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SacrumProfanum

Benjamin Dwyer – Composer, Performer, Writer

Research Excellence Framework 2021 - UoA33

8 June 2015

ORCID number: 0000-0003-3616-7091

SacrumProfanum Collaborators

PERFORMERS

Garth Knox (viola)

Siobhán Armstrong (medieval Irish harp, sean-nós singer, narrator)

Emma Coulthard (flutes)

FILMMAKER

Dylan Griffith

POET

Jona Xhepa



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An overview of the process, research insights and dissemination of *SacrumProfanum* project and research.

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EXTERNAL VIEWING LINK



300 WORD STATEMENT

SacrumProfanum is a multi-media work (music, film, texts) based on ancient stone carvings found in Ireland called Sheela-na-gigs: naked and abject female figures that prominently depict oversized vulvas. A feature of the Irish landscape for a millennium, I situate the Sheela as ‘witness’ to Ireland’s history of colonization, the disintegration of its Gaelic culture, church and state patriarchy, its integration into global-Capitalist networks, and a current phenomenon I coin ‘self-racialization’ (fabricated cultural narratives such as Riverdance and Celtic Woman, which are not only ahistorical but further airbrush over actual histories of oppression and destruction).

The profound damage done to Gaelic culture forms the basis for artistic methodologies employing elements of fragmentation, disintegration and abjection, as central tenets of composition (including collaborators’ work in text and film) created through an ‘aesthetic of damage’.

These are implicitly built into compositions (disintegrating processes, fragmented melodies, distortions) and audible through explicit use of distorted sounds, deformed samples of traditional instruments, aggressive vocalisations, abject language, etc.). These counterpoise current modes of traditional Irish music that nurture nostalgia for idealized pasts through aesthetically pleasing modes. In various movements, the distortion of uilleann pipe music (being deeply representational of Irish landscape and myth) recalibrates that memory and myth towards a postcolonial music of witness and exposure. The ‘voice’ of the Sheela—heard in *HAG*—represents an explicit and abject retort to forces of patriarchy and institutional abuse conducted upon women in Ireland. In creating a project that accounts for itself politically (channelling feminist and postcolonial theories), *SacrumProfanum* seeks to conduct autopsies on received historical narratives and ideologies of power.

Comprising multiple modalities, *SacrumProfanum* has been performed, exhibited and published in Spain, Ireland and the UK.



MODE

A multi-component output

SacrumProfanum is a multi-component output reflecting the multifaceted ways in which the research has been developed and disseminated over the period, consisting of:

Live performances

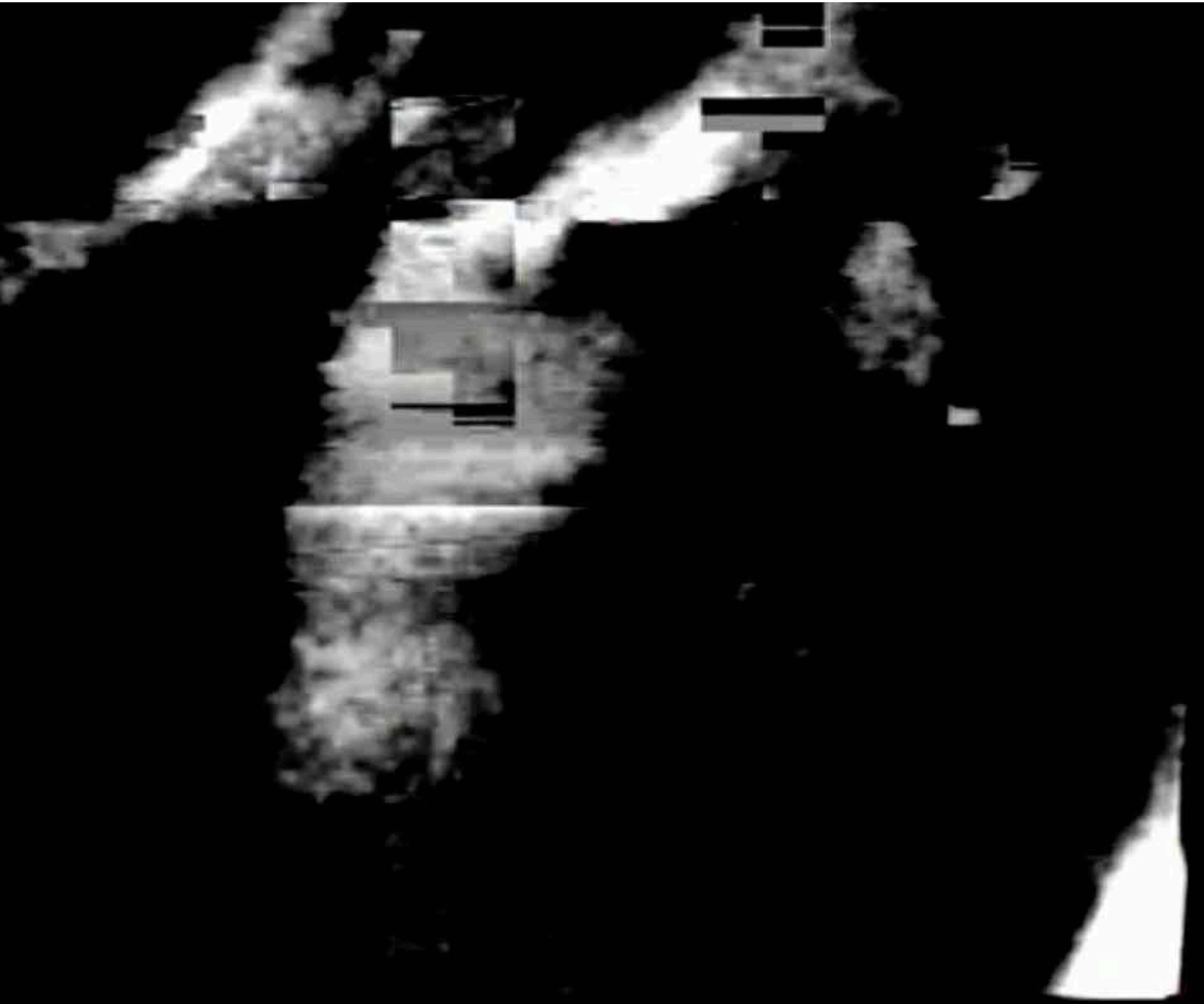
Book publication (including an audio-download of 4 movements of *SacrumProfanum*)

