



**Hidden Dips**

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## ***Altering Perceptions: New Work by Conor McFeely***

MCAC is proud to present 'Hidden Dips' an installation by Conor McFeely, one of Northern Ireland's most interesting installation and video artists. Through the use of three-dimensional works, video projection, ultraviolet light and mixed media Mc Feely has created an environment where both meaning and irony co-exist. Although the overall installation is made up of a series of disparate elements they are all interrelated, constructed together as a single unit. A common theme running throughout the show is one of parallel meanings. There are two roads, two ways of seeing, two levels of conceptual creative processes as well as multiple meanings.

'Hidden Dips' epitomises MCAC's dedication to alter perceptions and create opportunities for people to experience both new art and interpretations of ideas in a way that allows the viewer to decide how they wish to perceive the work. The notion of conceptually 'unapproved' or no go areas are echoed in certain spaces in Craigavon, therefore connecting and making the show more relevant for local viewers while also being a universal theme.

The curation process consists of mediation, interpretation and presentation-between artists and the public. The artists who are commissioned to create new work at MCAC are selected based on several criteria-a high standard and track record of challenging artwork that 'alters perceptions', innovative approaches to process and practice; and particularly work that aims to relate to the space and the 'place' of Portadown / Craigavon / NI. Good art has both a resonance to

place and space both locally and internationally and this show does that. Also, it needs to be able to be read by local viewers and international viewers-getting them to see differently and think differently. Some emotion or reaction is necessary. More and more in contemporary art the role of curator and art administrator is to act for both the artists and the public. Contemporary art is sometimes hard to get, but good art has the ability to speak to everyone-viewers just need an avenue of entry into the work. But therein lies the difficulty.

As a curator I am interested in the artist's expression, process, outcomes and approaches. My curatorial approach-one I like to think of as Risk Management in a way-is calculated. I believe that the artist's work is what it is-they are left alone to present the work. My job is to mediate dialogue and debate to challenge viewers and allow for different avenues of interpretation in as many ways as possible. Part of these 'accessible' yet challenging approaches include catalogues, Gallery information, didactic labels, tours and educational activities. This is where the connection between art and the creative process with that of money, sponsorship and sociopolitical relativity can take place. There needs to be a connection that can be imagined, communicated and shown to the general public. And, if as art professionals, there is a desire, commitment and obligation to provide these avenues of accessibility we have succeeded in altering perceptions.

- Megan Johnston, August 2005



# Thoughts arising and pursued after meanings inherent and construed in the work of Conor McFeely

*Andrew Stones*

Since the work of Conor McFeely is finely and deliberately poised between the everyday and the outlandish, the bland and the cerebral, I want to begin with a cautionary tale – whose source I can no longer recall – concerning the over-reflexive analysis of the everyday as cited in ‘art’. Bob Dylan’s Subterranean Homesick Blues ends with the line: ‘the pump don’t work ‘cause the vandals took the handles’.<sup>1</sup> A claim had been made on the songwriter’s behalf by an enthusiastic student of Dylan, that in this line one could discern his critique of the collapse of the American Dream, the rescinded promise of nineteenth century industrialisation under late capital, etcetera, etcetera. One wag, probably a journalist on a music paper, retorted that Bob would have said that, really, he was just talking about the collapse of the pump.

I became aware of Bob Dylan as a teenager, as the era of Stiff Little Fingers and The Clash was dawning. The Byrds’ version of Mr. Tambourine Man was on the jukebox in a local pub popular with benign bikers, music-obsessed teenage boys, and their real or imagined girlfriends. On Friday evenings I would return from this establishment at around midnight, to slump in front of the television. I was in an inebriated condition ameliorated only slightly by a large quantity of chips, and the long walk home (which I can still trace in memory). Thus I was first exposed to the kind of B-movie in which, as an adult, I have detected subtexts worthy of intense and sober consideration. Granting that sober consideration can coexist with somewhat hysterical delight, these movies have also prepared my mind for its encounter with the video works included in the exhibition Hidden Dips.

First, I want to rewind to a time before video in the work of Conor McFeely.

