

Nathan O'Donnell, 'File Note 2018', *Fire Station Artists' Studios*, Dublin, 2018

*Around us the sculpture studio is strangely quiet. Áine McBride is working in one of the last booths in the row; the rest are, on a Tuesday afternoon, unoccupied. In a few months of visits, I never get a clear sense of when the place is empty, when full; seems arbitrary. I remember wondering if there is in fact some rhythm to this place or if its as unexpected to the artists as it seemed to me.*

*McBride says, during this first meeting, that she is interested in making work that, when encountered, seems like it might have always been there. On the screen of her laptop she shows me a photo of a previous work, a cast concrete bench she installed in an alcove on 'Red Square' at NCAD, a bench I have walked past many times in the past year, on my way in and out of the Visual Culture building, innocuous and unremarkable: I had never enquired into it, I hadn't noticed when it appeared. Had I been asked I'd have said I thought it had been there for years.*

*She talks about 'seepage' between work and its environment, as if her sculptures might simply dissolve into their surroundings. I am reminded, incongruously, of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, in which cyclists and bicycles are gradually – out of sheer inertia – beginning to merge.*

*McBride is preparing work for an exhibition, in the new year, at mother's tankstation. When I meet her first she is thinking about this show though there is no material made yet. She shows me some ceramic objects, like freestanding clips, which will join works together – a material she has been experimenting with at Fire Station. It is one element of a material register – she mentions concrete, lino, tiles, raw timber, sand, gesso. At the same time she does not want to talk about material. She wants to talk about resonance, context, staging. She mentions theatricality; she does not want to create work that is 'theatrical'. (I am not sure what she means by this; it seems at odds with the idea of the ensemble.) It is hard to talk in this abstract way about work that is still hypothetical. But I get the sense that this difficulty is part of the process, for McBride. She seems to want to resist any resolution for as long as possible. In some ways, she says, she doesn't want to know what she's doing until she's actually installing the work, in the gallery, the week before the show opens.*

*Earlier this year, as part of the Douglas Hyde Gallery's series of installations around the Trinity College campus, McBride installed a series of objects around the concourse of the college's Arts Building: an assemblage of low-lying, innocuously-clad units, suggestive of storage units or tables, mimicking functionality, yet subtly resisting utility. They melded with such strange ease into the brutalist surroundings that it felt strange, one afternoon in Spring term, to stand and 'look' at them. Students flowed around them without noticing any distinction between these objects and the mass-produced furniture surrounding them.*

*Unlike the cast concrete bench, however, McBride did not want them to be used. The units were out of reach of any bench; the surfaces were not laid out for people to leave down books or cups of coffee. These were not to be mistaken for 'usable' objects.*

*McBride talks to me about the language of 'affordance', the idea that a well-designed object should furnish the user with a sense of how it should be used. These objects both invite and frustrate. They take the language of affordance, that is, and subvert it, suggesting use where there is none. In our conversation, McBride quotes Morgan Quaintance's critique of the Turner Prize-winning architectural collective Assemble; in an article for *e-flux* in December 2015, he set out his critique of the award committee, arguing instead for the need to safeguard some 'radical uselessness' for art.*

*She also mentions Pierre Huyghe, whose approach to creating landscapes she admires. She wants her assembled elements to work as a group in articulating something. She is interested in the idea of the ensemble; the interrelation of objects as well as their relationship to what's outside the group. The context is as important, for McBride, as the objects themselves; she wants an assemblage that extends into the world around it, a whole environment, the distinction between the work and its environs, blurred.*

*Provisionality is an important part of McBride's work. There is a deliberate refusal of the machine finish. She wants things to appear make-shift, precise in some ways, certainly, but not extremely well-made.*

*This tendency in her work relates, as she sees it, to the provisionality of the contemporary moment – the demands upon new generations, artists and otherwise, to be 'flexible', to be 'lean'. She is responding to the discourse of precarity. She is working with modular forms and cheap materials, making work that is movable, durable, un-precious. She is operating in accordance with current conditions, but deliberately; her work is also a very clear riposte.*

