

QUANTUM FOAM

Curated by
**Marie
McPartlin**

Kinsale Arts Festival
19 September
—28 September

Luan Gallery, Athlone
19 October
—9 January

Wexford Arts Centre
20 November
—22 November

Galway Arts Centre
5 December
—17 January

The LAB, Dublin
11 December
—11 December

MEL BRIMFIELD
WRITTEN FOR AND PERFORMED BY
DAVID CANN



CAMERAWORK, EDITING
AND POST-PRODUCTION
BY LUKAS DEMGENSKI

MUSICAL DIRECTION,
ARRANGEMENT AND
SOUND DESIGN
BY PAUL HIGGS

quantumfoam.ie

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“There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place...”

Old Times, (1971) Harold Pinter

Quantum Foam is a new commission for Kinsale Arts Festival, and gives its name to the selection of my work curated by Artistic Director Marie McPartlin for a tour of the Republic of Ireland. It takes the form of a theatrically devised sculptural film installation that contrives to articulate the gallery space as a hotly contested mutable territory, notionally shifting its fictive form and function to stage a wildly divergent sequence of monologue-driven scenarios. Delivered by virtuoso solo performer David Cann, multiple realities are verbally conjured and systematically dismantled at a dizzying rate of knots by an array of characters, yanking the viewer through one imaginative wormhole after another to slowly reveal the gaseous outline of an individual consciousness at the core. Projected onto a vast monolith-like screen structure, the characters appear one after the other, like a re-tuning TV set, as a series of grotesque composite ‘faces’ splicing the actor’s monstrously enlarged isolated features into peculiar configurations. Each character’s face is painted a different colour (red, yellow, blue and green) to aid the process of distinguishing one voice from another, and as the piece progresses, the pace of interruption and interjection proceeds at a hectic clip. Two further audio channels relay auxiliary heckles, reaction and commentary from the other characters.

The narrative begins by establishing a swathe of clearly defined monologue formats that project a motley assortment of past, present and future realities. In the absence of any tangible props, sets or supporting cast, these imaginings are fixed purely by verbal description, and range in pitch and intensity. A palpable erosion of logic ensues within these interwoven narratives as they unfold, coupled with increasingly fast-paced cuts between them. The bullying technical jargon wielded with weapon-like authority by an estate agent relating the details of an absurd property development with fluctuating architectural features and outlandish interior design is broken to admit the brutish hectoring polemic of a dictatorial political candidate making promises to a reticent electorate. The soothing hypnotic reverie of a series of visualisation exercises for relaxation situated variously in a forest, on a cloud and minister’s sermon detailing from the unimaginable torments awaiting the damned in Hell with a prurient zeal that congeals into an incomprehensible Sadean jumble of flaming limbs and pitchforks, whilst a psychotherapy patient haltingly recounting a shadowy childhood trauma is pitched variously as its victim, aggressor and audience in his self-contradictory figuring of the event. As the piece grinds inexorably towards its juddering climax, the task of scriptwriting takes on the aspect of choral composition; the cast of clamouring voices begin to overlap, simultaneously mumbling, shrieking, weeping, barking and succumbing to apoplectic fits of hysterical laughter before resolving into a single voice singing Faron Young’s ‘Hello Walls’ arranged as an a capella ballad. The lonely artwork laments its abandonment by the artist who created it, singing directly to the gallery, resigned to their mutual isolation.

The menacing claustrophobia of the isolated room as Harold Pinter’s recurring milieu of choice is a key reference point for the work. The populace of enigmatic invaders, manipulative schemers and hapless victims who collide and collude for control or dominance of space in dramas such as **The Caretaker** and **No Man’s Land** find a garbled echo in the perpetual imaginative reinvention of the gallery’s function proposed by **Quantum Foam**. Pinter’s preoccupation with the slippery phenomenon of memory also surfaces in the frequently collapsed contingent realities evoked by the piece; by its very nature, memory is an act of the present and cannot therefore be a verifiable record of the past. In a final self-reflexive turn, the work also draws on the formal language of improvisatory exercises for actors, underlining the shifting crude mechanics of evocation that must attend the process of devising a theatrical fiction.