- Film
- Selected performance scores
- CD/DVD/Text*

*NOTE:

This full collection was due to be published in CD/DVD/Text form (7th June 2020), alongside a launch performance event. This has been postponed due to COVID until June 2021 but is included here.

Plus, contextualising documentation including poetry, fieldwork images and a published essay



OUTPUT AND DOCUMENTATION

SacrumProfanum

PAGE RANGE: 06 - 16

USE ARROW KEYS FOR NAVIGATION



INCLUDES EXTERNAL VIEWING LINKS



A multi-component output comprising:

- CD/DVD/Text Artifact
- Performances
- Book & Audio-download publication (entitled imagines)
- Film (entitled Gierador)
- Exhibition/installations
- Scores



CD/DVD/ Text artefact Farpoint Recordings

Performance at Chapter Arts Cardiff, June 2020

(NOTE: postponed due to the Covid crisis
until June 2021)

01

The release (publication)
of the CD/DVD/ Text
artefact (Farpoint
Recordings) was
postponed due to
Covid-19. It will be
launched at Chapter Arts
Cardiff in June 2021

**02**

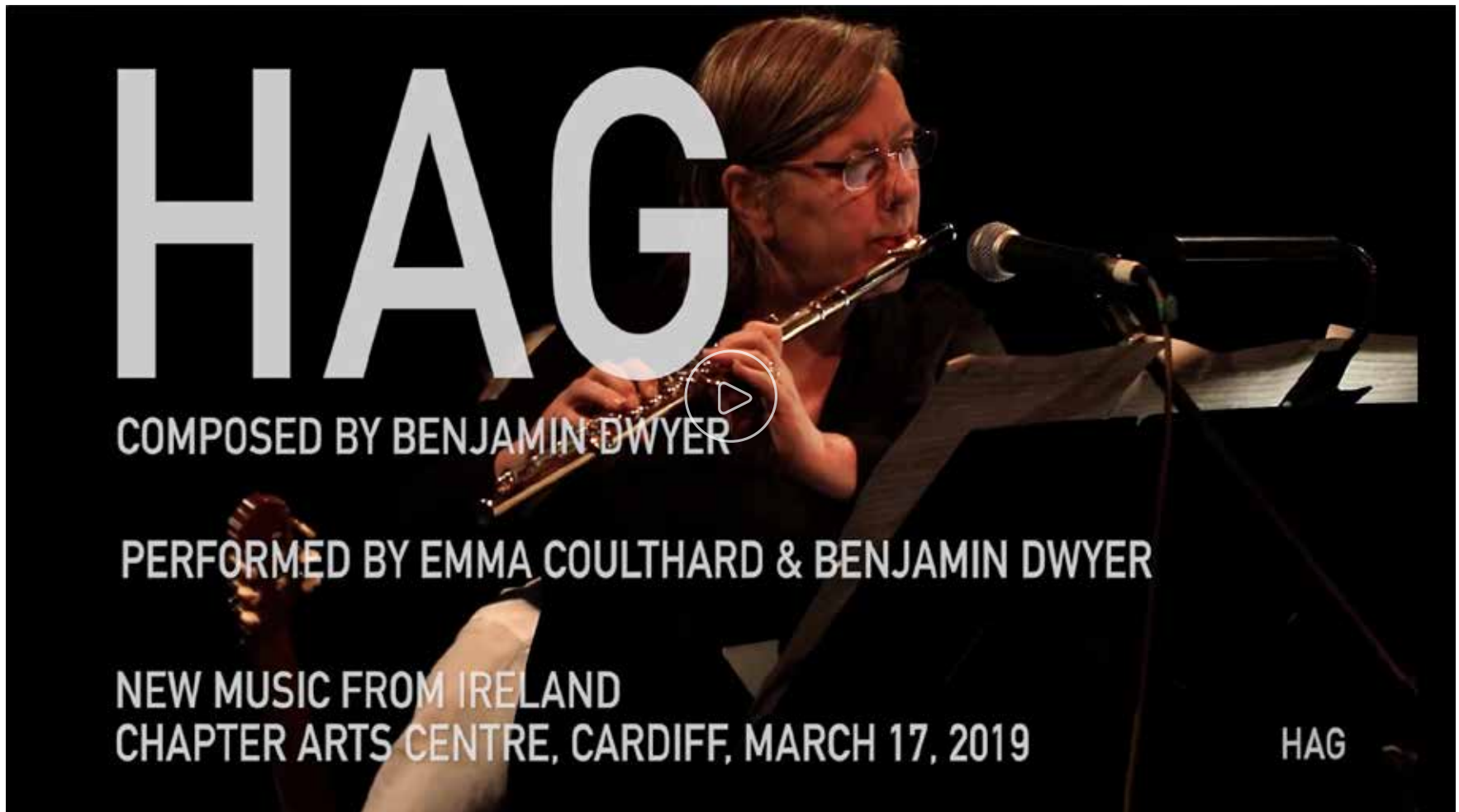
World premiere
performance of
SacrumProfanum at the
Belfast Book Festival
September 2015



03 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icons to watch video.

