



MECHANISM

ANDREW KEARNEY

JOANNE LAWS
ART WRITER
IN RESIDENCE 2017

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THE PERMEABLE INSTITUTION

A RESPONSE TO ANDREW KEARNEY'S

'MECHANISM' AT THE DOCK

J O A N N E L A W S

"Power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to an ability to hide its own mechanisms."

— Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1: An Introduction (i)

Across his expansive artistic career, Andrew Kearney has approached buildings as holding sites of knowledge. From concrete tower blocks to former factories, as well as many state institutions (including schools, hospitals, asylums and prisons), the artist has scrutinised how buildings function within a given landscape; how people inhabit or circulate through spaces; and the historical power relations that underpin the evolution of architecture. Kearney's vast experience of developing artworks for the public realm has undoubtedly influenced his site-responsive approaches towards exhibition-making. For Kearney, museum spaces are non-fixed, permeable sites, where the institution's physical and conceptual boundaries – between public and private, interior and exterior – are subject to playful reconfiguration or subtle erosion.

Even before entering Kearney's exhibition, many of these ideas are already circulating as we pass through a PVC strip curtain installed in the lobby of The Dock. Anyone who is familiar with this building will know that, as a former courthouse (built in 1821), it was originally designed to intimidate. Formality still governs the building's modern usage as a multi-purpose arts centre, with its foreboding staircase functioning as a physical barrier between institutional realms. While the theatre and Design House are situated in the foyer, audiences must climb the stairs to enter the domain of contemporary art. Kearney's decision to install a semi-transparent industrial curtain – the kind found on factory floors, where permanent doors are impractical – acknowledges the habitual circulation of people within the building and demarks a now-obvious transitory space. Kearney's intervention entices visitors simply to walk through, generating a tactile public encounter reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's architecturally-responsive beaded curtains – works of passage embodying the flimsy threshold between life and death; between the visible and the unseen.



While ascending the stairs, our gaze is enticed upwards, towards a shimmering silver parachute, affixed to the atrium ceiling. Lit from within, this foil-covered geodesic dome conjures associations with celestial entities, Science Fiction and the suspension of gravity. It implies infiltration from above, in the way that art thieves in comedy films might enter museums via skylights, stealthily lowering themselves via ropes, to avoid triggering motion-sensor alarms. The levitating sculpture also incorporates a silver raft – a buoyant yet vulnerable form that further implies notions of ‘influx’ from unknown territories, underpinned by the pivotal practice of ‘othering’ within modern geopolitics. Rarely are we invited to view an artwork from below, but this vantage-point extends into Gallery Two, where a colossal silver globe rotates hypnotically like an oversized disco ball. The four corners of the space are illuminated with spotlighting, as if to highlight the parameters of this architectural arena. The expansive and bare floorboards feel soothingly liberated from the burden of displaying art objects. Seemingly unperturbed by the additional weight, the ceiling seamlessly conceals purpose-built reinforcements and a motor within the roof cavity, which facilitate the ball’s suspension and soundless rotation.

The result is a deceptively effortless presentation that feels lightweight and uncluttered. The rectilinear forms occurring within this decidedly masculine building are softened by the vast curve of this gigantic circle, described by Katherine Waugh in her robust accompanying essay as an ‘enigmatic celestial orb’, based on its evocation of lunar or planetary cycles. The orb’s seductive chrome surface also calls to mind omnipresent convex mirrors, secreted in public spaces for surveillance purposes. In the gallery, viewers become strangely aware of their own physicality. To observe one’s own static reflection on the glistening surface of a moving object is quite unnerving. It offers a portal into an altered world – a physical and conceptual realm of otherness, described by philosopher Michel Foucault as a heterotopic space.

Offering partial seclusion from this seemingly innocuous ‘all-seeing eye’, a semi-circular shimmer curtain is installed across an often-overlooked door in the corner of the room. This semi-private, glistening enclave is exactly the kind of out-of-sight place that amorous couples gravitate towards in nightclubs. Nostalgically, it harks back to the underground club culture of the 1990s as one of the few counter-cultural spaces existing in Thatcherite Britain. Such freedom and escapism later became irretrievably eroded with the introduction of increasingly draconian legislation including The Criminal Justice Act of 1994, which sought to eradicate rave culture, squatting, itinerant communities, civic protest and many other forms of public gathering.