Swagged Jacquard fabric window treatments in claret will enhance the opulent lustre of the mahogany paneling in the library.

Opt for self-rimmed or flush mounted. Team with sumptuous cut pile semi-plain velvet slip-covered cushions and bolsters for pure empty luxury and desolation. Choose from Fiesta, Tobago, Xanadu or Clam. You can’t go wrong with a Heppelthwaite camelback sofa upholstered in woven stripe linen cotton for durability. Mist with the evocative scent of sandalwood and pisssss. A breakfast nook always adds value. A large lump of quartz is a striking addition. Lay down an ash-grey oak mansion-weave parquet floor. Install a cotton-bordered seagrass runner. Create a relaxed atmosphere with strategically positioned boulders. Tent with terracotta voile to achieve a rose-ate glow. For instant elegance, scatter spare change throughout the vestibule. Flank the bespoke gilt-edged mirror with porcelain shepherdess figurines. (pause) Brocadeed taffeta on the lawn creates a luxurious statement – choose from Duck Egg, Sulphur, Amethyst or Bisquit. A thoughtfully placed floral arrangement or well-chosen landmine can create a sense of drama. Illuminate the dark pockets with low-wattage polished nickel pendants and glow-worms. Create an intriguing display of trinkets, nick-naika, gee-gaws and bric-a-brac on a distressed Welsh Dresser to catch the eye. Bold juxtapositions will pique the interest of your guests – insert a Pratiware bust of Methodist preacher John Wesley and a tusk amidst clustered ranks of enameled Victorian snuff boxes and silver flaggee thimbles. An 18th Century Saltglaze scratch-blue decorated tea caddy will sparkle in the company of tarnished candelabra and chipped Pearlware elephants. Broken teeth, shrunken heads, and splintered matchsticks will add texture.

Extract from **Quantum Foam** Performed by David Cann Commissioned by Kinsale Arts Festival, 2014



“OH GOD— MY LIFE IS A FUTILE SUCKING HOLE.”

THE HARDER I TRY, the deeper I go into sin. Isn’t there any power to deliver me from the ache of my sinful heart? All have uttered the same heretery to the Lord for His power and deliverance. I have knelt a thousand times with the prosperous and the exalted and the powerful, and the weak and the poor and the broken... Thousands have tried to forget the realism of life in hectic pleasure, drown it with liquor, cauterize it with pseudoscience, vaporize it with

poetry, explain it away with philosophy, but it still lingers as a haunting problem in every heart. Sin is the root of our troubles and difficulties and misery. The mistakes, failures and sins are written into the Record Book to await the Day of Judgment when every man shall give an account before the Almighty. Danger lurks behind every corner. The thunder of those Four Horsemen can be heard drawing ever closer. War, Famine, Pestilence....

Extract from **Quantum Foam**. Performed by David Cann. Commissioned by Kinsale Arts Festival, 2014

No don’t laugh. No don’t. No don’t laugh

There’s a stupid and old joke that the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has told many times that goes along the lines of this. A man goes to the doctor convinced that he is a piece of corn. He’s taken to a mental institution where the staff try to convince him that he’s not corn but a human being. Eventually his therapy seems to be working and he’s ready to leave. Just after leaving he rushes back, terrified. “There’s a chicken outside that wants to eat me” he splutters. “But” the doctor says, “You have nothing to worry about. You know perfectly well now that you are not piece of corn but a man.” “I know, I know” the man says, still scared witless, “I know that, but does the chicken.”¹

A version of the chicken story appears in a published anthology of Žižek’s jokes. That there can be an entire collection of his gags tells us two things about the Slovenian thinker. First, that he’s famous enough at this point for there to be an audience for edited fragments from his vast oeuvre. And second, that nestled amongst all the political incorrectness, violence and obscenity in the book lies both a rigorous philosophy and an ethics. As both philosophers and comedians will tell you, comedy is a very serious matter.