Emma Coulthard (flute) and Benjamin Dwyer (bowed guitar) perform HAG (from *SacrumProfanum*) at Chapter Arts, Cardiff, 17 March 2019



03

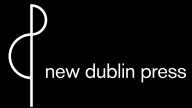


04 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icon to view pdf file.

imagines (New Dublin Press 2015)
(featuring score of four viola movements from *SacrumProfanum* and audio downloads of a recording by Garth Knox)

01



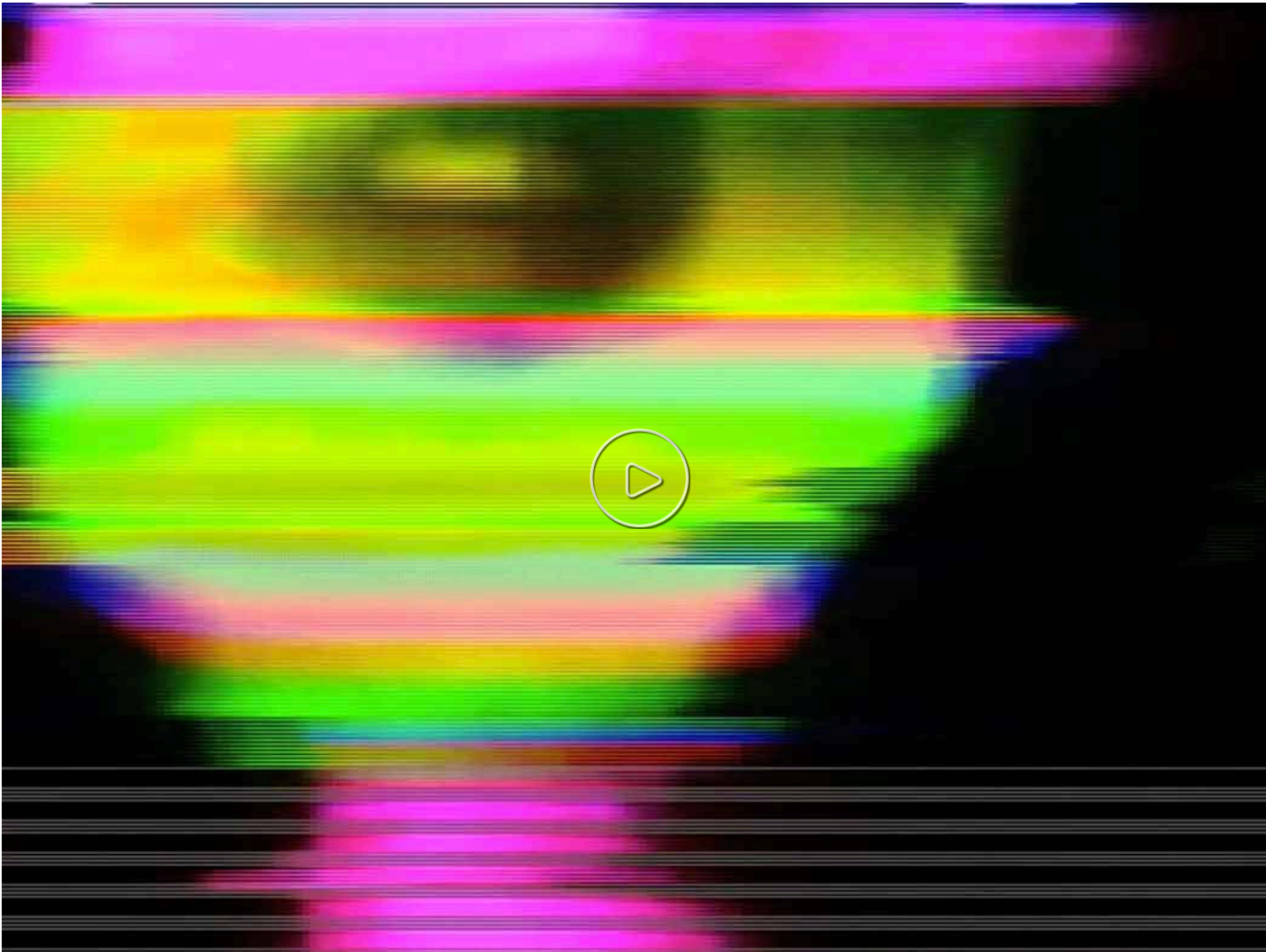
Imagines

Four Poems by Kimberly Campanello
Score by Benjamin Dwyer
Edited with commentary by Jonathan Creasy
Viola Performance by Garth Knox
Design by Distinctive Repetition

Imagines — 1st Edition

05**05**

(New Dublin Press) is a limited-edition book containing a specially designed score of imagines (the four solo viola works from *SarcrumProfanum*). The book also provides a downloadable digital recording of the same work by violist Garth Knox. Also containing texts and photographs, the book is an aesthetic artefact in itself. The score is the result of a specially designed imprint and is an integral part of the overall artistic aesthetic of the book.



