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## WATERMARK: between the archive and the river

When and how does an archive come into being? At what point does the act of keeping become the action of collecting, of searching and of preserving? A similar question: when and how does somewhere – a space, a field, a flood plain – become a place? Perhaps it happens gradually, the result of casual, everyday actions, until one turns around and sees what has accumulated. David Seamon, in his 1980 essay exploring habitual daily actions and their role in the bodily negotiation of environments, used the phrase ‘place-ballet’.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, this seems particularly apt – the particular beauty that exists in the simple actions of everyday life.

Seamon’s essay centres on the ways in which individuals locate themselves in their environment through repeated actions, developing body-knowledge through those habitual movements which allow them to feel free and at home in their space. There is, I think, something inherently moving about thinking about the routes and passages, the turns and gestures, that make up the movement of the body through the spaces of everyday life as a kind of ballet. Seamon’s conceptualization of the freedom of the living body in space, safely negotiating known terrain, also brings to mind its opposite – the trauma of exile, the disorientation of placelessness and of being unable to find the rhythm of the living body in place. In thinking about displacement and exile, the image of the archive returns. In situations of exile, the idea of the archive both shrinks and takes on a terrible urgency. An entire archive in one photograph. A lifetime of memory in one suitcase. And if nothing can be taken? The sudden flood of memory when some survival appears – a taste, a face, a sound. Although the archive has, in some cases, become a symbol of the Enlightenment and an autocratic ideal of knowledge, it can also speak of the quiet days of peacetime, of time to collect and space to reflect.

While WATERMARK is an exhibition celebrating 20 years of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, it also questions and explores these connected ideas of archive and place. Artists Fiona Hallinan, Aaron Lawless and David Lilburn, together with playwright and actor Helena Enright, have responded to the idea of the Academy’s own archive, as well as the location of the Academy itself, situated as it is on the banks of the river Shannon. The exhibition is, in a way, also a celebration of the idea of the archive itself, and the role of institutions such as the university in creating and maintaining archives. The Academy’s archive reflects its unique role in preserving, collecting and promoting the understanding of Irish music and dance, as well as the music and traditions from across the world. It also

collects traces of the ways in which these traditions have been extended and explored by students, staff, visiting artists and artists-in-residence since 1994, when it was founded as the Irish World Music Centre at UL. Each of the artists commissioned as part of WATERMARK visited the Academy, and each individually drew out the connection between the archive with its carefully ordered and stacked papers, spools of film and files of photographs, album covers and sheet music and the unpredictable and beautiful riverbank. While they seem, at first, like two things that should never meet, WATERMARK is an exhibition that crosses the boundary between the quiet order of the archive and the unknown energy of the river. This connection will make sense to all those who work or who have worked in the building – the intimacy between the river and the Academy informs so many aspects of the lives of those working, making and thinking within it. This crossing has become part of the ‘place-ballet’ of the place for many, and this exhibition acts, in a way, as a way of looking back or of looking up, and of seeing it as refracted through the vision of another.

For her contribution to WATERMARK, Fiona Hallinan has included the Living Bridge as one of the terrains charted and scored in her larger *Heterodyne* project. The Living Bridge, which crosses the river and connects the north campus, where the Academy is located, and the main UL campus, is the third stretch of water to be included by Hallinan. *Heterodyne* is a project that scores roads and other journeys with original site-specific audio compositions. To date, these have included a scenic flight over the Atlantic off the West coast of Ireland, the M3 motorway in Ireland, a military road in Wicklow, and most recently, the commuter ferry crossings of the Bosphorus in Istanbul. These compositions are stored and made accessible to listeners/ walkers/drivers/bus-journeymakers/commuters/passengers via a location-based mobile application. The logic of the project is informed by the definition of its title: ‘to combine a high-frequency signal with another to produce a new frequency equal to the sum or difference of the two’. This has several implications for WATERMARK – it implies both the surprising, unpredictable outcome of combining landscape, movement and sound in one moment, as well as the new constellation of ideas, sounds and spaces created in bringing the Shannon crossing together with the Bosphorus, the Atlantic and the military road. While Hallinan usually commissions and collaboratively creates scores for her compositions with musicians such as fiddle-player Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh, she has chosen to open this piece to submissions from students, staff and alumni of the Academy, who will create and contribute the scores for the project, their work becoming part of the Living Bridge crossing, but also part of a much larger project to do with sound, emotion, place and movement.

While *Heterodyne: The Living Bridge* creates a collaborative, yet intensely personal, archive of sound and memory, Aaron Lawless’s work for the exhibition has grown from the storms of late January and early February 2014, which flooded the Shannon banks and ripped limbs from the trees around the Academy. *The Darwinian Bouzouki*, made by Lawless out of material gathered from the banks of the river after the storm, is one of a series of instruments responding to ideas of place and use.<sup>2</sup> The images included in this catalogue

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1. D. Seamon, ‘Body-subject, time-space routines, and place-ballets’, in A. Buttimer and D. Seamon (eds), *The human experience of space and place* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980). I’m grateful to art historian Kathryn Milligan for bringing this essay to my attention in her paper ‘Exploring space, creating place: Harry Kernoff RHA (1900-1974) and the depiction of Dublin’, given at Mansfield College, Oxford, in September 2011.

