

Conor McFeely: Partial Objects
A Conversation Between Artist Conor McFeely and
Art Historian Gabriel Gee

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INTRODUCTION

In the following conversation, the artist Conor McFeely and art historian Gabriel Gee reflect on the multiple properties and veiled meanings of five objects used by McFeely in some of his recent artworks. Conor McFeely was born in Derry, Northern Ireland, where he lives and works today. His work incorporates a wide range of processes, from the ready-made to sculpture and installation, as well as photography, video and audio. A fracturing and manipulation of "material" in the service of finding new relationships is a chief characteristic of his practice. Often conceived as multi-layered in terms of their reading, many works have been driven by ruminations on the nature of individual freewill, choice and autonomy. Contexts and source material reflect interests in a history of counter culture, literature and social contexts. Historical mindedness informs McFeely's work, with references ranging from 20th century global political history, Northern Ireland's troubled legacies and landscapes in the second half of the 20th century, and scientific and epistemological histories. McFeely has exhibited both nationally and internationally.

Gabriel Gee is an Art Historian who lives and works in Switzerland. His research interests include British painting in the 20th Century, forms and discourses in the visual arts in Northern Ireland in the late 20th century, and the interaction between aesthetics and industry in the 19th and 20th centuries. Recent publications include "The metamorphosis of Cain: aesthetics in the transindustrial city at the turn of the century" (*Visual Resources*, 2014), "The catalogue of the Orchard Gallery: a contribution to critical and historical discourse in Northern Ireland 1978-2003" (*Journal of historiography*, 2013). His monograph on *Art in the North of England* is to be published by Ashgate in Spring 2016. He is a co-founder of the research group on Textures and experiences of trans-industriality (www.tetigroup.org)

The discussion starts by evoking apparent layers of signification, before considering the additional inclusion of hidden meanings, and the extent to which these might function as the existential roots of the pieces. In that respect, the notion of symptom is implied, and in particular how aesthetic elements might point to denials of past, potentially traumatic experience. It is more specifically the manipulation by the artist of such possibilities, which is considered. The notion of abstraction is equally useful, in that it points to a pool of meanings, which are present, but somehow not immediately accessible and visible. The reference to 'partial objects' suggests a range of interpretative potentials. Partial is of course that which exists only in part, which is incomplete; therefore it demands an interrogation of the lacking component. Partial objects are also a staple in psychological theory, alluding to the fixation on a part mistaken for the whole, and to an ever-unattainable object of desire. Interestingly, partial objects are also used in programming, where they refer to objects that have become disconnected from significant amount of their supposedly corresponding data. The relation to the whole in this case cannot be reset, and functions as an irremediable loss. Fragments, remnants and resurgence are thus explored in five recurrent objects of Conor McFeely's practice. The selected objects were part and informed the *Weathermen* project initiated in 2012 and shown at Franklin University in 2013.¹

Gabriel Gee [GG]: *The Elizabethan collar (figure 1): the collar gives a perspective, it offers an entry into the world, it is akin to a window open onto the world, a monade connected to the labyrinth of the city beneath it; but it also shuts out the vision, it prevents the viewer from gaining a panoramic view, it protects you from scratching your hitching bits, while condemning your vision and actions to a fragmented framework.*



Figure 1: Conor McFeely. *Inside his Master's Voice*. 2010. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

Conor McFeely [CMF]: Initial tests with the collar suggested a range of possible readings, from a type of siphon or filter allowing a conduction of sorts in both directions. I would occasionally see that clown-like dog limping along wearing one of these odd funnels and found it quite disturbing, that is the idea of this restriction and the blinkered vision imposed by it. The peripheral vision is limited and the result of that is usually a form of agitation causing the occupant to turn their head continually. The structure naturally implies a projection or movement, which, if extended outwards, suggests an ever-expanding scanner or radar. At the other end of course it shrinks back to nothing. But it was the separation caused by it that first attracted me. It almost decapitates the body and creates an acephalic. It alienates one part of the person from the other. The body is almost denied by the contraption and at the same time protected. R.D. Laing talks about the unembodied self. A sense of self that is detached from the body so that the body is felt as an object among other objects in the world rather than the core of oneself in the world. This type of experience is referred to as depersonalisation disorder. This might be a refuge of sorts, but it makes it difficult to distinguish between the inner and outer world experiences. The collars were used in work from “Inside His Masters Voice”. The book by Lem, ‘His Masters Voice’ refers to a failed scientific project to decode a neutrino signal from space. It also recalls the old record label. The addition of the word “Inside” suggested a backwards glance at history. The sound used in conjunction with the collars contains the voice of Oppenheimer.