06



06 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icons to view video.

Dylan Griffith's film *Gierador*, with music by Benjamin Dwyer, is a visual and aural interrogation of identity and power. It explores historic and contemporary attempts by various power structures to control the untamed power of the female body. In *Gierador*, Griffith and Dwyer situate the enigmatic pre-Christian figure of the sheela-na-gig as an enduring icon, one that has been subjugated and projected upon by the religious, gender, sexual, cultural and political contexts of the passing ages, sometimes literally mutilated and defiled before finally being given the name 'sheela-na-gig', and with it, a degenerated and circumscribed identity.



*imagines obesae
et aspectui ingratae*

(solo viola)

2013

Benjamin Dwyer

imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae was commissioned by Garth Knox with assistance from the Arts Council of Ireland (an Chomhairle Ealaíon). It was composed at the Heinrich Böll Residency, Achill Island (8–22 June, 2013).



07 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icons to view pdf file.

Score for *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae* (four movements for solo viola from *SacrumProfanum*):

- 1) Chloran
 - 2) St John's Well
 - 3) Rutland
 - 4) Coolaghmore
- (listen to these movements on page 15)



Benjamin Dwyer

HAG

for

amplified flute and amplified bowed guitar



08 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icons to view
pdf file.

Score for *HAG* from
SacrumProfanum
(listen on page 15)



09



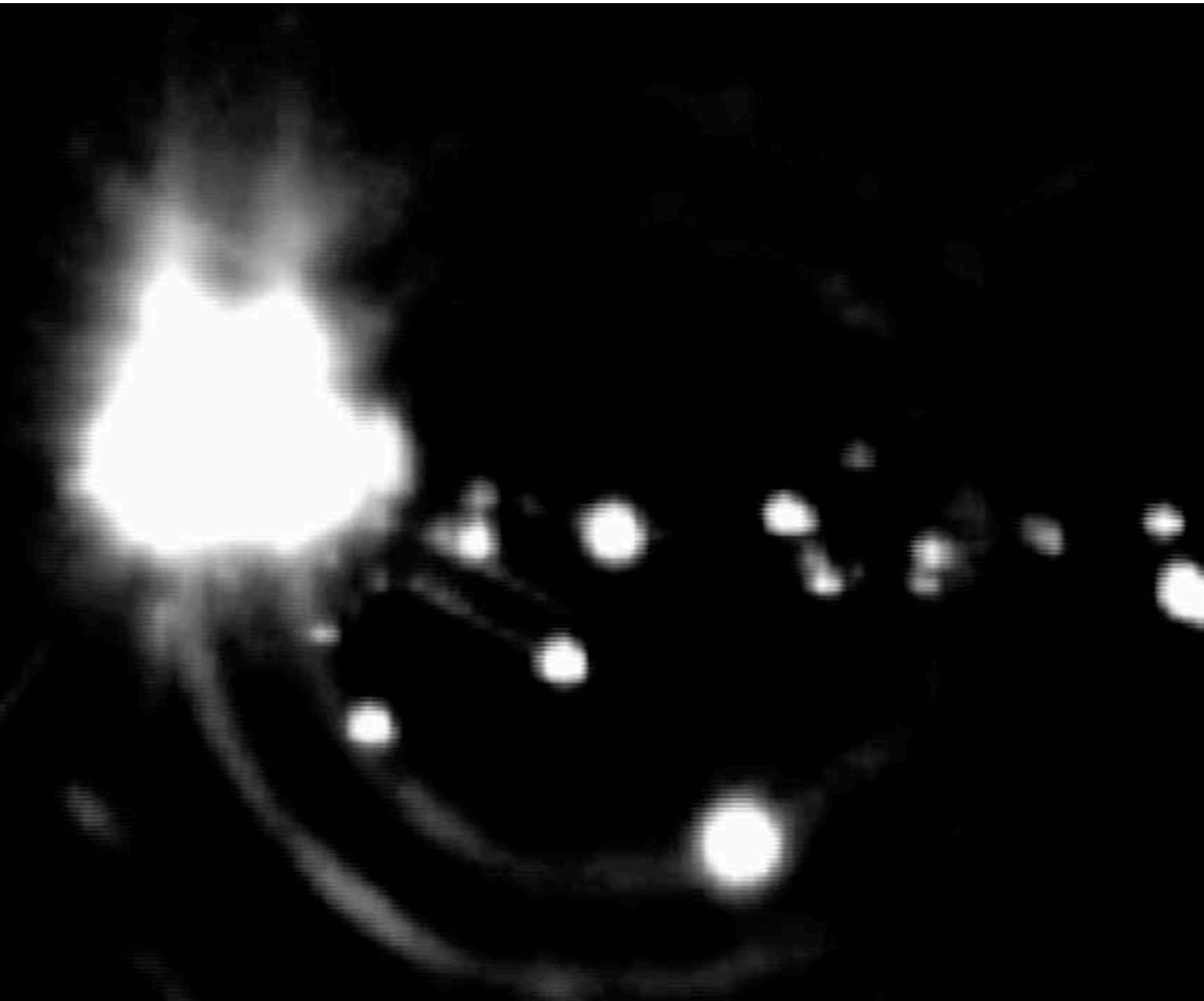
09 EXTERNAL LINKS

Click on the track names to listen.

AUDIO TRACKS

SCORES FOR SELECTED TRACKS CAN BE ACCESSED ON PREVIOUS PAGES.

