

EVENT REVIEW

The Double Life of Catherine Street; Gothic theory in action **Catherine Street, Limerick, 13th -15th of May 2011**

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An old-fashioned news vendor stands on the pavement, urging passers-by to take his ink-stained broadsheets, people drift to swell a growing crowd for a guided tour, the costumed guide pointing out buildings of interest, tourists peer in bemusement at the series of plaques dotted along walls, and a steadily-growing mass of people begin to assemble outside a boutique, holding simple, white masks and waiting for the signal to begin a waltz.

People turn to each other. “What on earth is going on?” asks one baffled passer-by.
 Welcome to *The Double Life of Catherine Street*.

The Double Life of Catherine Street is a piece of participative Gothic psychogeographical myth-making which was finalized and performed over the weekend of the 13th to the 15th of May 2011; the culmination of a project carried out by *gothicise*, a Limerick-based, Gothic, interdisciplinary art practice with a floating membership. *The Double Life* is a story of imagined identity situated in a geographical location, conveyed through visual means, and located in invented narratives. For this project, the *gothicise* team was composed of twelve students, graduates and staff of the Limerick School of Art and Design, in collaboration with the street traders on Catherine Street, Limerick. In 2010 a local socially-engaged art practice, *SpiritStore* (1), had directed a cultural Dig on the street for an interactive Limerick art festival ev+a (2); this Dig was a festival of dance, readings, art, all celebrating the culture and heritage surrounding the street. The street itself is a typical Limerick city street, a hotchpotch of bars, boutiques, Georgian houses, alleyways and the butchers’ shops for which the city centre is famous. For this 2010 weekend-long event, *gothicise* was involved in a performance entitled *ghostwalk/ghosttalk*; an interactive historiographic piece consisting of a walking tour of local myths and legends, followed by an informal, participative session of telling ghost stories. When the approach came from the street traders to participate in the 2011 Catherine Street Dig, the original invitation was to replicate the *ghostwalk/ghosttalk* event of 2010. However, *gothicise* undertook to create a different project that would nonetheless still engage with psychogeography, narrative and the uncanny but which would also probe the notion of constructed or falsified history. There was also another interesting layer to this proposed project. The street traders had assumed leadership of the Catherine Street Dig (in true socially-engaged fashion, *SpiritStore* had handed the directorship of the Dig over to the street; while still maintaining a curatorial presence). This posed another collaborative opportunity, to engage with the dwellers and traders from the street, thereby adding another layer of legitimacy to the project, and to conspire with them to create some kind of alternative reality for Catherine Street.

Slowly, slowly, meeting by meeting, e-mail by e-mail, the *Double Life of Catherine Street* was born. The name itself referred to the Gothic notion of the Other, the *doppelganger*. The idiom of the Gothic therefore became “the perfect anonymous language for the unwillingness of the past to go away.” (Spooner 2006) It was important to the group to reinterpret the spaces on Catherine Street as *unheimlich* or uncanny in order to create a sense of dislocation, of the familiar grown unfamiliar. In order to stay faithful to the historical roots of the street, a principle was agreed that each invented story would have an element of truth (3) but would suffer from “the inevitability of historical and chronological distortion which has always been the cornerstone of the Gothic perspective.” (Punter 1999)

Together gothicise walked the street, met on it, and mapped it. The store of stories grew as the art school members began to drift off individually to find their own street collaborators and construct their own legends. Gradually six coherent myths began to emerge – *The Magic Bush*, *The Tale of Miss Christy*, *The Butcher’s Bride*, *The True Story of the Foundation of the Republic*, *The Masked Ball of Catherine Street* and *The Visit from Iressia*. *The Masked Ball* was an invented legend that sprung from the collaborator’s particular interest in masks within the fine art and filmic tradition; this project offered her the chance to combine this with her own background in dance, while the idea for *The True Story of the Foundation of the Republic* project came directly from a trader/collaborator who offered the story as his personal fantasy about the history of his establishment. For more information on this individual stories and their origin see <http://doublelifecatherinestreet.weebly.com/stories.html>.

If the *Double Life* was a conspiracy with the street and its inhabitants, then how would its imagined identity become ‘real’? An authoritative voice was needed; one that purported to use ‘official’ language and forms in order to verify the false. Assuming an imagined street identity that would be collaborative and communal in its construction, four ‘umbrella’ identity projects came into being. The aim in all of these was to subvert trusted badges of identity and history in order to lead to a sense of fractured identity and dislocation in the spectator. One such project was the *Limerusian Gazette* (Fig. 1), a broadsheet purportedly from the early 20th century that presented the street stories together in an authorial manner. In fact, the idea of a constructed history itself is deeply embedded in the roots of literary Gothic – “The construction of fake histories is integral to Gothic texts...This manuscript is often in poor condition, fragmented, missing important information. The narrator may be unreliable or inarticulate. It is often framed by supporting narratives that elaborate on or question the story told inside.” (Spooner 2006) Another text-based work was the creation of historical plaques on strategic locations along the street what gravely commemorated fictive stories. The concept of the plaques was created in a socially engaged way, the invented history negotiated between art school participant and street collaborator. The web-site of the project constituted a third over-arching project; the final one being a direct reference to the *ghostwalk/ghosttalk* of 2010, a guided tour of the fictive history of the street, given by a known local figure of authority, a librarian and folklorist.