G.G: *The words of J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967) evoke the inception of nuclear weapons in America in the 1940s. The fragmentation of the self the collar exposes appears to be tied to an underlying cycle of creation and destruction. Behind the Elizabethan collar, there might be an impossible individual quest to grasp the fullness of the world, either at its inception through the big bang, or at its ending through the black hole. This tension between fullness and void is further emphasised by the Japanese voices in the soundtrack of the piece, which, as you pointed out to me, were extracted from the video game the Simms, and allude to the creation of a nonsensical language.*

CMF: I am conscious that we can observe this quest you mention being central to much art practice. It can appear to be an angst-driven attempt to establish certainty. A desire to structure some meaning and purpose, intended or accidental. This is tempered by an understanding of the absurdity of the quest. That is, there seems to be an accompanying scream (possibly of laughter) that knows this articulation is simply a new form responding to a timeless quandary. So we create new orders to make sense of this. This includes political, scientific and other experiments. In the Simms world with its laws, codes of behaviour and unintelligible language, questions of morality come into play quite quickly. How and why do we reward or punish? How does a society develop its value system? What is a transgression? The tone of Oppenheimer seems to be one of reflective regret. The bomb changed the world we live in permanently as did the political experiment in Germany that brought this about. There is an irony in the nature of the soundtracks' Japanese style voice over-laid with Oppenheimer's low apologetic delivery. The mechanics aside, visual aesthetics are a large part of the work.

