25.5 Hours on Whiddy Island

Gunnera is very present throughout the island - in the hedgerows, up at the middle battery. Its gigantic leaves, prehistoric in aspect, pierce the gentler line of shrubs and hawthorns, the native plants we're accustomed to. There is Japanese knotweed too, taking over the crumbling brick of the battery, running riot.

Gunnera and knotweed are what are known as 'invasives', meaning their access to this country has been revoked, or was never granted. Whiddy is flanked by military batteries, built in 1804 to guard against access to Bantry Bay by the French. I access the island by ferry, the small one, first one out on a Saturday morning.

The group are in the old school house, now converted into a hostel. Seven academics/artists[1], and me. They have come together to speak about the topics of defuturing and agonistic design. I have come, with no knowledge of either of these things, to listen to them. The event is titled AGON-A : Antidefuturing: Infrastructuring for Socio-Technical Sustainability.

I have visited Whiddy before and on that first trip had encountered one of the best stiles I've seen. It's a ladder that leads from the road and passes through the portal of a forked tree trunk, landing you at the top onto a grassy trail that winds along the edge of a field. It's a threshold from a paved route to a wild track. This access has presumably been granted by the farmer who owns the fields, which is the case with all the way-marked trails in Ireland. 8% of our total land is publicly owned, and 70% of our total land is farmland.

The idea of access, and the connected idea of (in)hospitable environments, comes up again and again over the course of my 25.5 hours on Whiddy.

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[1] Robert Collins, Shane Finan, Seán Finnan, Cliona Harmey, Micheál O'Connell, Paul O'Neill, Aisling Phelan.

In the first presentation of the day, Rob talks about the ‘right to repair’ movement - I’ve never heard of it as a movement, but have been an unknowing supporter of its principles for a long time. He mentions the idea of ‘affordance’, the term used in design to refer to the possibility an object offers for interaction, possibilities which the designer has encoded into the object in advance. Framed another way, affordance is about the possibility to access an object.

Rob advocates for design that allows for unforeseen affordances, so that users can continue to adapt the designed object themselves. This is perhaps closer to the original meaning of the word, as coined by psychologist James Gibson, which describes the relationship between a being and its environment as a whole. Gibson thought that our understanding of affordances is embedded in how a body interacts with its entire environment, and so each person’s perception of the affordances available to them will differ based on their particular body, their needs and experiences.

We go on a walk to the middle battery and learn that a couple of islanders took it over as a domestic residence after the military had left - a function beyond what it was designed for, an unforeseen affordance.[2] It’s surreal to walk down the central corridor of the battery and find scattered remains of civilian life - a single high heel, yellowing copies of local papers. While at the battery, Shane offers us all a go of his handheld document scanner, but rather than using it to scan documents, we’re scanning the environment around us. Michéal scans a pat of sheep shit, an affordance presumably far beyond what the designers had in mind.

When I think of affordance in relation to our environment, natural or built, I think of the idea of hospitality - openness to accommodating a body. How hospitable (or not) are our natural environments? How hospitable are the ones we build? Physically, an urban environment lacks the ‘affordances’ of natural spaces. In the countryside, foliage can offer shade and/or insulation, rivers offer water, hedgerows and forests offer food. In a city (unless it has been greened), concrete throws the heat of the sun back up at you, or collects rainwater into a flood in a flash; it amplifies the inhospitable elements of the climate. When the human-made systems of hospitality in a city (housing, community, access to food, water and sanitation) come undone, or are inaccessible to a person due to financial barriers, there is no ‘the natural’ to fall back on.

Later in the day, Ais gives a talk about a temporary arts space she ran in Dublin with Viva Dean, called BASE. The intention for BASE was to create a place for people to spend time and be social in the city, without spending money. BASE gave hospitality to bodies in a city - a space to lie down, to listen, to speak, as citizen rather than consumer. It offered a physical point of access to the topography of the city.

