Dublin continue to present music regularly to local audiences. Current economics and a changing cultural practice point to this becoming a long term situation. It is fashionable to talk of Ireland's maturing as a nation in the twenty first century, yet I view these developments in that light. Dublin audiences are, today, looking beyond the traditional presentation of music as mediated through an alcohol licence, a promoter, entry policies, profit margins and a circus of other obstacles between the musicians and audience. These artist-run spaces offer a real alternative to this system with many interesting artists working in these spaces today, supported directly by audiences. Fundamentally, though, it is the organisers of these spaces we have to be grateful to for a sometimes thankless job of committing themselves to this work and safeguarding these new spaces for artistic and musical adventure.

Interviewees:

Ian Oliver & Monika Sapielak

Centre for Creative Practices, 15 Pembroke Street Lower, Dublin 2 | www.cfcp.ie

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Jack Phelan & Erin Michelle

Hello Operator, 12 Rutland Place, Dublin 1 | www.hellooperator.org

Miranda Driscoll & Feargal Ward

The Joinery, 6 Rosemount Terrace, Arbour Hill, Dublin 7 | www.thejoinery.org

Seán Mac Erlaine is a Dublin-based musician, composer and music producer. He works in a wide variety of settings from free improvisation, contemporary jazz to folk music and experimental theatre performing with a diverse range of musicians and artists reflecting his own versatility and interest in cross-platform work.

An accomplished woodwind instrumentalist, Seán plays alto and soprano saxophones as well as clarinet and bass clarinet. He holds a first degree honours Masters of Music (Perf.) from DIT and a Diploma in Jazz Performance awarded by The Guildhall School of Music, London. He is currently a PhD candidate at GradCAM, developing a practice-led research around live electronics in solo woodwind performance.

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