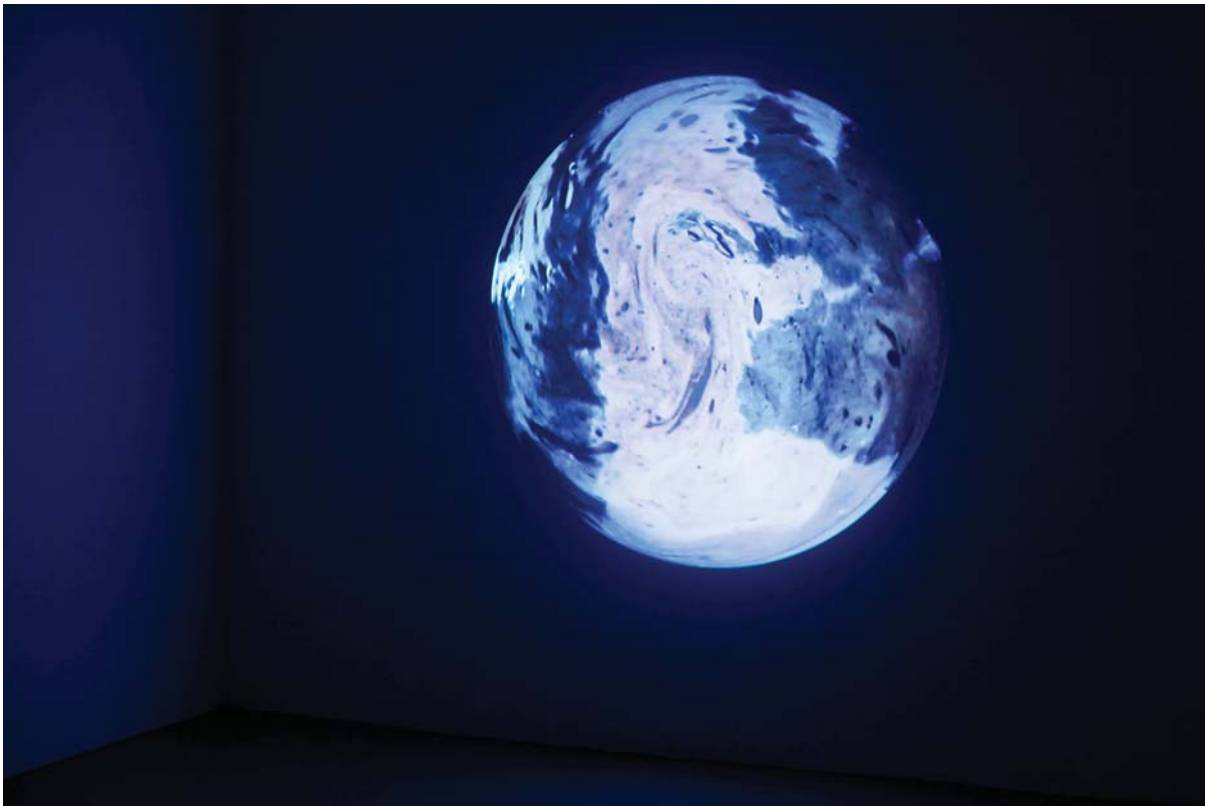


Figure 2: Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

GG: *The pint glass (figure 2): the glass and the liquid within it are a limited proposition, a small world in which to drown your thoughts; or they are an archetypal example of how worlds fold onto one another, they were brought about by demiurgic forces, and within it infinite universes are contained.*

CMF: The transformative power of drink cannot be underestimated. Ireland is synonymous with it. Guinness is the stuff of legend, an Irish stereotype in itself. “Guinness is good for you” was their most notable slogan. It is also a beautiful minimal contemplative sculpture. Watching the seductive action of stout poured and settling can be mesmerising. The chemical reaction caused by the nitrogen and the burnt barley creates a rising tide of particles, a transubstantiation? In Ireland it's almost a holy water or a weapon in some hands. The effect can open and close doors. The pub snug, a refuge from the weather is a HQ for planning and operations. As used in *The Weathermen* the pint represents the last object in a ritual, the final object of bodily desire. An agent in a transition ritual between one state and another.

GG: *The opening video of your Weathermen display at Franklin University in 2013 depicted the perfect circle of the pint's rim seen from above, in which substance was being poured with as a consequence a myriad of coloured metamorphoses taking place before the viewer. There is a touch of magic, or alchemy at play in the constitution of the beverage. Perhaps the artist's task is more closely linked to that of a brewer, than that of a distant intellectual and contemplative mind: more craftsman, than pure 'cosa mentale'?*

CMF: Art can be a social lubricant and Guinness does a good job at that. I think of the process as demanding a mixture of elements. It's a rounded process. It also a truism that human beings have sex, procreate, eat, defecate as well as design and analyse the world. A focus on visual appearances alone doesn't interest me but it is an aspect of practice that matters. Concepts alone can be unrewarding. So much so-called "conceptual art" can be visually poverty-stricken and intellectually lacking. Different energies come into play over the process and like the Guinness in the video these forces produce self-organised chaos, order and fluctuation. I take into account that someone might look at my work. So I have to consider how the artist engages people. Pure craft can be incredibly beautiful but some additional ingredient is needed for a more meaningful pact. There is nothing to take away from it apart from the satisfaction of seeing something well made. It seems more fitting that the exhibition begins after you leave the gallery. It is understood retrospectively. In the process of making something I hope some magic or alchemy happens that heightens my engagement and encourages a loss of self. The desire is that this moment, or something like it, is experienced by others. If there is any alchemy it is in the collision of thought and form, which might produce an antidote to this binary. Alcohol and drugs can seem like useful tools in this task.

GG: *The stethoscope (figure 3): the languid instrument is an extension of the inquisitive bear ear? and analytical mind, a tool to assess bodies and hearts, an instrument to heal the living world; a radar onto the external environment which can plunge into the depths of secret and hidden spaces, the stethoscope can further the controlling propensity of human politics to nefarious consequences.*

CMF: Medicine has been used as an instrument of social control in many contexts and some earlier works most notably Disclaimer has referenced this. The cast resin capsules that reside somewhere between bomb and pill were essentially large valium. The writings of R.D Laing have been an on-going interest. His notion of an anti-psychiatry and his experiment in the Tavistock clinic which challenged conventional treatment with its desire to define "normal" held a fascination. There are paintings from many years before where I drew on my experiences of working in a psychiatric hospital as a student. I see the stethoscope as a probe that might have been used by Burroughs' Doc Benway in some casually obscene operation.

GG: *Here the individual is at the heart of the perusing, the object of medical scrutiny, and possible mental manipulation. Could there also be a socio-historical unconscious evoked by the blurry silhouette of a doctor framed within a grid-ordered surface?*

CMF: The nature of the image, its visual appearance, black and white and partly out of focus suggested a kind of faked historical document. This image is pivotal in the Weathermen Projects. It could have been found in a filing cabinet in a medical institution or some research centre. So conceptual questions about function and formal concerns, position, gesture, angle, definition and cropping arise. The image's ability to convey is determined by these factors. The style or look of the image was informed by a book I found in a supermarket. A complete photographic encyclopedia of dead Norwegian Nazi soldiers. Most of whom had been photographed killed in action with a photo portrait beside them. The presence of history in the work is metaphorical

rather than literal, but my interest in the events of WW11 extends to other ideological experiments to restructure society.

