



John Carson: *what not* – selected artworks and ephemera 1975-96, published by ACA Public; image courtesy Daly & Lyon and the artist.

Artworks & Ephemera

SEAN LYNCH SPEAKS TO JOHN CARSON ABOUT HIS NEW PUBLICATION, PRODUCED BY ACA PUBLIC.

THE LATEST IN a series of publications produced by Askeaton-based imprint, ACA PUBLIC, *John Carson: what not – selected artworks and ephemera 1975-96*, investigates the activities of the Pittsburgh-based Northern Irish artist during his college years in Belfast, as well as his life and work in Los Angeles, London and elsewhere. The outcome of an extensive archiving project which began in 2019, the publication features an in-depth essay by critic, Chris Fite-Wassilak, and extensive documentation of Carson's early and mid-career. His enthusiastic endeavours to make a socially orientated art – one encompassing strains of conceptual art, the immersive role of popular culture, and a form of storytelling peppered with insightful wit and humour – is seen throughout. Here, the artist and publication co-editor, Sean Lynch, reflect on the book's making and release.

John Carson: Why did you select the particular artworks and specific time period in the publication, *what not*?

Sean Lynch: 1975 starts with pages from the student magazine of Belfast School of Art, made during your degree studies there, featuring your encounters with the conceptual art collective, Art & Language, the history of wheelbarrows, and Joseph Beuys. By 1996, you are making performance art inside a hospital in London. Between, there is printed material, documentation of artworks and incidental notes on projects you've made, as well as life lived in Belfast, Dublin and throughout the US, UK, Germany and Australia.

It's certainly far from a comprehensive survey of your work; it's more episodic and probably more reflective of our own relationship. We've been working together for a decade now, making shows, talks and events and an earlier publication – all activities that led to 2019, when my co-editor, Michele Horrigan, fundraised and worked with artist/archivist Sinead Bligh to archive forty-plus years of your work. During that time, we invited



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Chris Fite-Wassilak to travel to Pittsburgh to write an essay. From there, we assembled a selection of artworks and archive material that reflected many of the themes Chris identified.

Some highlights were uncovering your 1987 performance, *Off Pat*, at Goldsmiths College on an old VHS – its transcription appears over twenty pages in *what not* – and discovering more about mail art culture of the early 80s and how it formed communities, something that ultimately led to your postgraduate studies in CalArts in 1981 with teaching staff such as Michael Asher and John Baldessari. From an editorial viewpoint, the publication pauses for reflection in 1996. There are major projects on the horizon for you around that time, such as *Evening Echoes* (a survey of newspaper sellers on streets in Ireland and the UK, realised with Conor Kelly) and *Citywatch* (considering the roll out of CCTV in Birmingham). Both of these projects signify a particular trajectory in your artist work around the neoliberal public realm – a topic that might warrant other forms of exploration.

JC: What do you mean by the neoliberal public realm?

SL: *Evening Echoes* is effectively the capturing of the last shouts of news distribution of the 20th century before the rise of digitisation. Your *Citywatch* project foresees a shift in urban space at the turn of the millennium, when councils called the places they were responsible for 'public', yet in reality these places are not the same for everyone; that notion was disappearing to accommodate city centres as overtly commercial. The implications of these situations, manifesting nowadays as fake news and market-led corporatisation, are what those artworks began to critique. It would be good to have more time to explore this with you.

JC: The period of time covered in *what not* was crucial to me in several ways. I spent two years from 1970 to 1972 attempting to study architecture at Nottingham University in England, because I thought I wanted to do architecture as a way of combining art and design creativity with social concern. I also wanted to escape from the escalating sectarian violence in Northern Ireland at the time. I found

my architectural education constrictive, and I realised that I was not cut out to be a designer. I worked on building sites in London and lived in a house in Stockwell, filled with an indeterminate fluctuating number of Irishmen. All the while, I was plotting my return to Northern Ireland. Nottingham and London were not my reality. Belfast was my reality gauge, my touchstone, and art was my first love, before my dalliance with architecture.

Getting to art college was a liberating experience for me. I had a Carrickfergus friend, Big Jimmy Orr, who was at the art college in Belfast. Jim was making ephemeral sculptures on the beach, to be washed away by the tide. He was pouring paint down the sea wall, making improvisational abstract patterns on the rocks. This was my awakening to the fact that 'anything' could be art; that art did not have to involve the creation of a material object, but that art could be about gesture or an experience. When I got to art school, I learned about the work of artists such as Robert Smithson and Richard Long, who were working in, on, and with the landscape, and not in a studio or gallery setting. At Belfast School of Art we had our own Philip Roycroft, whose projects involved surviving in a forbidding landscape, or living in wooden box in the corridor of the art college building for one week. Far away, in the USA, artists such as John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler were making conceptual works which involved burning one's own paintings or setting out to photograph everyone in the world. The possibilities seemed limitless.

Paradoxically, the art college was trapped within the city of Belfast, which in the seventies experienced some of the worst years of The Troubles, with indiscriminate bombings and shootings, rioting and assassinations. This was the backdrop against which we were being introduced to the esoteric aesthetics of modernism, minimalism and abstract expressionism. As an artist, how could one reconcile these extremes, especially when conceptual art, political art, representational and figurative works were not necessarily welcomed as part of the curriculum? I tried to find my own ways of dealing with this dilemma and witnessed the emergence of a generation of young artists who challenged the prevalent art school can-

on, in order to produce meaningful work about the troubled times they were living through. For instance, the excoriating performances of Andre Stitt, the satirical narratives of John Kindness, and the insightful paintings of Rita Duffy. The 70s in Belfast were my formative years as an artist. Why are you so particularly interested in what was going on with the visual arts in Ireland during the 1970s and 80s?