If this space simulates a nightclub, then Gallery Three is the glamorous VIP section. The entire room has been painted in a tantalising shade of tropical pink, while another shimmer curtain glistens in the spotlighting, casting disco-esque light shards across the floor and walls. Shrouded within the circular fringing is a miniature model of the nearby nineteenth-century infirmary building, part of the former prison complex that is visible through the customised pink-tinted windows. Floating on a pool of ink, the model echoes the isolated position of Leitrim's first county prison, a square fortress constructed on an island in Lough Scur in the 1600s. Many hangings reportedly took place on 'Jail Island' and, with the prison surrounded by water, only strong swimmers could escape. According to historian Dr John Logan – a Leitrim native whose grandfather worked in the courthouse – Jail Island was abandoned in the 1750s, with the establishment of the County Gaol in Carrick-on-Shannon.



As the site of judicial and legal enforcement, the courthouse itself was undoubtedly a mechanism of conformity and control. A hidden spiral staircase is retained within the modern-day building, along with an underground tunnel connecting the courtroom to the former gaol and gallows nearby. Originally the judge's chambers, the now-saturated painterly realm of Gallery Three offers a moment of reflection. While the old infirmary building outside resembles a fortified castle – conjuring notions of tyranny, surveillance and defence – the interior model has the proportions of a dollhouse, embodying a more intimate scale that diminishes the building's historic potency. At the shimmering threshold between fantasy and reality, this captivating installation functions as some sort of fantastical vision, flashback or dream sequence, offering a brief interlude from the building's prevailing narratives.

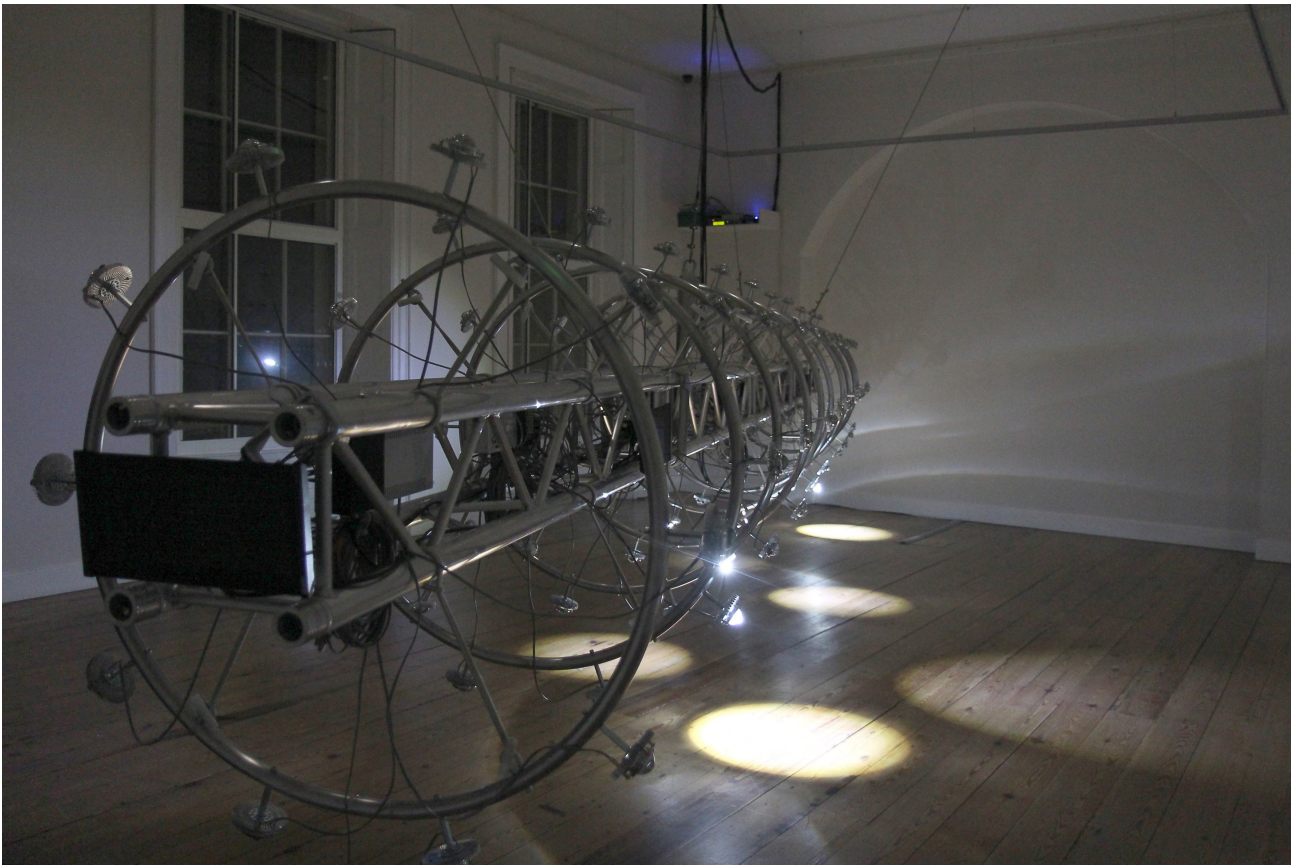
This whimsical atmosphere is altered considerably, as we confront a sinister contraption suspended diagonally across Gallery 1. The curvaceous, streamlined forms found in the other spaces give way to a cold aluminium structure incorporating spoked rings, flashing LEDs and loops of entangled wires. A seemingly random light sequence frantically throws spotlighting across the walls, floor and ceiling, the way prison guards might hunt down escaped inmates in the dead of night. A dramatic accompanying audio has been achieved by taking sound from the town centre via microphones, feeding the live recordings through an algorithm processor and transmitting the abstract soundtrack via directional speakers in the gallery setting. It's as if this data-munching automaton is perpetually nourished through this live feed and fluctuating light score.