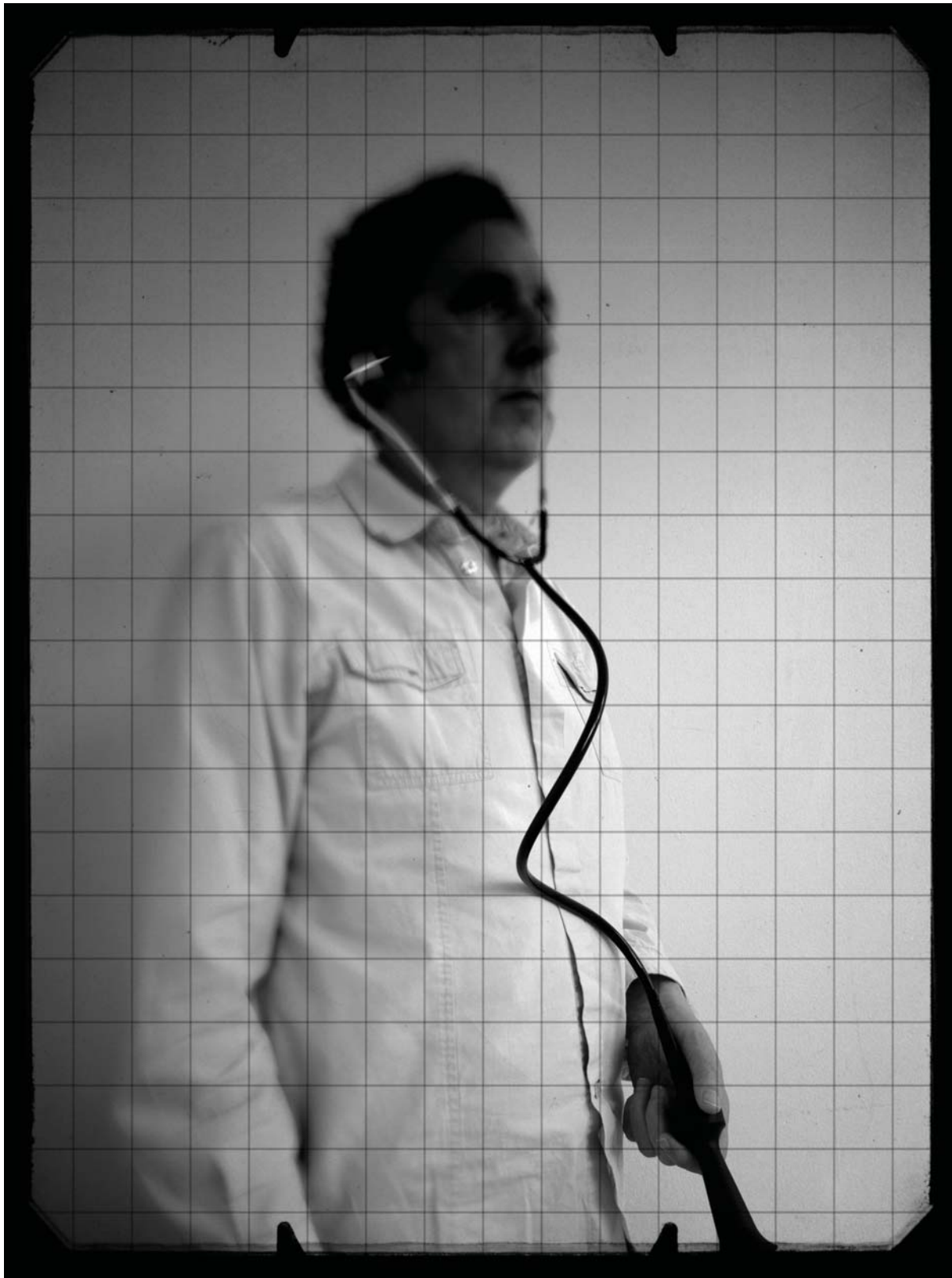


Figure 3: Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

GG: *The duvet (figure 4): a protection against the cold and the night, a place to dream which evokes home and homeliness; striped and uniform, the duvet is a jail, a prison from which passive abandonment foments and clings its occupant to oblivion.*

CMF: The duvet is a photo sculpture with a pattern that is universally understood, part of our collective sub-conscious. It only works for me as a photographed image. It comes into existence through a history of documentary photography I mentioned earlier. Its reference is implied by its relationship to the ideological stethoscope and its folds are formed by the body it once wrapped. It is beaten. It's hanging is final. It is seen through the grid of a camera viewfinder and a detached but concealed inspection is offered.