In this case the chicken is not a mere punchline but takes on a metaphysical significance. It becomes a way of thinking about our conscious and subconscious relationship to the world. Ideology, Žižek argues, functions not on the level of our subconscious, or our set of beliefs which we can analyse and critique, but rather at the level of reality itself. Both our identity and the world we live in is shaped by latent symbolic structures outside of our control.

I picked up Žižek’s book again after seeing the work of Mel Brimfield as it occurred to me that they share some common ground. My first reaction on encountering her art was the same as when I first read Žižek: to laugh out loud. Brimfield seems to be gleeful sauntering up to art and pulling its trousers down to snigger at what she finds. The situations she presents are ribald, hectic, obscene. Quips, ideas, motifs are all little custard pies to be thrown in the faces of the audience. Some seem familiar, other less so. Alternative histories of art and performance are proposed in which drag, striptease, and end of the pier nudge-nudge, wink-wink one-liners are as important as statements by masters from

the canon like Jackson Pollock or Henry Moore. Van Gogh is presented as a grotesque idiot Pierrot; there are fragments of Frankie Howerd and Beckett. Is that Kenneth Williams or Clement Greenberg? The lips in **Death and Dumb (part 2)** exhort us, insistently, with the phrase: “No don’t laugh, no don’t, no don’t laugh” but I’m not sure that’s possible. And yet, for all the larking around that seems to be going on there’s a deep seriousness at the heart of it all. Art, Philosophy, Comedy; all have the potential to take certainties and render them uncertain or **queer**. They are all, in the words of Wittgenstein (another jokester and philosopher) in the **Philosophical Investigations** “queer process[es].” Jokes are queer because they unsettle binaries: tragic/ comic; true/ false; art/ life. Jokes are queer because they offer a provocation and a threat.

The provocations are challenges to taste in the face of which we have to re-assert and thus re-assess our values. The comedian Stewart Lee paraphrases Cicero’s line that “an indecency decently put is the thing we laugh at hardest.”² Jokes, then, become a way of facing indecencies, grabbing them by the collars and slapping them in the face. The biggest indecency of them all is, of course, our own deaths. There’s a huge cosmic joke being told in which we will all die along with the eventual fizzing out of all life and energy as the sun finally packs up, explodes into a supernova and shrivels away to nothing. And it doesn’t matter.

The threat of comedy is the same as the threat of art: an ontological one. They challenge us for accepting the world the way that it normally appears to be. Perhaps, comedians and artists tell us, some things don’t exist in the way we think they do; perhaps some things are not as meaningful as we’d like them to be. Perhaps there **are** metaphysical chickens out there waiting to peck at us. And they don’t know we think they don’t exist.

To end, here’s another chicken joke I can imagine Žižek telling. It’s about the cliché that lots of different meat – rabbit, frogs legs, alligator – all tastes like chicken. The joke is: what if this is not because humans are too crude to tell the difference or too ignorant to discern the nuances in the rich textures of things. The joke is: what if the world is really like that, somehow unfinished or incomplete? What if the world hangs only loosely together as if it was thrown together by some blind idiot god who didn’t really know what they were doing or was too drunk to care? The true, ghastly obscenity is that there might not be a punchline after all.

Francis Halsall
www.alittletagend.blogspot.com

² Stewart Lee, **How I Escaped My Certain Fate, The Life and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian**, (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Pg. 143

I don’t care what I say, do I? I don’t! I don’t! Honest I don’t!