A decade or so after encountering Dylan, I came across Claude Lévi-Strauss’s description of bricolage; the *modus operandi* of the do-it-yourself handyman, or bricoleur.<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss describes a character who must be simultaneously a maker, a collector and a taxonomist, habituated to saving and cataloguing objects and materials according to likely future usage. Faced with a requirement, let’s say for a new lamp or a table, the bricoleur goes to the collection, already aware of the potentialities of particular items and materials, and begins a trial and error process of assemblage. In the somewhat solipsistic way typical of an art student in his early 20s I believed Lévi-Strauss’s formulation applied especially to me, to the way in which my own nascent methodology as an artist could be connected to the creativity of my parents and grandparents; their capacity for salvage and repair; their ingenious, careful way with any raw materials they would acquire, use, and conserve.

Adopting the tag of ‘artist-as-bricoleur’ is certainly one way of formalising a certain outsider status, of attending to the artisanal and the domestic mind, whilst being simultaneously engaged in a more far-reaching life-work; for ‘utilitarian’ materials and objects are also carriers of ideas, fragments of histories, tribal and political preferences. As the work of Conor McFeely attests, assemblages of such conceptually loaded scraps can, when marshalled carefully, amount to complex propositions concerning, for instance, the dilemma of the subject whose willed gestures resist at every turn the easy availability of so many off-the-shelf behaviours.

Lévi-Strauss connects ‘bricolage’ to his own central concerns as follows:

The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual ‘bricolage’ - which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two...<sup>3</sup>

Here we can locate the possibility of personal action (informed by a sense of the collective) founded on a repertoire (linking the action to potentialities inherent in the world), which is not far from a description of the way in which Conor McFeely makes art.

Writers attempting to get to grips with McFeely’s work have alighted on its materiality, not least because of the artist’s own insistence on cataloguing it, a practice he has consistently employed in exhibition publications. It seems this is more than the prickly colonisation of an artworld convention (acrylic on canvas, cement fondue on fibreboard, etc). om lehka refers to McFeely’s use of ‘consciously meaningful’ materials,<sup>4</sup> whilst Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith comments on the ‘recalcitrant materiality of McFeely’s wide range of sculptural objects’ which ‘persistently asserts itself in the teeth of the transformative process of art making, fiercely resisting any alchemical aspirations inherent in that process.’<sup>5</sup>



In McFeely's earlier installative work there is, I believe, a clear attempt to mobilise some 'alchemical aspirations'. In *Disclaimer* (1997) almost all the materials used are transformed into new indicators of some kind. Looking at photographs of the installations<sup>6</sup> I see minimalist 'canvasses' rendered stickily unpleasant, and pills too big to swallow, so huge they're more like grubby old-fashioned bombs. There are wrapped, foamy lumps gone hard, like tarred bolsters and pillows, or body parts violently dismembered then obsessively packaged. A paraphernalia of post-social DIY therapy (or torture). Disquiet, hinted at in the manner of a set-designer for an B-movie horror: *The Terrors of Dr. McFeely*.

In the artist's more recent work, such as the installations of *Headfirst* (2003), the terrors hinted at seem to be those of a consumer-citizen, highly individuated economically, who notices that his everyday, ready-made 'repertoire' has increased in detail uncontrollably without seeming to offer any deeper grasp of social or cultural identity. McFeely seems to be resisting a condition like that of Barthes' child, who, 'faced with a world of faithful and complicated objects... can only identify himself as user; never as creator'; a subject who is 'turned into a little stay-at-home householder who doesn't even invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready made.'<sup>7</sup>

For om lehka, who has noted the sculpted lemon cake which 'makes more sense as a sculptural material than as a food' this condition has become '...the grim antithesis of the modernist re-imagining of essential

selfhood and its consummation in the postmodern playground of cultural vacancy where nothing is left but commodity and contentless transaction.'<sup>8</sup>

For *The Clash*, a figure who plaintively declares 'I'm all lost in the supermarket, I can no longer shop happily...'<sup>9</sup>

It is a cliché of modern marketing cant that consumers purchase not simply 'goods' but 'identities', and it is in the face of this overheated claim that McFeely's bricolage takes place. Works such as those in *Hidden Dips* press-gang forms and materials from the aisles of the DIY superstore, where the bricoleur might expect to feel at home. However, the DIY store is an establishment where 'raw' materials can still be had, although the agency (and thus the identity) of the bricoleur is in danger of being confounded by the proximity of a bewildering range of ready made domestic goods. McFeely is, in any case, more DIY double-agent than simple domestic bricoleur, and as he makes off with his spoils he intends to make them speak, not only of their materiality, but of their place in the world of ideas. For *Hidden Dips*, McFeely declares, he will build a replica of Hitler's bunker in Portadown, using raw materials (insulation) normally used to keep people cosy.<sup>10</sup>