GG: *The duvet also featured prominently in an almost stilled video of a young man in bed, seemingly procrastinating (was it originally entitled 'How Irish is it?')*

CMF: Yes I made a short sequence of that title for *The Case Of The Midwife Toad*. I have played with the title since then in relation to other works. The rumination on my part was on the idea of purity, racial purity specifically. The politics of Northern Ireland revolve around cultural identity and it can seem inescapable at times. No matter how one thinks of oneself you will be categorised regardless according to birth and schooling. Mixed religion marriages and integrated education can still be viewed with suspicion. Most people still adhere to either of the dominant traditions. There is great pride taken in cultural purity. The project was informed by the research carried out by the zoologist and evolutionary scientist Paul Kammerer. The outcomes of Kammerer's research cross-breeding different types of toads over twenty years produced hybrids which challenged the established Darwinian view and offered the possibility of "acquired characteristics." The figure under the duvet is my son who at the time was dealing with his own "Irishness" in relation to others. While I was making work that was informed by the conditions of the place I live in this isn't indicated by any easy visual reference. At its heart I'd say the project was a rumination on choice and free-will. There is free-will but within certain limitations. Formally it was unresolved, but it was a contribution to the larger project and I have returned to the title as a starting point since then. The duvet/bed evokes an underworld or musing on the question that is the title, and I hope the title suggests the response "How much does it matter?"

GG: *The shelves: the shelves are a space on which to display worthy items whose clear function or aesthetics might be better put into the light; only archaeological remnants occupy those shelves, as encased artefacts in museums, objects have lost their agency and dust covers their loss of meaning.*

CMF: The language of shelving display is the language of dispassionate selection and organisation. It pretends to be neutral and purely functional in its presentation. Orders are proposed. Bakeries, bookshops and hardware stores in particular excel at display. Hardware stores, with apparatus suspended and objectified in sun protective bags like body parts. Bakeries, with food that seems to make better sculpture than food. So, what to present and how to present it? This seems to be at least 50% of the task. As Emmet Williams says in Spoerri's topography of chance "...did you ever hear about the artist who came to dinner and took the table with him when he left? Not only did he take it away, he hung it up and exhibited it as a work of art." The objects I select often reflect some aspect of the local culture and the idea of buying ready-made art from the shop next door is definitely appealing.

GG: *Can we then evoke an aesthetic dialogue, with Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961) for instance, and possibly with Joseph Beuys' *Working place of a scientist, artist* (1961-67)?*

