Just Keep Sweeping

JESSICA FOLEY REFLECTS ON ‘THE CENTRE FOR DYING ON STAGE #3’ RESIDENCY AT COW HOUSE STUDIOS, COUNTY WEXFORD, WHICH SHE UNDERTOOK FROM 10 OCTOBER TO 20 NOVEMBER 2016.

At night the whole of Wexford seems to settle like an ocean in the dark beneath the mountain, dancing with the lights of fishers and anchored seafarers. The cattle breathe and stomp into the warm dark air of the corrugated sheds. In the grey green light of a sleepless moonful night the rooster woke you twice. You came here to wake up after all. Here belongs to the side of the Blackstairs Mountains in County Wexford, home to the O’Gorman family farm for over 200 years and the Cow House Studios since 2007. Today is your final day on the residency called ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #3’. You are looking back through your notebooks where you have been making observations, like: It is sunny. The leaves are autumnal. The wind wintry. Terracotta cows move over the green grasses in a complimentary trance [...]

It is challenging to work together. It can be beautiful to agree not to do so. I am here in my studio, listening at a distance to these other voices finding the notes of an idea they can play together. It is all storytelling. And before storytelling it is experience and sleep and dreams.

You came here to wake yourself from a tyranny of analysis and critique. You came here to remember your intuition, to regain a creative process. Your notes say that the purpose of staging contemporary art must be to energise each other to think creatively and critically, to become more lively and to seek inter-inspiration with others, to tell stories and share experiences through words, objects, movements and stillness.

The late afternoon sun is shining and all the surfaces of the farmhouse yard are awash with golden light. The inner spaces of the Cow House Studios playfully counterpoint those of the farmhouse by a bursty kind of order. You have become fond of one of many boxes tucked high into the shelves of the main art room labeled “sentimental clothing”.

This is the tidest farm you have ever seen. Strangely, the place reminds you of the context of your own growing up, though you were never a farming daughter. It’s a place where the agency of matter is perceived for what it is. An instance of this is the sloping field by the forest near the hay-shed, the one that kept flooding and was gradually acknowledged as a pond, duly excavated and kitted out with a small jetty, life-buoy, a kayak and some carp. Since your arrival on the farm you’ve watched their shadowed bodies rippling the surface tension many times, thinking how the tranquility here betrays a human preoccupation with prediction and control. One of the conversational slogans that emerged during the residency was ‘just keep sweeping’.

You recall the challenges of the previous five weeks, working to create rhythm within this community of strangers in order to bring something to the stage at Wexford Arts Centre. ‘Sudden rituals were established in the group, playfully yet with conviction. Three of five artists began to train together, going running every morning around the 4k loop, down and back along the hillside from the farm. At first, you didn’t quite relate. You were amused, yet somewhat anxious, at the fanaticism. You followed from a safe distance considering what was going on. Slowly, you began to get the legit of it all. This training was something wildly serious: a commitment to the process of art making as intuitive, spontaneous and systematic. Something quite trustworthy yet unpredictable. Training for the stage was training for life.

Ordinarily, you work in a context where engineering researchers devise telecommunications “networks for the future” between the worlds of industry, business and academia. The research centre where you work is called CONNECT. When a colleague emailed to ask how you were getting on at ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #3’, you replied that it was ‘disturbing’. This blunt assessment was not a complaint. It was the most relevant word you could think of, in that moment of correspondence, to describe the disfiguring effect of different creative processes coming into relation and tension with each other, an effect troubled and intensified by flashes of cruelty and fear.

In CONNECT your creative and collaborative process has been described, sincerely and without malice, as a distraction. Quite directly, you have been named an ‘interceptor’, so called after an algorithm that interrupts electrical circuits when a fault occurs in the system. In that context the negative connotations of these words had become affirmative, constituting a local vocabulary to describe healthy relations of difference. Now, on the final day of your residency, you see that all along you have been wondering what it means for you to describe the experience of ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #3’ as distracting?

From the edge of your empty square white table, set at a diagonal to the white walls of your studio in the Cow House, you intuit this question. In every aspect of your experience on the residency, you intuit this question: You walk the loop walk daily and intuit this question. You go shopping, make and eat meals with the others, converse and share gestures and ideas with the others, and intuit this question.

You pet Dolly the farm cat and intuit this question. You observe the stars' at IMMA (15 September – January 2017), using the museum as a rehearsal space and touchstone for the development of a new theatre production. #4 took the form of a promenade lecture at Performance as Process at St John’s College, Cambridge, on 27 January 2017. ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #4’ was an intensive six-week residency at Cow House Studios #4 and took place as part of the Fringe and other events at WMA (15 September – 13 October 2017). Using the museum as a rehearsal space and performance venue created a new theatre production for the development of a new theatre production.

One of the stipulations in the open call for ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #3’ was that the selected artists should present some aspect of work developed during the residency through the public forum of Wexford Arts Centre, specifically by using the infrastructure and resources of the theatre. The intention was to engage with the discipline of theatre and to explore modes of interdisciplinarity and performance, and was one of the things that made this particular iteration of ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #3’ so compelling. On 12 of November at 2pm, two performances took place on the stage at Wexford Arts Centre. The first, ‘Spoon Game in a Cage’, was by Alex Minnaert, and the second, ‘First Glue/Stage Business’, was by Jessica Foley, Lisa Hoffmann, Marjorie Potiron and Steven Randall.

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Notes
1. Cow House Studios is an artist-run school and residency set in 180 acres of farmland in County Wexford.
2. The Centre for Dying on Stage #3 was initiated by Kristina Gouwenaar (Director, IW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin) and developed by Irish curator Kieran Strain as a research project that generates new artistic understandings, is hosted to notions of death and the stage. The website collates instances of unexpected deaths that have occurred during moments of performance in the public domain (contemporaryartstage.com). ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #4’ was presented at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 18 July – 13 September 2014. #2 took the form of a promenade lecture at Performance as Process at St John’s College, Cambridge, on 27 January 2017. ‘The Centre for Dying on Stage #4’ was an intensive six-week residency at Cow House Studios #4 and took place as part of the Fringe and other events at WMA (15 September – 13 October 2017). Using the museum as a rehearsal space and performance venue created a new theatre production for the development of a new theatre production.
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4. For further information on CONNECT’s research visit connectcentre.ie
5. This is how Marjorie Potiron and Lisa Hoffmann describe the purpose of their artistic process: to ‘systematically generate a beautiful mess’.