I’M PLAYING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES but not necessarily in the right order. As it happens I’m wearing me yodeling trousers. Like two sticks of celery sticking out of a carrier bag. Woo hoo! No – don’t laugh. No, don’t. No don’t laugh... Listen. Pull yourselves together. You’ll make me a laughing stock. Use your ligaments, boy and don’t percolate. Desist! What’s the matter? Lost your bike? No individual laughter – the others have paid as much as you. Ere, there’s a funny thing. She said ‘You’re not polished enough.’ I said ‘What do you take me for – a coffin?’ You’d be thin if you came up the same pipes as this ale. I’m as full of vim as a butcher’s dog. I’m as lively as a cricket. I don’t want to worry you, but this tent-pole’s loose. It was a collar stud in me sock. That’s no good. It takes 20 minutes to get me wellies off. And if I eat another starch-reduced roll and turn over in bed I’ll crack. It wasn’t raining – I went to see an antique curiosity. Sit down and take the weight off your lavender bags. Wet-Whistle, Wallop or Windbreaker, sir? You baboon-faced inkstain. Three old ladies? Goodness gracious. How very uncomfortable for them and for you. I wouldn’t fancy doing that on cold lino. Ada’s are much bigger. She always has them loose on the counter. Have you ever done it while drinking a glass of water? It was very tasteful but they ruined it with a staple. By golly it doesn’t half go. Me kneecaps are working loose. Me jockey shorts are up round me neck. Two of these and you’d disappear completely. They found him the following day up a tree in Huddersfield with his peeler in his hand. Out of bounds – a tired kangaroo. Never play ping pong with your mouth open. With the outbreak of World War two, he served with great distinction behind the bacon counter at the co-op disguised as a middle-aged spinster Did you get your free sausage on the way in?

Extract from **Death and Dumb – Part 1** Performed by David Cann



Place your hands under your buttocks and exhale....

Aim the right knee towards the left nostril. Very gently roll down your spine, just a vertebra at a time. Draw your knees up by your ears and keep your hand on your ha’penny... Gently slide one foot down the opposite thigh...and tremble. That’s it... Tighten your abdominal muscles and gleeeeeeeeam... Draw your knees to your chest and rock...Feel the pressure. Roll your eyeballs upwards and let your scalp slide back...With full lungs, switch and repeat until you pixelate. Just practice and you will see results sooner than you expect. On the count of three, your thighs should be perpendicular to the floor, and your shoulder pressed firmly to the wheel. Let your jaw become limp and heavy... Levitate. Rest your head on your folded arms, then drop like a stone. Exhale slowly, relax and repeat. Your chin will be pressed to your shin. Crack your knuckles, arch your back and massage your knees gently...Allow yourself to feel dreamy and drowsy, making sure that all negative things leave your mind...Let your worries and tensions drift away.

Extract from **Quantum Foam** Performed by David Cann Commissioned by Kinsale Arts Festival, 2014

PRESENTERS, DATES & WORKS

Kinsale Arts Festival
kinsaleartsfestival.com
 19 – 28 September

Quantum Foam (2014)
 Death and Dumb Part 1 (2013)
 Death and Dumb Part 2 (2013)

The Luan, Athlone
athloneartsandtourism.ie
 19 October – 9 January

An Audience with Willie Little (2013)
 Vincent (Portrait with Bandaged Ear)
 Vincent (Portrait with Straw Hat after Kirk Douglas)

Vincent (Portrait with Fur Hat and Bandaged Ear)
 Vincent (Portrait in Straw after Kirk Douglas) (2012)

Wexford Arts Centre
wexfordartscentre.ie
 20-22 November

Clement Greenberg – Lee Krasner – Jackson Pollock (2011)

Between Genius and Desire – Jackson (after Ed Harris) (2012)

Galway Arts Centre
galwayartscentre.ie
 5 December – 17 January

Four Characters in Search of a Performance (2010)

The Lab, Dublin
thelab.ie
 11 December

CREDITS

Curated by Marie McPartlin

Design and lettering Ryan Gillard
Print Fine Print
Technician Alan Raggatt
Tour Assistance Nicola Carragher

THANKS

Clare Doyle, Catherine Bowe, Maeve Mufrennan, Aedin McGinn, Sheena Barrett, Ceri Hand, Hannah Pierce, Francis Halsall, Stephen Brandes, Gareth Hunt, Tessa Fitzjohn, Gemma Tipton, Clara Lowless, Maggie Hogan, Gar Mahigan, Noelle Cooper, Colin Farmer, Andy Moss, Mareta Doyle, Maureen Tierney and Marsha Morrison.

Published by Kinsale Art Festival.

¹ Slavoj Žižek, **Žižek’s Jokes**, ed. Mortensen, (London: The MIT Press, 2014), pg. 67

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