Some published examples: McFeely states that 'materials used in *Popular Mechanics* include thermoplastic, tin foil, wood, exhaust pipes and text'.<sup>11</sup> He lists the 'glue' and 'lights' of *Disclaimer* with 'baseball bats covered in wool blankets'.<sup>12</sup> 'Paper' appears alongside 'broken glass' in the *Headfirst* publication.<sup>13</sup> It may be noted

that some of the artist's terms go further than others in defining a given item's functionality, firstly in the consumer world of its origin, and secondly in the artwork. We are required to disentangle 'raw' materials from more referentially inflected elements; to wonder, perhaps, whether 'Hitler's bunker' is actually implied or inherent in a material called 'insulation'. Masquerading as a key, the artist's lists are in fact an invitation to his conundrum of meanings – inherent and meanings – created.

This is surely a game of liberationist alchemy, if not the alchemy itself.

Something of the spirit of McFeely's provocative taxonomies of objects and materials is carried across into the form of his recent video works. Indeed, his inventories of materials already resemble those movie cast lists – or *dramatis personae* – where every speaking part is accounted for; lists which can return one to a supposedly familiar movie in an attempt to remember the contribution of a long-forgotten minor player: the man who bursts into the diner screaming 'It's the end of the world!' in *The Birds*, for example.<sup>14</sup>

Cast lists for thousands of movies can be found on web sites like the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). For a period of time between the late 1970s and the existence of the IMDb I remained unsure of whether, late one Friday night on TV, I had actually seen a film entitled *They Saved Hitler's Brain*. No-one I knew admitted seeing the movie, and the possibility that it might not exist was equally interesting – if mildly

alarming, since an impression of 'actors' marching around underground in Nazi uniforms with a squawking head under a demijon had entered my mind from somewhere, and remained. *They Saved Hitler's Brain* does exist, and it can be purchased on DVD.<sup>15</sup>

In Conor McFeely's recent video works *Hidden Dips*, *Moments to go*, and *Infinite Regress*, wildly variant signifiers of identity collide, pitching the viewer into a delirious world akin to that of the enthusiastically contrived B-movie. There are, however, closer parallels to Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim Two Birds*.<sup>16</sup> Here, O'Brien creates a 1930s Dublin of Joycean students, hard drinkers, cowboy gangs fighting over 'black slavies', fictitious characters escaping nocturnally from the imagination a literary landlord, fairies, pookas, and figures from Celtic myth gushing florid, heroic verses. Whilst he satirises Joyce, and the Dublin intelligensia's drawing on of the Celtic mantle, O'Brien also recalls Jonathan Swift, revelling in invention, every draught of the exotic seasoned with a drop of acid.<sup>17</sup> In McFeely's video works, grotesques and hybrids are brought to temporary life, gurning and glaring the frustrations of their creator. They rail against not only the definitions and limits of art (although a struggle with these is clearly taking place), but also the where and the when, the sanity and the politics of McFeely's life and practice.

A thorough engagement with to one's place and one's antecedents is bound to be a troubling one.

McFeely's video works suggest at first a mind in a state of free association, at play with its preoccupations and



memories, untroubled by the provenance of its sources. Yet there is too much order for this to be the final impression, if only because the cast of the videos is marshalled by this particular individual: an artist living in the city of Derry who has spoken of the 'absurdity of making contemporary art in Northern Ireland'; who has ordered from the local baker too much lemon cake for personal consumption; who daily passes a spot where one troubled fellow recently brought the neighbourhood to a standstill whilst he fired off the contents of an automatic rifle magazine in the street;<sup>18</sup> an artist concerned with the exigencies of psychic and social identity, living in a city recently 'outed' as one of the most racist in the United Kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

The video work *Hidden Dips* (2005) unfolds on two screens, a montage of footage apparently gathered via the artist's camera (which I will call raw material) and clips from TV documentaries (ready made signifiers). Frames float within frames, fuzziness closes in and melts away, clarity comes and goes in an almost musical fashion, in tune with a score of radio crackles and static, fumbblings with controls, a jolly tune which could be Andean pipe/guitar music,<sup>20</sup> and a little laughter cut short. The image-cast of *Hidden Dips* includes: McFeely himself, endowed (via the magic of cheap video post-production) with the power to transmit lightning bolts of energy from a comically enlarged head; Northern Irish country roads; Adolf Hitler and associates; Nazi armoured vehicles; dancing arcs of electricity playing between the fingers of the artist's hand; Nazis scanning through binoculars, Irish roads in black and white negative, German maps, a white disc held aloft and snapped in two; insignia of the Third Reich. There is

one on-screen text, like the melodramatic strapline of a movie advertisement: 'when did you first realise you were dead'.

