

## Inside Hereafter

*By Sarah Pierce*

*Indeed, have not certain astronomers and mathematicians recently asserted that time has its own inertia, that time is in fact matter, a different kind of material?*

–Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*

*My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house was already an indication of my body.*

–Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

*The house, like a man, can become a skeleton.*

–Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs*

In February 2003, artists Paddy Jolley, Rebecca Trost and Inger Lise Hansen began work on a new project commissioned by Breaking Ground, the Per Cent for Art programme connected to the regeneration of Ireland's largest public housing project, Ballymun. Over several months they filmed the interior spaces of a four-storey block in Shangan, in Ballymun's northeast corner. The culminating work, entitled *Here After*, involves two versions. The first is an elaborate installation, which will take place on the fourth floor of Eamonn Ceannt Tower, one of the seven fifteen storey towers in Ballymun. The second is a single-channel video, which will be screened in axis, Ballymun Arts and Community Resource Centre and in Dublin's Meeting House Square following the installation in Ballymun. Both instalments of the project in Dublin will take place at night.

The seven fifteen-storey towers in Ballymun are among the highest buildings in the country. In addition to their visual impact on the landscape of Dublin's north side, the towers bear a psychological complexity that becomes apparent in almost any conversation about Ballymun with any person who has spent time living there. I have heard residents describe them as "beautiful," and "the soul of Ballymun." In addition to the towers, Ballymun's 20,000 residents live in eight-storey spine-blocks and four-storey walk-ups, like the flats in Shangan, as well as single family terraced houses, built to relocate people from tenements in Dublin's city centre. From the moment the first families arrived in the early-sixties, it was evident the government had failed to provide adequate amenities to sustain a growing community. Located on the periphery of

Dublin, as the city expanded, Ballymun remained isolated, both socially and economically.

The present regeneration of Ballymun includes relocating 3,000 families into new houses. Eventually the towers, spine-blocks, four-storey blocks and several rows of houses will be torn down. Walking past buildings slated for demolition, one can spot the residue of a place formed through casualties: the faded words Drug Free Zone inscribed over entryways; signs depicting surveillance cameras that read "Ballymun, CCTV Protected"; a recently burnt-out shed in the driveway of a house where just a month earlier Breaking Ground had launched another art commission to enormous laud from the community both in and beyond Ballymun.

The collaboration for *Here After* grew out of a shared interest in derelict locations and the artists used this interest as a basis to experiment with the physicality of the Shangan block's disused floors. Determined to use spaces related to the emptying out and eventual demolition of "old" Ballymun they focused on the Shangan flats. With Super 8 and 16 mm film, and using only available light, they recorded items left behind by former residents: an array of mattresses, an outdated chesterfield, an armchair, lace curtains, shelves, a computer monitor, dishes, carpeting, books, papers and other debris. From this footage they created several short sequences—some simply still shots and some made more dynamic through the use of stop-frame animation. All of the footage contains the grainy undertones of black-and-white reversal film.

As part of their interaction with the building, the artists bore a huge hole between three floors. This served as their interior precipice and with a camera installed on the lower levels they began making objects fall. In one sequence, reminiscent of the machinic stop-motion found in films from the Russian '20s, a cast of full-sized mattresses engage in a chorus of sorts, plunging down from above, one after another, costumed in plaids, stripes, and drippy florals. One lands, the next follows, dropping on top of the rest with a little kick, twist, or similar panache. It is absurd and it is comical. A rather simple exercise renders these awkward objects utterly anthropomorphic. They are alive. In similar sequences a stack of mattresses shivers and quakes, linoleum tiles rise up and scramble across the floor, carpets breathe, a sofa regurgitates its stuffing. We begin to view these objects and their surroundings as beings, charged with energy, and haunting spaces now devoid of humans.

The most popular trope of the architectural uncanny is the haunted house. A space where people are gone but objects remain, the family home is somehow rife for

disturbances, the unexplained stirrings of its apparent history. One could invent that *Here After* has caught these strange occurrences on film—The Ballymun Witch Project. Or perhaps, as in a Roman Polanski thriller, space here assumes a psychological state, like the hallway in *Repulsion* that gropes Catherine Deneuve's "Carol" as she sinks further into a paranoid psychosis. But *Here After* does not invoke terror; its imagery is more akin to the vagueness of a dream. Disquieting, unfamiliar, and yet familiar too.

The brothers Grimm believed that at the root of the homely, that which is familiar and free from fear, is the unhomely, that which is ominous, "withdrawn from the eyes of strangers, something concealed, secret." Leading up to the exhibition, the artists and I walk through the vacant floors of Ceannt Tower. Traces of the families that once lived here remain: stickers on the walls of child's room, a lone jacket hanging in a hall closet, a vase in a kitchen window. These objects are in a kind of limbo—left behind, but not properly discarded. An empty home is a melancholic one. It is a place where the present cannot get beyond the past. In many ways, the repetitions in *Here After's* animated sequences evoke objects stuck in time. They are time and its traces. Even the work's title suggests moments of suspension between what has passed and what will be. In her seminal work on depression and melancholia, *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva points out that at the dark heart of depression is a profound loss of a sense of self. The melancholic "having lost meaning, loses life." In *Here After*, time is a trap that ensnares the family home. Lacking people, the unlived in house lacks meaning.

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In the first round of his application to Breaking Ground, Jolley proposed to film furniture falling from the roof of one of the towers in Ballymun. The Artistic Steering Committee hesitated; this gesture too closely mimed anti-social behaviour discouraged in Ballymun. Perhaps these initial concerns tell us less about a committee's desire to regulate, and more about the depth of our psychological connection to objects—a connection revealed though the body. Just as it is impossible to see a chair, a bed, a table without imagining the body's relationship to them, it is impossible to enter an empty home without sensing the people that lived there.

Architecture reflects the order of society and perhaps no one understands how architecture serves to impose that order better than people who live in public housing. This partly explains why certain national and civic architectures turn out to be the iconic representations of a city, as opposed to, say, the architecture of public housing. (How many postcards of Dublin depict the architectural glory of Ballymun's seven

towers?) Le Corbusier's utopian model of tower blocks surrounded by green-open spaces has collapsed into a mass of cracked exteriors, parking lots, mounds of rubble where children play, and maze upon maze of temporary fencing. For Dublin City Council, and indeed for many residents in Ballymun, the removal of the face of Ballymun is fundamental to its regeneration. A community on the cusp of many things, at the moment Ballymun is a place where the remnants of former dwellings linger over the rooftops of brand new architectures, like skeletons not yet buried.

In viewing the footage of *Here After*, it seems that since the time they were constructed these towers were fated to come down.

Sarah Pierce, November 2003