

Mark Curran: The Economy of Appearances

Curated by Helen Carey

Limerick City Gallery of Art

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The eponymous artwork of Mark Curran's solo show *The Economy of Appearances*, is a soundscape and a 3D animated graphic. The ebb and flow of the sound in the vast South Gallery at LCGA wash over the visitor while on screen the coloured graphs successively emerge in the foreground and recede into a dark horizon. Made in collaboration with Ken Curran and Damien Byrne, both sound and visuals have been generated algorithmically from the frequency of the occurrence of the word 'market' in the public speeches of European Ministers of Finance – to date, Michael Noonan, from the time he took office in 2011, George Osborne, Pierre Moscovici and Jeroen Dijsselbloem. The work points to how our public imaginary and political thought are saturated by market ideology.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the market is the subject and title of a project Curran has been working on since 2010; this is presented alongside reiterations of five other projects in this exhibition. The earliest of these other projects, *Stoneybatter, Dublin* (1998) is a series of small-sized colour photographs of children and teenagers in the streets of the popular neighbourhood. In tracksuits or school uniforms, they face the photographer readily, while tower cranes hover, cross-like, on the horizon. The construction boom was then in full swing and the pictures bear witness to a place and its people on the eve of a radical architectural and social transformation.

Southern Cross (1999-2001), a series of framed medium-sized photographs, takes a closer look at essential sites of Celtic Tiger mutation and the workers involved: road and building construction sites and the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) which offered the lenient (or non-existent) tax regulations credited for much of the Irish economic miracle. Portraits of construction workers are presented next to those of office workers, possibly accountants or tax advisors to international banks and corporations. Each portrait, however, belies its generic category by insisting on its singularity: *Stephen from Dublin (IFSC, Phase 1, Dublin 2001)*, for instance is a portrait of a young male worker at the IFSC whose mismatched jacket, loose tie and unruly red hair have little of the sleek appearance we would expect. Alongside the portraits there are details of the workers' employment environment - a stack of concrete blocks wrapped up in cling film, overlapping layers of tarmac, in one instance, a lone tree amongst the grid-like stone and glass buildings in another. Photographs of places and portraits are presented in an undistinguished square format establishing a continuity between them.

The Breathing Factory (2002-2005) takes its name from the flexible economic management system implemented by Peter Hartz on the factory floor at Volkswagen – and later applied to the German nation as a whole – where

workers' hours fluctuate according to production demand. Taking the employees and the production spaces at the Hewlett-Packard Manufacturing and Technology Campus in Leixlip as its subject, Curran presents photographs, interviews and a video of the production line as part of this work. It investigates with the artist's usual attention to details, what the faces of 'the most globalised country in the world' might be like. The photographs are unframed and hung with bulldog clips, so that they are easily removable like the workers they portray, Curran explains.

These three projects share a desire to look into the human and material manifestations of such ready-made formulae as the 'Celtic Tiger', the 'Property Bubble' or the 'Most Globalised Country in the World' that came to characterise Ireland during the 'Boom' years. With *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN* (2003-2008), Curran looks at the evolution of global capital and its impact on people in Lusatia (Lausitz) on the German-Polish border. The region has had a striving industry since the 19th century of which only open pits coal mining remain. In the gallery the project is conjured up through two slide projections, Curran describes the exhibition as fitting into one shoebox to reflect the dematerialisation of the economy. One projection is a series of colour slides of empty workstations at the former Steilmann textile factory whose site closed down after 150 years in 2006. Seen alongside the other projects the human absence in these images is striking. The human is brought back through the second projection composed of extracts from interviews Curran conducted in the area. They are typed in white over black, giving the words a ghostly presence.