- 1) **CHLORAN**
- 2) SHEELA-NA-GIG GAELIC TEXT
- 3) EXPUGNATIO
- 4) **ST JOHN'S WELL**
- 5) BURGEBEG
- 6) SHEELA-NA-GIG ENGLISH TEXT
- 7) **RUTLAND**
- 8) **HAG**
- 9) **COOLIAGHMORE FILE**
- 10) RESIDUA
- 11) SHEELA-NA-GIG SEAN-NÓS SONG



CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

SacrumProfanum

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USE ARROW KEYS FOR NAVIGATION



INCLUDES EXTERNAL VIEWING LINKS



This section consist of:

Project Synopsis

Enclave Review PDF

Poem

Selection of images and drawings



SACRUMPROFANUM

Project Synopsis

SacrumProfanum is a multimedia composition (music, film, texts) based on ancient stone carvings found in Ireland (and parts of Britain) known as Sheela-na-gigs. *SacrumProfanum* includes collaborations with filmmaker Dylan Griffith and poet Jona Xhepa; and features internationally renowned performers: violist Garth Knox, flautist Emma Coulthard, early Irish harpist and sean-nós singer Siobhán Armstrong, with Benjamin Dwyer on bowed guitar.

Various elements within the project have been composed at different times and thus have been performed and/or exhibited (some as installations) over the past five years. Additionally, lectures on the research themes employed in *SacrumProfanum* have been given publicly; and an essay discussing my research framework has been published.

Sheela-na-gigs are carvings of naked female figures that prominently depict oversized vulvas. In contrast, the rest of the body is often emaciated or even skeletal, with sagging, diminutive or missing breasts. Their bodies thus present images of both death and life regeneration. The figures are often balding with wrinkled foreheads and chevron-shaped striations on their faces. In addition to their extravagant vulvas, Sheelas often have excessively large heads, eyes and ears. The quality of the carvings varies from rough-hewn to well crafted, though very few have the aesthetic finesse of the delicately carved gargoyles seen on European medieval churches and cathedrals.

I have been researching for *SacrumProfanum* for over six years visiting carvings in situ and in museums, taking photographs, making sketches, researching archives, developing new aesthetics and methodologies in composition adequate to the themes they offer up.

I use the icon of the sheela-na-gig as 'witness' to explore themes of feminism, colonialism, cultural loss in Gaelic Ireland, notions of what I call 'self-racialization', and the modern Irish cultural landscape. As an Irish composer, my encounter with the Sheela made me want to engage with and to invoke my traditional Gaelic music inheritance but only in ways that took cognizance of the real story of the decline and destruction of that heritage.

In confronting the music practices of Gaelic society, we cannot evade the inconvenient truth that many have been effectively destroyed and many of its oral practices lost. It is this salient fact, the profound damage done to Gaelic culture, which forms the basis for my own artistic engagement with it. Central to this are questions arising out of the validity of (re) presenting this culture in ways that are exclusively attractive from an aesthetic perspective and syntactically coherent. While many compositions by Irish and non-Irish composers alike invoke ancient Gaelic (or 'Celtic') mythologies via thoroughly integrated, cohesive and 'attractive' compositional languages, my encounter with Irish traditions builds upon an integral 'aesthetic of damage'. I am not convinced that what remains of this damaged Gaelic

source material should be exclusively revitalized and presented as entirely coherent and celebratory. For me, such artistic renovations run the risk of creating narratives of Gaelic culture that are not only ahistorical but further airbrush over actual histories of oppression and destruction.

In terms of music, this 'aesthetic of damage' forms numerous compositional methodologies that have built-in mechanisms of self-destruction, elision and dysfunctional syntaxes, which form the compositional DNA of many of the works. These processes are embedded. Other aspects of an 'aesthetic of damage' approach appear more explicitly in the use of abject noises, vocalizations, and the use (by instrumentalists) of abject language often articulated aggressively and violently. There is a strong element of theatricality and ritual to some movements. Tape parts are often created using distorted samples of traditional Gaelic instruments (medieval Irish harp, uilleann pipes).

The work involves collaboration with the American filmmaker Dylan Griffith and Albanian poet Jona Xhepa. Both came to the project after it had been initiated and were keen to work within the already-established research framework of the 'aesthetics of damage'. For example, Griffith used 1970s toy cameras (with plastic lenses) that create distorted imagery. Xhepa's texts emulate the abject nature of the Sheela herself; and they metamorphose patriarchal violence to women through (among other references) images of scaring to the female body.

Sheela-na-gig

The light of my cave
falls in the knowing of skin
that transgresses stone
touched or untouched
that sight mars the eyes
that a crevasse marks my bones

I speak a tongue that arches
your gaze to bodies buried
before the earth licked them
that sings the clay I touch
to mold hands, not mine,
that bare my skin

Once fastened and viewed
they carry me petrified
to shores interleaved with our hunger
but here I return and turn
fixed in the breath of death
unfastened in death unborn

Not a bird to rip the schist of limbs
to stop an omen at the door
not a mouth, open as I am, to open
if they knew me I'd be unmoored
with all their knowings
through my openings I'd fall

In your weeping I am halfshut
where ash spring clouts
the spurned pain of delight
out of sight my face is loud
where vision cranes to flesh
where wrinkles enter wounds

Your inquiry immured, at rest
I shout the silence of desire's sulk
that cleaves the river of untelling
I sing to the chisels that sting
my terrible laugh and drown
the stench of my delirium

by Jona Xhepa

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Sheela-na-gig, poetic
text by Jona Xhepa set in
SacrumProfanum



(<http://enclavereview.org/wp-content/uploads/Dwyer-image-2.jpg>)

Sheela-na-Gig (Burbesbeg, Tipperary) housed in the National Museum of Ireland. Sandstone. 7cm high. Photo © Benjamin Dwyer

(<http://enclavereview.org/wp-content/uploads/Dwyer-image-3.jpg>)

and on roof apexes, on bridges, buried under wild ivy on town walls, placed into cathedral walls in the 'occluded' position (sideways, so as not to be immediately observable), and built into homemade grottos. I met those who cared for them —farmers, rural families, young kids, elderly men and women, graveyard caretakers and priests. I studied those held in the National Museum of Ireland, in the British Museum, and in numerous smaller rural community centres that had acquired them.