Northern Ireland is being invaded by Nazis using the back-roads. McFeely has adopted powers.

In *Moments to go* (2005) McFeely's raw materials include: flickering, computer-drawn squiggles and vari-sized dots; studio 'self-portraits', and family video portraits (mangled into grotesques in post-production); a shot of McFeely's disordered studio; a shot of a Derry road intersection at dusk. Ready made signifiers include: some gentle 'art-pop' music; '1940s' film of a Nazi officer shutting someone into a car, with a superimposed dateline '4.45pm, april 30th, 2004, Derry'; film of Eva Braun going backwards; various passports; insignia of the Third Reich in grey and candy pink; a photo of a Bauhaus-style interior.

No-one fits in. McFeely knows where it will all end.

In *Infinite Regress* (2005) a constant scrabbling noise punctuated by beeps accompanies a procession of 35mm slide mounts. Some contain fragments of 'home movie' shot from a mountain cable car; others, a movie clip showing a young male subject of U.S. military experiments, swallowing/regurgitating an 'anti radiation' device; some hold miniatures of Goya's *Bedlam*; others, photographs of the artist's work, including grotesque and distorted self-portraits.

Whatever the problem is, McFeely the artist is part of it.

## Notes

1. Bob Dylan 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', from the album *Bringing It All Back Home*, Columbia, 1965
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962]
3. Ibid.
4. 'om lehka', in *Conor McFeely Headfirst*, Belfast, Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2003:
5. Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, in 'Small Steps', *Northern Ireland*, Kaleidoscope, 2000
6. 'Conor McFeely Disclaimer', Derry, Orchard Gallery, 1998: throughout. ISBN 1-902016-02-5
7. Roland Barthes 'Toys' in *Mythologies*, London, Vintage, 1993: p54. ISBN 0 09 997220 4. Originally published Paris, Editions du Seuil 1957. Trans. 1972 Jonathan Cape Ltd.
8. 'om lehka', essay in *Conor McFeely Headfirst*
9. Strummer/Jones 'Lost in the Supermarket', from the album *The Clash London Calling*, Epic, 1979
10. Conor McFeely in conversation with the author, Derry, 19/20 January 2005
11. Quoted by Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith in *Small Steps*
12. Conor McFeely 'Disclaimer'
13. Conor McFeely *Headfirst*
14. *The Birds*, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963. McFeely's lists operate in a manner not unlike Alfred Hitchcock's 'incidental' inclusion of himself in the cast of his own films: a funny-serious wagging finger, chiding his audience to stay awake at all times so as not to miss the incident which he has guaranteed will happen (his own appearance).
15. *They Saved Hitler's Brain*, Dir. David Bradley, 1963
16. Flann O'Brien *At Swim Two Birds*, 1939
17. Jonathan Swift *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726, amended 1735

18. Conor McFeely in conversation with the author, Derry, 19/20 January 2005
19. According to the latest figures from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), racial incidents leapt almost 80% between 2003/04 and 2004/05 to 813 in total - almost four times the number two years before. Homophobic incidents rose by 176% in 12 months to 196 - six times higher than in 2002-03. 'Mary O'Hara 'Fear and loathing'', *The Guardian* newspaper, London, June 29 2005
20. Actually a Roger Whittaker tune. Conor McFeely in conversation with the author, Derry, 19/20 January 2005

## Materials used in 'Hidden Dip' include:

Polystyrene sheeting, Text panels, Black and White prints, colour photograph, Ultraviolet lights, Cats Eyes, Cake, foam expansion, Blankets, cake, perspex and cast resin light bulbs.

## DVD Projections

- Film 1. Large Projection: 'Hidden Dips', 5.45  
 Film 2. TV: 'Moments to go', 4.36  
 Film 3. Small Projection: 'Infinite Regress', 3.35

All photography on pages 10 - 23 and page 26 was taken from the 'Hidden Dips' installation at Millennium Court Arts Centre, August - September 2005.