The Market (2010-ongoing) is the most ambitious of Curran's projects to date, it presents works in a variety of formats including photography, video, printed documents, soundscape and 3D animation – in an earlier iteration it had also included a 6ft high column of A4 sheets. The gallery has been partitioned to allow fluid circulation between the different works. There are portraits of employees of stock exchanges in London and Addis Ababa, as well as photographs of their places of work. There are tables with desk lamps and brown folders containing transcripts of interviews with traders and analysts, some heavily edited. One of the most recent works is a HD video *Algorithmic Surrealism* (2015). It is filmed in the landscaped gardens surrounding the Zuidas Global Financial District in Amsterdam, which specialises in algorithmic trading. The camera slowly pans over shrubs whose leaves sway in the breeze, offering an occasional glimpse of the glass and concrete façade of the buildings beyond. A female voice-over with a German accent reads a text by Brett Scott, a former broker and now a prolific blogger. It opens with:

In the time it takes you to read this sentence, a high-frequency trading (HFT) algorithm, connected to a stock exchange via 'low latency' trading infrastructure, could make, perhaps, 1,000 trades. I say 'perhaps', because it really depends on how long you pause on those commas I put in the sentence.

In an essay for e-flux journal in 2013, 'Too Real an Unreality: Financial Markets as Occult', Philip Grant discusses the relationship of money to magic and how

popular characterizations of contemporary finance as occult may not be so far off.

Just as the Enlightenment destroyed magic, but rests on a magic of its own, so too finance, through its rationality – the force of its numbers, the logical brilliance of its algorithms – destroys earlier, nonrationalized understandings of how value is created, and yet finance's public – regulators, legislators, critics, the public, us – continues to be dazzled by it.

A large part of Curran's work is not easily amenable to an exhibition context. The photographs are the end result of an engagement with institutions and people that took years to come to fruition. His practice, informed by social concerns and conducted with an ethnographic methodology offers a wealth of material. Gaining access to factory and trading floors is not easy, nor are the people working there necessarily willing to be photographed. The documentation of how Curran failed to gain access to the Frankfurt Stock Exchange indicates some of the administrative difficulties involved but is at risk of looking like a poor cousin to more radical institutional critique practices. The transcript of interviews with traders, analysts, brokers and bankers from London and Addis Ababa can appear gimmicky in their bureaucratic aesthetic and yet are anything but. They form a body of research of their own, giving intriguing insights into the daily life of City workers – they all agree that what they do owes much to intuition and feeling, or as a senior analyst seems rather proud to admit: 'it's an art rather than a science.'

Perhaps most fascinating is the account by Dr. Eleni Gabre-Madhin on how she came to set up the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX) in 2008. Dispelling the dazzling haze surrounding financial activities, her account brings us to the basic ground of goods and commercial exchange. Haunted by the memory of the 1984 Famine, she was inspired by a research paper indicating 'that there was a surplus in the western part of the country while there was a famine that killed a million people in the North' to dedicate her doctoral research to studying Ethiopia's grain market. She thus set about resolving such problems as: how does a buyer know where to find a seller? How does a seller know how to find a buyer? How do you know what the grade or quality of the grain is? How do you get the price information in time? etc... These questions eventually led to the establishment of the ECX, taking as its structural model the open trading pits of the Chicago Board of Trade (which first opened its trading pits in 1848 – many of these were closed in 2015).

The exhibition includes a photograph of a bell at the Irish Stock Exchange's decommissioned trading floor. The disused bell stands as a lonely reminder that trading floors in many ways belong to the past: they are steadily being replaced by electronic trading. Strange the things we find ourselves nostalgic for.

The overlapping artistic and the ethnographic methodologies in Curran's practice may not quite find resolution, but these tensions, along with the artist's

open-ended approach, offer us much towards apprehending the conflicted realities we live in.

At the end of the *The Economy of Appearances*, the algorithmically produced sounds stop and the graphs are allowed to disappear in the distance without being replaced by new ones. For a few seconds there is darkness and silence, conjuring both dread of the void and hope for a different discourse.

Michaële Cutaya is a writer on art based in Galway. *The Economy of Appearances* was on view 4 September – 30 October 2015.