11 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icon to view
pdf file.

Enclave Review (ER16):
'Sheela-na-Gigs and an
"Aesthetics of Damage"'

12131514

12 - 15

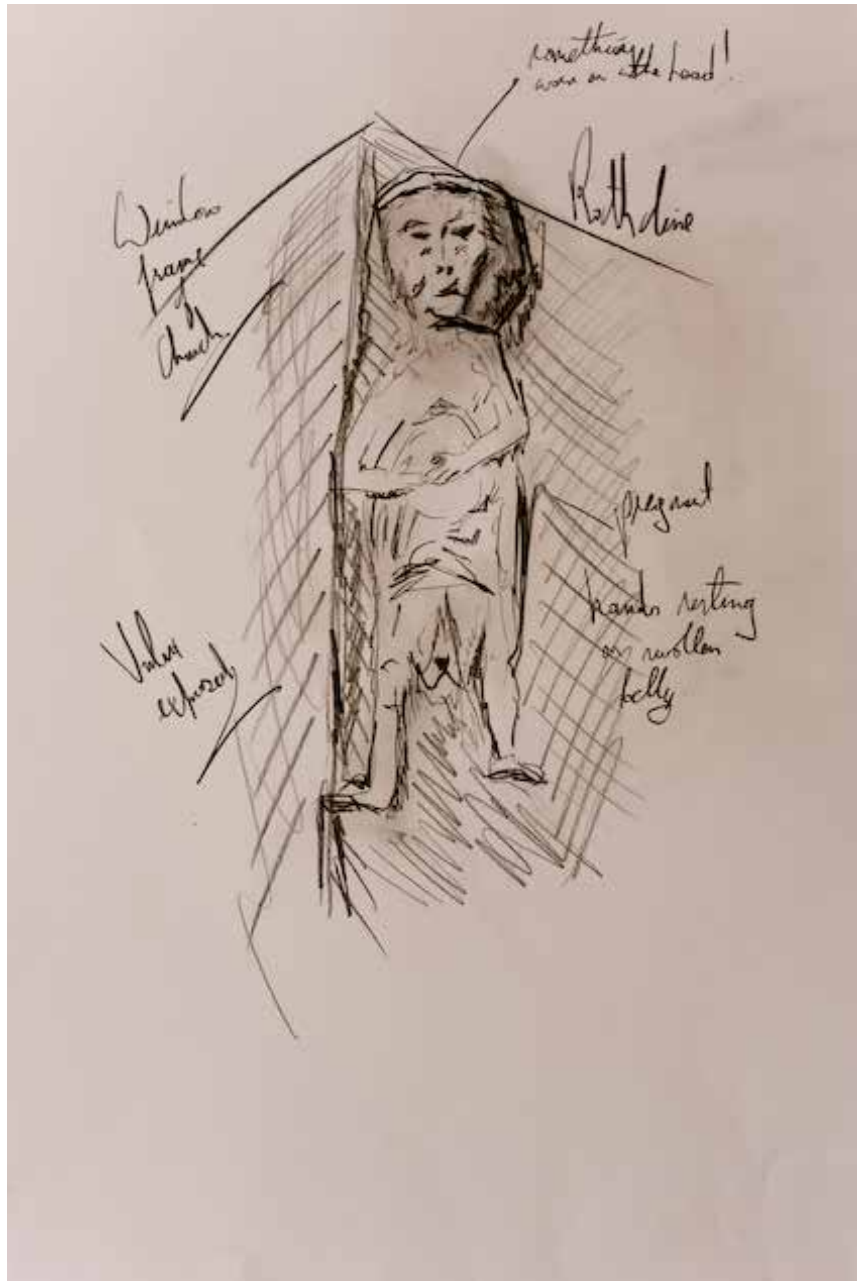
Selection of Sheela-na-gig photographs by Benjamin Dwyer

Fieldwork includes the photographing and archiving of up to 70 Sheela-na-gigs found in situ on walls, churches and castles throughout Ireland, and in museums in Ireland and Britain. The photographs provided opportunities to undertake a long-term study of the carvings, to devise a taxonomy of them, to observe in detail the (at times) extensive damage caused to them. This detailed analysis fed comprehensively into developing an 'aesthetics of damage' research framework for the entire project (music, visual, texts).