For all its digital complexity, it is difficult not to interpret the resulting white noise as residue from the analogue era, encompassing: the occurrence of audio pareidolia within radio static; the concealment of subliminal or satanic messages within vinyl records (a process known as back-masking); the strange metallic screeches generated by the downloading of outmoded computer programmes from cassette tapes; or even the bloodcurdling shriek of the villainous cyborg *Daleks* (undoubtedly the most chilling TV sound effect of this era).

While individual sounds or voices are not distinguishable between audio waves, the technological process is perceived as an invisible form of surveillance, prompting reflection on whose gaze watches over us. Now resembling a fallen watch-tower, the aluminium sculpture recalls Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century Panopticon prison – one of most enduring historic examples of the capacity of architecture to assert power relations, thus regulating human behaviour through spatial means. In his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses the panoptic mechanism as a metaphor to trace surveillance tendencies within disciplinarian societies, describing the prisoner as being subject to asymmetrical surveillance: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication.” (ii)

As a mechanism of control, Bentham's Panopticon ensured ‘a guarantee of order’, because power was always ‘visible and unverifiable’(iii). While subjects of the watchtower’s gaze were aware of observation taking place, encroaching data surveillance in the digital age is less obvious or tangible. On the internet, it is difficult to tell where exposure to surveillance begins and ends, or who stands to capitalise on our perpetual streams of data. Interestingly, Kearney’s exhibition coincides with the recent announcement of plans to install CCTV in Carrick-On-Shannon, in an effort to curtail antisocial behaviour. What started out as a site-responsive project in the context of a former eighteenth-century courthouse, has expanded to encompass the cultural history and modernisation of this small rural community.

‘Mechanism’ is the most ambitious install ever undertaken at The Dock and the technical team are to be commended for their unwavering commitment. This exhibition generously invites viewers to become part of the work: their reflections are visible on chrome surfaces; they playfully rustle the shimmer curtains when no one is looking; and they listen as local soundscapes infiltrate the gallery from the street outside. By democratising the exhibition experience in this way, staff and visitors alike are treated as ‘maintainers’ or guardians of the building. Using this performative approach, Kearney responds to the psyche of the space, reconciling the building’s past with its modern usage.



Joanne Laws is an arts writer and editor based in Carrick-on-Shannon

- (i) Michel Foucault (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. United States: Random House.
- (ii) Michel Foucault (1975) *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage, p.200.
- (iii) Ibid. p.202.



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Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Leitrim. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was previously assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and coordinator of the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF). Joanne won 'VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2012/13' for her extended essay 'Commemoration – A ForwardLooking Act'.

She has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland.

Joanne Laws website can be seen here

Images by artist in residence Anna Leask

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Gallery Opening Times:

10:00am – 5:30 pm Monday to Friday

10:30am – 5:00pm Saturday.

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