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2. The *Highbright Lapharp* (2010, shopping trolley and strings), by Aaron Lawless, was acquired for the collection of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in 2014. It was featured on the cover of the Academy’s 2014 *Of Our Times/Comhaimseartha* brochure.

chart something of Lawless's process in creating the instruments, from walking the river bank and finding material from the detritus of the storm, selecting pieces of wood and bark, and finding their inherent curves and forms. Next, the process of building begins, of weaving the wood together and letting it dry, making a 'transitional instrument' somewhere between craft and happenstance. Although the craft involved and the clever and careful use of materials catch the imagination in Lawless's work, they also reveal his negotiation between form and meaning as a sculptor. Often guided by YouTube tutorials and DIY instruction manuals, Lawless describes his constructions as makeshift solutions made with the resources at hand. His nuanced attention to the qualities, surfaces and circumstances of the materials he uses, however, makes him a particularly adept interpreter of the tradition and idea of the 'ready-made', evident in his use of metal from a local factory in Carlow, or a washed-up keg from the canal banks in Limerick city. Through finding and reusing what has been abandoned, broken or lost, and giving it both a new use-value and capacity for sound and communication, Lawless also questions and probes concepts of value, labour and the material world in a changing Ireland. *The Darwinian Bouzouki*, made for WATERMARK, takes its place within his practice as a piece which responds to these ideas, as well as the intimacy between instrument and artist, between wood, bow and strings – surprising, warm and wrought.

While Aaron Lawless and Fiona Hallinan were exploring the Academy and its environs for the first time, David Lilburn knows the landscape of the university and the Academy well, and draws on his memories of the place in his work, also titled *Watermark*, for this exhibition. As evident in his 2006 series *In Media Res*, commissioned to celebrate the centenary of Bloomsday, and his more recent piece charting the monuments, cathedral, lanes and passages of Limerick city in *Cyphers* poetry magazine, Lilburn interprets the landscape and memory-scape of places in a way that is unique in Irish art. His work, etched into zinc plate, loaded with ink and printed onto Zerkall etching paper, begins with fluid and soft pencil sketches and often combines watercolour as well as different etching and printmaking techniques. In his essay 'Walking drawing, making memory', Lilburn likened drawing to walking, and described it as 'a way of conversing with the event or the landscape, as you experience it, and making it memorable'.<sup>3</sup> While the response to the immediate moment, to the sensations of landscape, is immediately apparent in the movement and action of his line, he also maps in time and depth. Lilburn's *Watermark* maps the Academy, tracing both the forms of Daniel Cordier's building as well as the recognizable gestures of the musicians and dancers who people its landscape. *Watermark* also maps the intangible, however, capturing the sounds and events that have inhabited the Academy's hinterland, and extends outwards to include the compact and fierce carving of St. Mary's cathedral doorway, and even further, Picasso's running women, caught in a moment between eternity and abandon. In many ways, Lilburn's work recalls the ambitious project of mapping carried out by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland from the 1830s, which mapped the country at a scale of six inches to the mile. The survey aimed to include each site of local or national significance, as well as collecting local folklore and place names, and is

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3. D. Lilburn, 'Walking drawing, making memory', in J. Savage (ed.), *Drawing Texts* (Limerick: Occasional Press, 2001), p. 65.

responsible for preserving much of what was lost through increasingly intensive agricultural practices as the century progressed, as well as the devastating loss of memory brought about by the mid-century Famine. Lilburn's work has, of course, both a different scope and intention to the Survey project, but exists in parallel with it – mapping the valuable, the joyful and the intangible, mapping gesture, sensation and sound.

The plans for WATERMARK were already in place when I met Helena Enright, Limerick-born playwright and actor who was in the process of creating a site-specific piece of work for the Shannon, titled *The River*, and due to be performed on board a barge (*Spero in Deo*) from 13 August to 1 September 2014. Enright's work, which is part of Limerick's cultural programme for its year as the inaugural Irish City of Culture in 2014, immediately resonated with the ideas which had been discussed around WATERMARK. Her contribution to the exhibition catalogue reflects the wider engagement with the river and its place in the city and surrounding countryside, as well as the Academy's ongoing relationship with the cultural life and with artists across the city and the region. In her word and image essay for the catalogue, Enright recalls the process of creating *The River*, as well as giving the reader an insight into her own journals and the letters which she received from others, giving her their story to be woven into the play. Enright's practice as a playwright, actor and documentary theatre maker has seen her engage with human stories from across the world, from the Blitz in Exeter in 1942, to the households of those affected by human trafficking in Sindhupalchok, Nepal. That her practice has brought her back to the Shannon in 2014, and that her work resonates so clearly with that of the other artists who are part of the WATERMARK project is perhaps no surprise – as she writes, 'stories find us when we need them'.

While the individual works in WATERMARK are intimately connected to the Academy, and to the individual experiences of the artists within that space, the exhibition also connects with ideas of memory, emotion, sound and the individual story. This negotiation between the individual gesture and the larger, less easily defined world of meaning is reflected in the title for the exhibition. Inspired by the poem *Exegesis of the First Words Spoken (Ishmael)* by the American poet Dan Beachy-Quick, the exhibition, like this poem, quickly brings us down-river to the ocean, into 'the watery part of the world' mentioned by Herman Melville in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick*. In his poem, Beachy-Quick draws the beautiful image of the 'scholar-on-waves, a water-gazer', but within the motion of the poem, he also urges the necessity to 'sign your mark / with a nail, a splinter, a harpoon'.<sup>4</sup> The necessity to make a mark, to somehow be heard within the ceaseless flow of the world, to have a story told or to make something once lost heard again, is at the heart of all the works in WATERMARK. The works by Fiona Hallinan, Aaron Lawless, David Lilburn and Helena Enright work with, rather than against, the flow of the river and the weight of the archive. In their thoughtfulness, nuance, care and insight, they lift the 'place-ballet' of these river- and ocean-crossings into sight, albeit briefly, for all to take part in.

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4. Dan Beachy-Quick, 'Exegesis of the First Words Spoken (Ishmael)', from *Spell* (Ashanta Press, 2004).