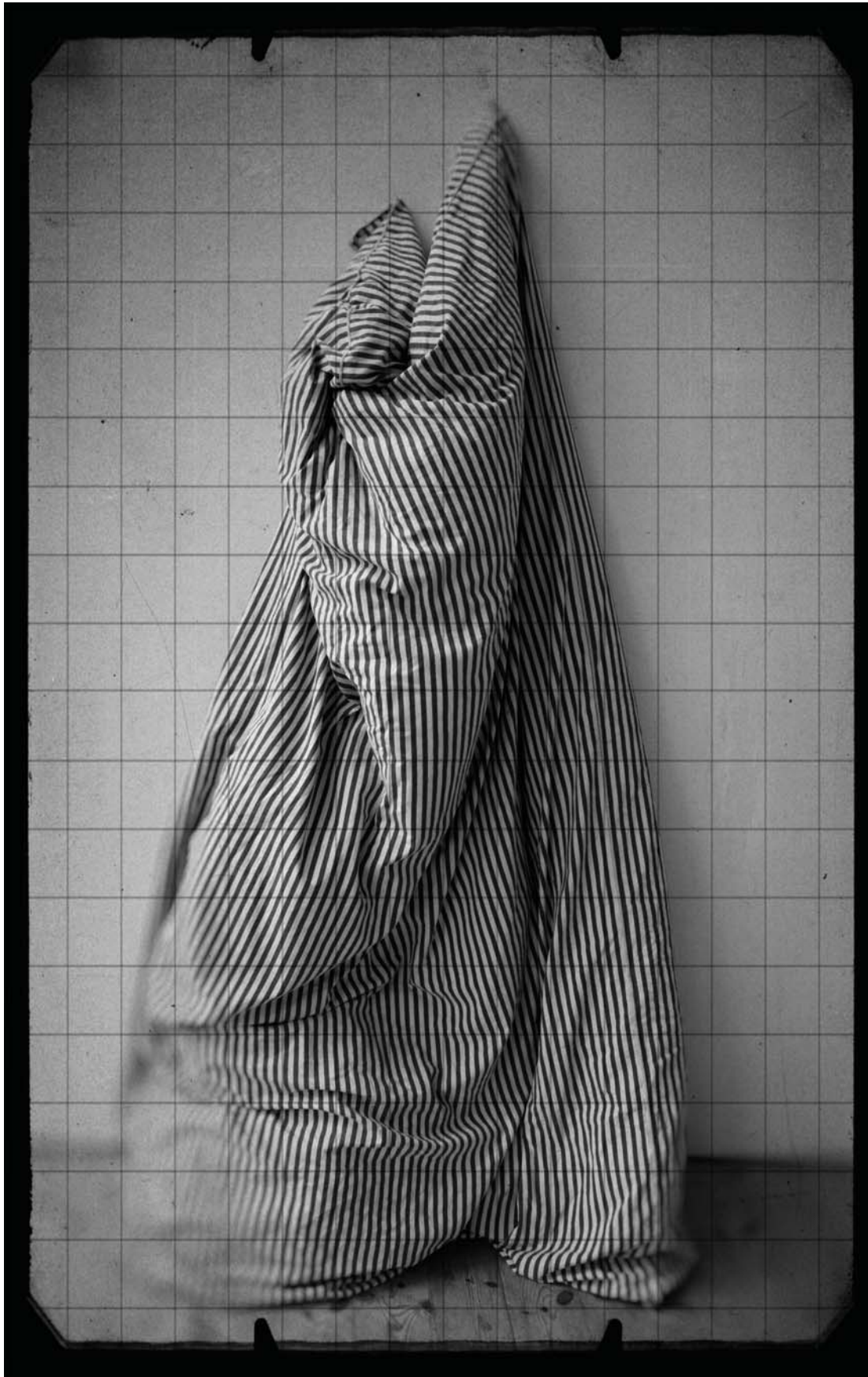


Figure 4: Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

CMF: There is connection to art forms of that period and I would probably cite Paul Thek's technical reliquaries along with Beuys's displays. Thek's clinical arrangements of body parts and lumps of meat inside coloured perspex boxes predate so much art of the nineties. Thek's was a humanist response to much of the commercially finished works of Pop Art. It was a reminder that really nothing had changed, behind this American Dream we see so much of in Pop Art we are still made of the same fragile matter were always made of. Beuys is in the background of so much contemporary practice also. Oldenburg offers something of this and adds an absurdist dimension to his presentations. They can look like the dummy cakes thrown by clowns at a circus. With Thek it's always real and they invoke a very different world. There is reliquary in Drogheda Cathedral. It's the exhumed head of The Blessed Oliver Plunkett encased in a glass box and raised high for public viewing. He was the Archbishop of Armagh, executed in 1681 in England for promoting Catholicism. Thek's world like Beuys reaches back through history. The patina present in all these works plays a large part in our reception of them. I wonder how long this belief with the visceral can remain relevant. The future world of digital technology will probably render this pointless.



Figure 5: Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

GG: *The sunglasses (figure 5): a protection from the sun, they give you a cool and relaxed vibe attuned to the surrounding ambiance; but there is no sun, in fact, you are in a basement, who knows why you are wearing sunglasses, and what you might be thinking about beneath them?*

CMF: Disguise and protection are all in there. The use of sunglasses in Northern Ireland is well documented and in the same way that baseball bats here weren't used for playing baseball sunglasses were not always about protecting eyes from the sun. In the mind of the person wearing them I think they make the wearer invisible. It's a form of self-delusion really. In a development of this I have recently started making some works that include the use of Ganzfeld goggles. The work addresses the idea of deprivation (partly sensory). These fit right over the eyeball to block all vision and light.