The hedgerows on Whiddy are brimming with nettles. On our walk to the battery, I strip the seeds from one and offer them to Sean and Cliona, insisting on their amino acid properties: “You can put them on porridge!” I eat some myself and my tongue fizzes and goes numb at the tip. There is an abundance of honeysuckle and meadowsweet in the hedges also, fragrancing the air, which has undertones of slurry. I think a lot about the hospitality of hedges while on Whiddy. They are lifelines in our predominantly agricultural countryside, the place where wild plants can still grow, where pollinators can browse, where wildlife can find cover to cross the land. As BASE offered access to human bodies in the city, hedges offer access to wildlife, in the topography of a heavily agricultural landscape.

The main theme of the conference, ‘defuturing’, is a concept developed by Tony Fry which refers to the human tendency to write ourselves out of our own futures through poor design choices. The practice of ripping out hedgerows to make bigger fields in farming, or building urban environments with little in the way of plant-life to mitigate flooding and heat islands, or sealing up the soil with concrete - these could all be considered defuturing pursuits.

I don’t make it to the oil refinery on the west side of the island on this visit, but its presence looms large in the background of the talks. In 1979, a disaster caused by the explosion of a crude oil tanker off Whiddy cost 50 lives, and blew out the windows of houses up along the coast of the

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[2] Ideas developed in conversation with Colm Rooney following the trip to Whiddy.

mainland as far as Adrigole. Our use of fossil fuels is a particularly defuturing practice, and Whiddy experienced the more violent end of that spectrum of consequence.

In 2021, the new owner of the Whiddy oil refinery, multinational Canadian company Zenith Energy, announced it was going to develop a major ‘green energy’ facility on the island, which would process green ammonia. Whilst described as a carbon neutral source of energy, ammonia is also a material that is toxic and explosive, making this proposed evolution of the oil refinery consistent with the tendency to defuture ourselves. These plans never came to pass however, and the Whiddy oil refinery has since changed hands again, being bought up in 2024 by Texan multinational Sunoco. Decisions about one of the country’s largest liquid energy facilities are being made by distant private entities, which have no real relationship with the people on the ground, who live with their physical bodies in the shadow of the refinery, and who will directly experience the impact of any fallout.

The distant multinational ownership of the Whiddy oil refinery links the idea of defuturing to the idea of access - what access our physical bodies have to their environments, who is shaping those environments or witholding that access.

Although I don’t make it to the oil refinery, I do get as far as Béal Tonnta strand on the west coast of the island, where the sea is rougher, the violence of coastal erosion more apparent in the crumbling cliff edges. Huge hunks of what looks like styrofoam lie on the beach, orange and alien. Small stones are embedded in them, as when barnacles suction to the hull of a boat and the human-made object becomes a hybrid of nature and design.

The right to repair, the movement described in Rob’s talk, answers back to the defuturing trajectory of how we live now. It refuses consumerism, waste, planned obsolescence and the loss of our bodily agency. The increasing lack of affordance that designed objects have means that these objects now resist interaction with the user when they cease to perform their intended function - they can’t be hacked. Rob gives the example of a car that depends on an internal computer to function - if it breaks down on the side of the road, the point of access to repair it is distant from the body of the user, the machine it must be hooked up to and diagnosed with. This loss of bodily agency in our environment contributes to foreclosing our political agency, our options to resist systems as they’re presented to us. Trying to find alternative affordances for designed objects opens up the material world to us again.

Cliona’s phone freezes at some point over the weekend. The touch screen stops working. She says she’ll have to wait for it to run out of power, as she can’t manually remove the battery. She leaves it on a shelf, inert, until it runs down.

The morning after the day of talks, I return to the hostel from a walk to find that some of the group have set up antennae to tune in to the local air traffic control. A pair of laptops and long metal wands sit on the blue wooden outside furniture. A bed of static is interrupted occasionally by a voice. They have tapped into the ether above the island, accessed an invisible slipstream of

human activity, atmosphere layered with technology, using their physical hands and the tools available to them.