16 - 17

Selection of Sheela-na-gig photographs by Benjamin Dwyer

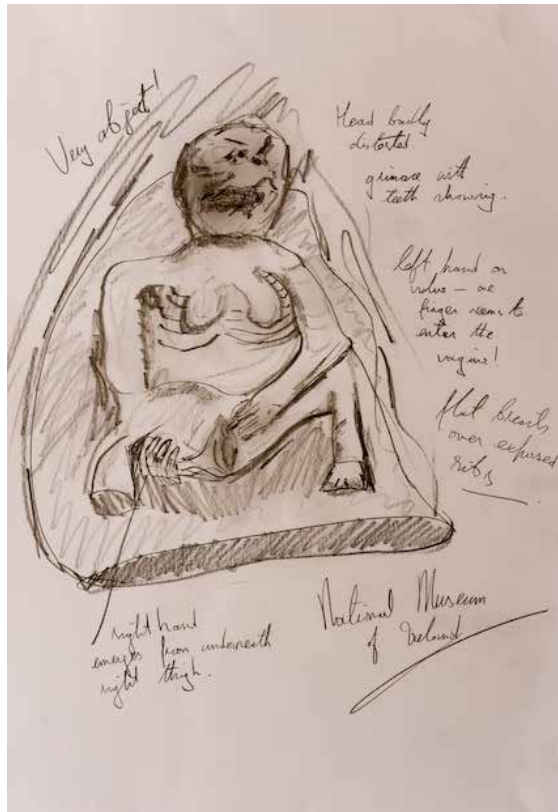
1617



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Selection of Sheela-na-gig sketches by Benjamin Dwyer

Fieldwork includes a series of sketches undertaken during fieldwork trips. These include sketches of Sheelas in situ and in museums. The very process of sketching brought me into close contact with the Sheelas. The sketches include annotations describing the features of the carvings and the damage done to them through both exposure and violence. This process profoundly fed into the research framework of an 'aesthetics of damage', which became a seminal artistic focus.



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19 - 21

Selection of Sheela-na-gig sketches by Benjamin Dwyer

222324**22 - 24**

Selection of Sheela-na-gig sketches by Benjamin Dwyer

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25 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icons to view video.

This short film documents the fieldwork activity while simultaneously providing contexts for where Sheelas are currently found in situ. It provides references to how Sheelas are often cared for by farmers and families who host them on their lands. It further offers evidence of how Sheelas have sometimes been placed in castle walls in what is known as the 'occluded' position (mounted sideways), as an attempt to make them less obviously visible (either for their protection or for reasons of discretion).



DISSEMINATION AND FUNDING

SacrumProfanum

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USE ARROW KEYS FOR NAVIGATION



INCLUDES EXTERNAL VIEWING LINKS



This section consists of:

Selection of evidence based images

Video file

Audio file



DISSEMINATION

SacrumProfanum – Benjamin Dwyer
Farpoint Recordings

(NOTE: June 2020, postponed due to the Covid crisis until June 2021)



CD/DVD/ Text artefact
Farpoint Recordings

(NOTE: postponed due to the Covid crisis
until June 2021)

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Sheela na gig, Chloran,
Co. Meath (British
Musuem)

Photo by Benjamin Dwyer



DISSEMINATION

Performances

SacrumProfanum: Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff. 6 June 2020.

NOTE: Performance was postponed due to the Corona-19 pandemic, due for re-scheduled performance in June 2021.

SacrumProfanum (world premiere performance)
Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast, 8 June 2015.

Barrow River Arts Festival (Ireland): Garth Knox
performs imagines (the four solo viola movements
in *SacrumProfanum*) May 2015

Chapter Arts (Cardiff): HAG performed by Emma
Coulthart & Benjamin Dwyer: 17 March 2018.



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Garth Knox premieres
imagines (the four
solo viola movements
in *SacrumProfanum*)
November 2015.



DISSEMINATION

Performances

Film of *HAG* premiere at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff.



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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSqDA8w9PBo>

Can be accessed on page 9

DISSEMINATION

Book & Audio-download Publication

Imagines (limited edition publication of musical scores and audio recording by Garth Knox (viola) of Dwyer's *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae* (from *SacrumProfanum*), New Dublin Press/
Distinctive Repetition Design Studio, 2015

(See: <https://www.Newdublinpress.Org/books/imagines>)



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29 - 30

imagines (New Dublin Press, 2015) is launched at the Barrow River Arts Festival, 2015.

IMAGINES has won a prestigious SILVER ICAD AWARD as one of the best pieces of Irish Design 2016!

[CLICK HERE](#) for more details

“

IMAGINES is an edition from New Dublin Press that gives one faith in the ability of artists from different genres to meet with a common cause to deliver a certain enlightenment on a subject that might at first seem obscure, but in fact touches upon contemporary reality. Every little detail on every page is astonishingly beautiful and out of the ordinary. One cannot fail to sense the ultimate care and love which has gone into this production.

We are very privileged to have had the official launch of this book at our Barrow River Arts Festival, and it was wonderful to witness how everybody involved in the production of this very special book was very moved and full of joy that their intense labour of love which lasted for over two years has finally become a touchable reality. We congratulate Kimberley Campanello, Ben Dwyer, Jonathan Creasy and Rossi Mc Auley!

— Barry Guy and Maya Homburger

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Imagines (new dublin press/distinctive repetition design studio, 2015) is winner of the silver icad award 2016, for best design.