GG: *In the series of works made for Weatherman, the indecipherable figure with the sunglasses alludes to the 1960s revolutionary American groupuscule, which in turn dialogue with the historical situation in Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century. More broadly, it suggests a plot, some plot, being devised.*

CMF: They suggest plot and conspiracy. Glasses of course are a laughably inefficient means of disguise but they used to be very popular in Northern Ireland whether they were used during paramilitary funerals or displays. The Weathermen in my mind are a conflation. They are a fusion of hard drinking, pub philosophising conspirators who want to transform society through revolution. The nature of Pub culture in Ireland can be seen as a reaction to the weather, an escape from the rain and the half-light and a social centre with essential lubrication. The Weathermen in America of course were a radical left organisation pledged to overthrow the government. The work's title is a pointer to this as well as to a weatherman, someone whose job it is to examine patterns and predict the future. The implication in the work being that the Weatherman wearing the stethoscope is diagnosing conditions. These conditions are non-specific in terms of location. Our protagonist wearing the glasses and the shamrock on his forehead invokes for me the possibility of a suicide bomber with his last pint served up to him. The bogus "Ash Wednesday" mark on the forehead is a symbolic mark of faith and commitment. Dylan refers to the Weathermen in Subterranean Homesick Blues: "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

Gabriel N. Gee is Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at Franklin University Switzerland. He earned his Ph.D. with a thesis devoted to contemporary art in the North of England. He has published numerous articles on contemporary art and artists in Great Britain, Ireland and France. A former postgraduate researcher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyon, Professor G.N. Gee's research and teaching interests include painting and photography in the 20th Century as well as the relation between art and industrial change in the 20th and 21st centuries. He is currently writing an updated study on "Art in the North of England, 1979-2008", to be published by Ashgate. He has just co-edited a special issue of the IJTA on the topic of "Constructing interstitial heritage: architecture, vision, experience", and has coordinated the organization of an International Exploratory Workshop supported by the Swiss National Research Fund on the theme of "The representation of nature in the trans-industrial city, 1970-present", held at Franklin University in May 2014. He is a co-founder of the TETI research group (Textures and Experiences of Transindustriality).
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Conor McFeely was born in Derry N.Ireland, where he now lives and works. He has exhibited both nationally and internationally. His exhibitions include "Disclaimer", Orchard Gallery Derry 1997, (solo). "Ink Mathematics", The Mappin Gallery, Sheffield (solo). "Headfirst", OBG Gallery Belfast 2003, (solo). The British Art Show 5, Hayward Gallery London, touring Edinburgh, Southampton, Cardiff and Birmingham 2000-200. "Small Steps, The Elipse Gallery, Washington DC, 2001. "Something Else", Contemporary Art from Ireland, touring Turku, Helsinki, Oulu, Joensuu Finland, 2003. "Hidden Dips" MCAC Portadown 2005 (solo). "Dogs Have No Religion" Czech Museum of Fine Art Prague, 2006. He is a recipient of The Curated Visual Arts Award 2007 (curated by Mike Nelson) resulting in two major solo shows of new work called "The Case of the Midwife Toad (*the unrepeatable experiment*)" in The Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin 2007 and at Void, Derry 2008, and "The Testing Rooms/Smashing Forms" a site specific audio and video installation at The Maze Prison 2008. In May 2010 he had a major solo exhibition at The Ormeau Baths gallery in Belfast. He also received an AIR residency at NKD, Dale Norway working on the "Weathermen" project to be shown in 2012

and 2013. His practice incorporates a wide range of processes, from the ready –made to sculpture and installation as well as photography, video and audio. A fracturing and manipulation of ”material” in the service of finding new relationships is a chief characteristic of his practice. Often conceived as multi-layered in terms of their reading, many works have been driven by ruminations on the nature of individual free-will, choice and autonomy. Contexts and source material reflect interests in a history of counter culture, literature and social contexts. He also is a member of the Void Gallery curatorial board (www.derryvoid.com/) and member of the board of Directors of the Context Gallery Derry (www.contextgallery.co.uk/).

¹ For a discussion of the Weathermen project, see Gabriel Gee: “Liquid, measure and history: notes on Conor McFeely’s Weathermen”, *Abridge 33* (2013)
<http://www.artlink.ie/uploads/2/3/4/1/23414114/weathermen_catalogue.pdf>