This project carried with it a final challenge – how to convey the essence of the *Double Life* through participative projects carried out in real time in a defined space on the street? Certain of the visual aspects – such as the *Gazette* and the plaques – would be read and viewed throughout the duration of the festival. However, others lent themselves to performative pieces – three events in total – the *Catherine Street Masked Ball Flash Mob*, the launch of the film of *The Secret History of the Republic* and the guided tour of the *Double Life*. Putting the work into the public sphere involved anticipating the possible reactions and contributions of another important stakeholder – the spectator, the outside participant in this weekend-long festival. These outsiders, these accidental *flâneurs*, would be integral to the coalescing identity of the street. Their presence – looking at the plaques, reading the broadsheet, joining the guided tour, would add a layer of authenticity to the performed reality of the project. Would they perceive the conspiracy or accept the invented reality?

The *Catherine Street Masked Ball Flash Mob* was a short piece involving a contemporary mirror of the ‘original’ dance via the medium of flash-mobbing. The instructions were clear – people would assemble, a whistle would sound, participants would put on the masks, waltz music would be piped out onto the street, the masked figures would grasp partners and then whirl them around for a two-minute waltz. Simple. However, the event became much larger than anticipated. Passers-by demanded masks, children joined in, the dance moved off the safe space of the footpath onto the middle of the road (Fig. 3), people

took out their phones and cameras to record it, and the noise rose – a compendium of waltz music, car horns, and the shouts and laughter of the dancers and the spectators; a gloriously happy cacophony.

Part of the reason for this unification of history was the prevalence of the mask designed for the Masked Ball Flash Mob. Boutique owners on the street agreed to put the masks on their mannequins – the act an allusion to Freud’s classification of the *unheimlich* as including the uncanny effect created by “waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata”, so for the duration of the festival, participants were watched from the windows by the blank stare of the masks. Collaborators involved in other projects began wearing them; a commemorative photograph taken for outside a bar, intended to showcase the plaque for *The Secret History of the Republic* was subverted by the pub owner’s insistence on wearing a mask (Fig. 4).

Opening up participation to the street transformed the project, and extended its ownership from *gothicise* and their trader/collaborators to the general public. Insofar as possible, the events were designed to flow around the street rather than interfere with it; while crafting the *Double Life*, the group was conscious of its brighter twin, the real life of the street, and whenever possible worked to integrate them in the realization of projects, such as participation in the *Magic Bush* ‘invented’ custom of inscribing stories.

Throughout the planning, development and realization of this project, the *Double Life* succeeded in embedding itself on Catherine Street. Working with the traders in evolving a shared system of signification; the plaques, the *Gazette*, the flash-mob, the display of masks in the boutiques, the launch of the film, the guided tour, was an exercise in collaborative myth-making, involving co-creators from outside the art college sphere. This led to additional learning from the different communities of practice working together, and helped foster a new sense of identity in the working group that emerged. It also helped create another, mysterious form of identity for the street. For like the Gothic itself, Catherine Street “has a history, over which it has changed, developed and accrued multiple layers of meaning.” (Spooner 2006)

Creating stories from the grains of historical truth allowed the group to experiment, mixing a layer of authenticity with fictional backdrops in helping to create a new history for the street and the city of Limerick - “For Gothic of a city rather than just in a city, that city needs a concentration on memories and historical associations.” (Mighall 2007) Working on the street, in the spaces of transition, the myths merged to create a whole new species of identities where the collaborators’ identities became fictional, and the stories, even in their realization as art events or project outputs, became intertextual, building the collaborative, uncanny myth of the *Double Life*. The success of the project can be measured in the enthusiastic reception of the *Double Life* as part of the Catherine Street Dig 2011, in terms of the numbers who participated and attended and in terms of the further invitation for *gothicise* to participate in next year’s Catherine Street Dig. During the 2011 Dig, the group were also, where the group have been invited to create a work based on Limerick spectral history, for an event to be organized by Limerick City Council in October 2011. This is a fitting future project for this group who have begun to carve out an identity of their own; as urban operators and interdisciplinary myth-makers creating psychogeographic Gothic projects within the city of Limerick.

Postscript

It’s the evening of the 15th of May. The street has fallen silent, apart from the far-off laughter of smokers outside Bourke’s Bar. A few *Limerusian Gazettes* lie discarded on a windowsill. The crowds have dispersed, carrying with them their memories and interpretations of the events, the life and stories of Catherine Street’s shadowy doppelganger. On the quiet street, a lone spectator wanders down, inspecting

the plaques that have now formally passed over to the street traders who own the buildings. As the shiny patina of newness wears off these plaques, as they weather in the Limerick rain, they will grow more authentic in appearance, claiming parallel historical identities for the street they inhabit.

The Double Life of Catherine Street continues.

Formal thanks to the other members of the *gothicise* collective who created *The Double Life of Catherine Street* – Anastasia Artemesia, Steve Maher, Lotte Bender, Aimee Lally, Anne Culhane, Owen Kelleher, David Bowe, Elena Bezberodova, Kira Kelly, Josie O’Connor, Evin Dennehy – and also Paul Tarpey of SpiritStore and Niall Bourke of Bourke’s Bar. Full details of the projects and the collaborators at <http://doublelifecatherinestreet.weebly.com/>

Notes

1. SpiritStore is “SpiritStore is an ongoing Limerick based art project. It has evolved practicing within a broad understanding of cultural work, articulated through a number of working methods. The project operates in conjunction with groups, from cultural practitioners and institutes, to business owners and organisations, and invites audiences and collaborators to interact or participate on a personal level.” <http://spiritstorelimerick.blogspot.com/> (Last accessed 14.5.11)
2. ev+a – exhibition of visual art – Ireland’s pre-eminent annual exhibition of contemporary art - <http://www.eva.ie/> (Last accessed 14.5.11)
3. The actual history of the street was diligently researched by local Limerick historian John Elliot for the 2010 Dig who kindly made his research available to the team.

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