*I ask McBride about 'theatricality'. She says these works are not immersive. She wants a proximity to the real – a recalculation of the urban environment or the gallery environment or the otherwise shared public space. She wants the work to be unnerving, uncanny; she does not want it to be 'transportive'.*

*This question of theatricality comes up again the next time we meet, a month or so later. (The workshop now is thrumming with activity. Every booth is occupied.) For this second meeting, some more work – a mould with which she is making bollard-like concrete objects. More importantly, she explains, she has worked up a series of drawings. These are no more than crude sketches, tacked to the wall; she laughs at how unfinished they look. But this is how she works, allowing looseness, resisting fixity too early in the process. Alongside the sketches are some photos of the gallery space itself, and a floor map, on which she has started to make marks. In particular, she is considering the introduction of some partition walls, to rearrange the space. These would be self-supporting, she says. They are not architectural interventions. Again she mentions their 'untheatricality'. She does not want any if the apparatus concealed. No trickery. No moment of revelation.*

*She goes further this time; her intention, in this, is to level the dynamic between maker and viewer. She does not propose to illuminate anything with her work. She does not want to assume some position of superiority. She is modest about her aims, to choreograph a group of objects. It is the materials, she says, which articulate something. Her practice is simply an investigation. The work figures itself out. The most she can make, with a show, is a proposition; each show builds upon the last only in the accumulation of technical skills.*

*McBride talks about how, for this exhibition, she might try to extend the work beyond the physical confines of the gallery, the way the concrete bench in Red Square tethered her degree show to the outside world. This could be as simple a thing as putting up posters in the vicinity. Or perhaps there will be some human aspect to the work in the gallery itself? Not a performance, though: she is very clear about this. Her work is not performative. It is not 'durational', she says. She mentions duration specifically; that is the word she uses. Consequently I think of Michael Fried's famous opposition – outlined in *Art and Objecthood* in 1967 – between visual art and theatre, in which he mounted a critique of Minimalism on the basis of its theatricality, its foregrounding of process, duration, and context ('objecthood') over the sacrosanct integrity of the art work. I ask McBride about this, if this is what she means when she talks about untheatricality. Does she want to retain the work's material integrity, its existence outside of time? But this isn't what she means either. This isn't 'static' work. She doesn't want it to read like a *tableaux*. Rather it is not 'durational' in that it does not – she does not want it to – 'start' or 'finish'. She wants the work to be continuous, in time as well as space; for there to be no clear sense of where the work ends, no limits upon its extendability. She wants the work to be continuous with its surroundings.*

*Continuousness rather than duration; another fine distinction, an important one too, I realize, beginning to think through its implications, beginning to share in the rumination.*

*For a while we stand there silently, peaceably, separately thinking things through.*

*Free-standing, unattached, modularisable, 'lean', transportable, extendable: these are words that have come up in the conversation. McBride does not want to disguise the work's 'objectness'. She wants it self-sufficient, its supports showing. She does not want it to melt seamlessly into its surroundings. Yet she wants it to be 'continuous'. By this, I realize, she doesn't mean it should be physically continuous, like Martin Creed's 'protrusions', say. Instead she wants the work to feel like it could be anywhere, that it could extend, repeat, duplicate; that there is no clear distinction between the work and another ordinary object in the world.*

*The other word that comes up – the word that comes up more than any other – is banality. McBride's work is an exercise in the banal. It fades into its surroundings. When she says this, I think of Robert Walser's writing, his soft plod through the banalities of service and bureaucracy, with prose apparently designed – in W.G. Sebald's words – to 'dissolve upon reading'. McBride's work seems to operate on something of a similar register. I think, too, how Walter Benjamin described Walser's writing (a description which could, I feel, with some slight adjustment, equally apply to McBride's work): 'each sentence has the sole purpose of rendering the previous one forgotten'.*