SL: It's about identifying terrain – who did what, what was possible at that time and place, and what forms of progress for art and society could be initiated. Finding these situations is one of the aims of the ACA PUBLIC imprint. For example, a concurrent 2021 release considers a series of paintings made by Deirdre O'Mahony while the Mullaghmore visitor centre controversy and protests were in full swing in The Burren during the 1990s. Michele, Niamh Moriarty and I are working somewhat on an ad-hoc basis on these strands of research, and what we are realising is that the most relevant touchpoints are about art discovering and inhabiting social contexts and influencing wider cultural tendencies in a myriad of ways. In your case, US west coast conceptualism, Irish post-punk and new genre public art were receptive environments for your work during that time. Now, coming out of COVID, it's good to remember this perspective and that rampant isolationism needs to be overcome. It would be poignant to think about *what not*, and the generosity of your work, with this in mind.

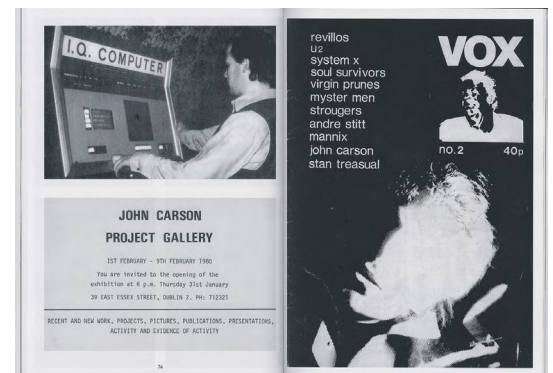
John Carson lives and works in Pittsburgh, as an artist and professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University. Sean Lynch is an artist and co-editor of ACA PUBLIC.

John Carson: *what not – selected artworks and ephemera 1975-96* (144 pages) is available at a discount cost of €35 including postage in March and April 2021.

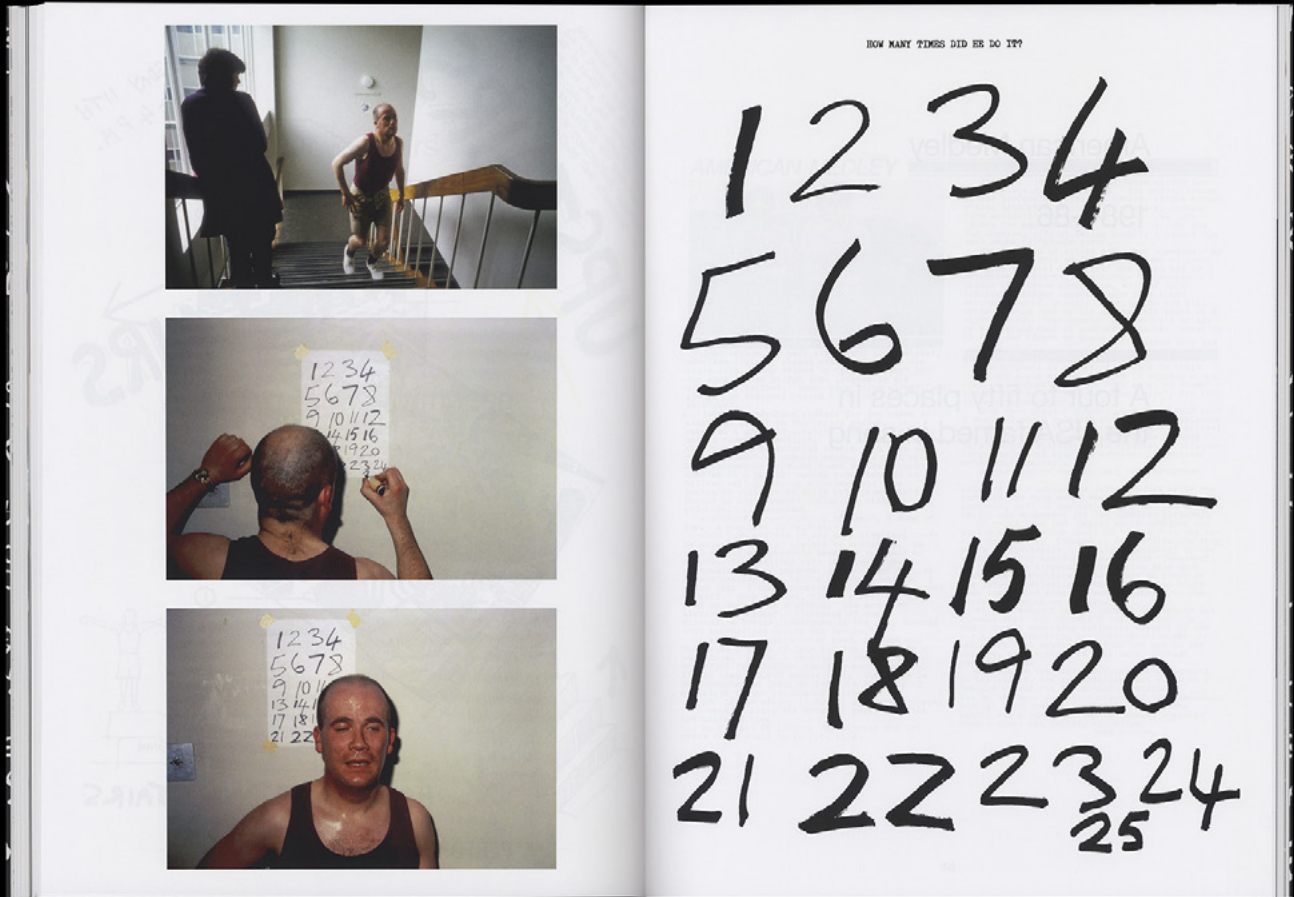
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