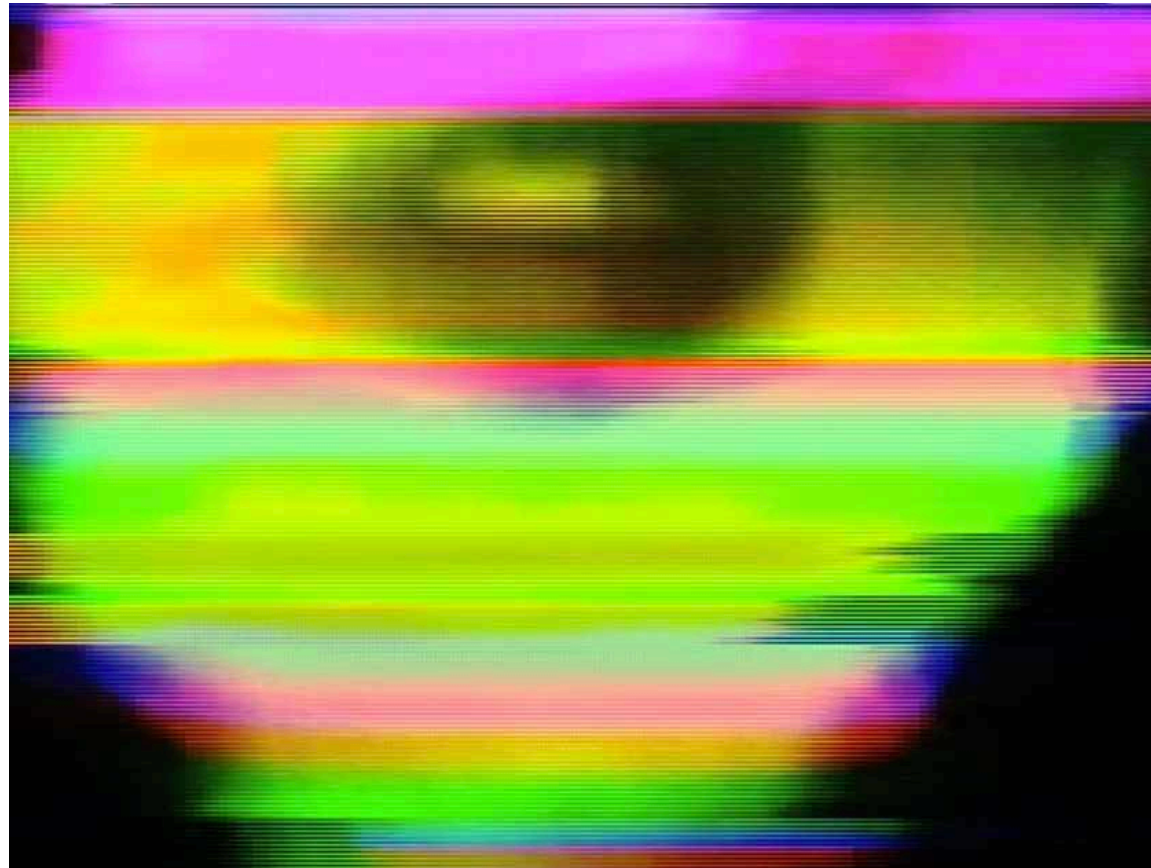
DISSEMINATION

Film

Gierador (film by Dylan Griffith with music by Benjamin Dwyer)

Installations and Exhibitions

- 1) Belfast Book Festival 2015 Exhibition
Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast. Gierador installation. Also: exhibition of fieldwork sketches and photographs.
- 2) Clifden Arts Festival, SKIN Exhibition (August 2016) Gierador installation. Also: recorded music from *SacrumProfanum* played in exhibition rooms & fieldwork sketches exhibited
- 3) Galway Town Hall Theatre, SIN Exhibition (December 2019) exhibition of fieldwork sketches and photographs. Recorded music from *SacrumProfanum* played in exhibition rooms



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Gierador (film by Dylan Griffith with music by Benjamin Dwyer)

Can be viewd on page 12

DISSEMINATION

Scores

SacrumProfanum Score (selection)
published by the Contemporary Music Centre
Ireland: The National Archive for contemporary
music in Ireland)



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Five scores included:

Chloran (viola)
St John's Well (viola)
Rutland (viola)
Cooliaghmore (viola)
HAG (amplified flute and
bowed guitar)



DISSEMINATION

Lectures

- 1) Lecture: Kingston University: "'Sundering and Reconciliation' – Confronting Cultures through 'Found' Processes in Benjamin Dwyer's *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae*" for viola (2015)
- 2) Lecture: University of Cambridge: Commonwealth Creativities in Intercultural Arts Network Building Interdisciplinary Bridges Across Cultures Int'l Conference, 2014. "'Sundering and Reconciliation' – Confronting Cultures through 'Found' Processes in *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae*"
- 3) Fondation Fyssen Colloquium (Paris, 2017): Translation, Multimodal Interaction and Context. Cross-disciplinary Perspectives. 'An Aesthetics of Damage—Modelling Cultural Loss through Music'

Published Essay

Enclave Review (16): 'Sheela-na-Gigs and an "Aesthetics of Damage"' <http://enclavereview.org/sheela-na-gigs-and-an-aesthetics-of-damage/>

FUNDING

- 1) Heinrich Böll Residency for one month in August 2014 to compose *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae*
- 2) Arts Councils of Ireland and the UK: Beyond Borders (in collaboration with Chapter Arts Cardiff; Town Hall Theatre Galway, and MAC Belfast) in support of three performances of the complete version of *SacrumProfanum*. Value: £12,000.



REFERENCE LIST

DYLAN GRIFFIITH: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0341482/>

JONA XHEPA: <https://thedublinreview.com/contributor/jona-xhepa/>

ENCLAVE REVIEW: <http://enclavereview.org/writers/benjamin-dwyer/>

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND: <https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/home>

BRITISH MUSEUM: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/>

NEW DUBLIN PRESS: <https://www.newdublinpress.org/>

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Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries

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