



Ukeoirn O'Connor

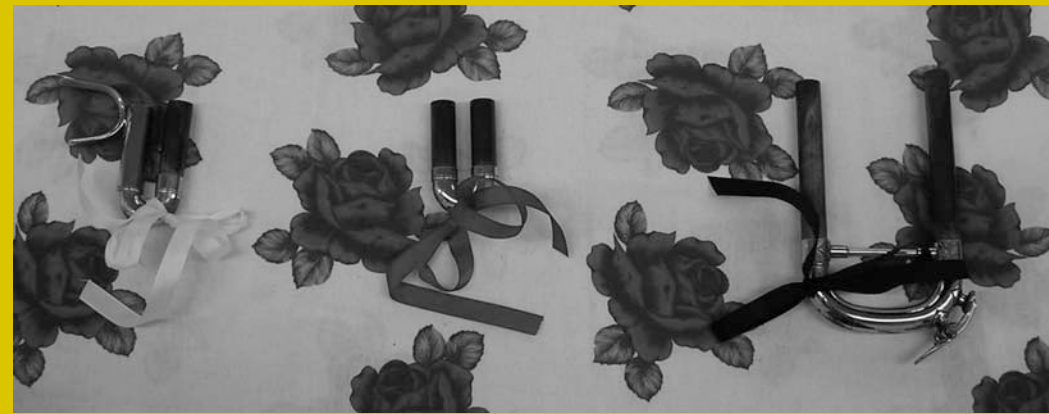
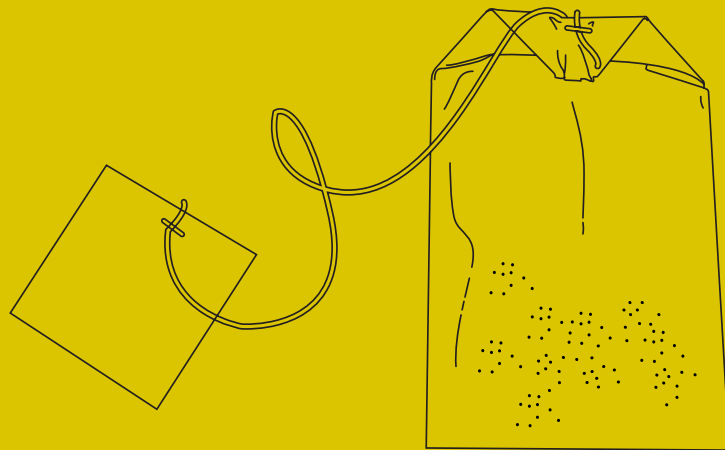
Ukeoirn O'Connor began his career as a visual artist, heavily influenced by comic-book artists Will Eisner and Frank Miller, Manga artists Osamu Tezuka and Yoshihira Tatsumi and German painter Gerhard Richter, and informed by the sound-world of Carl Stalling's cartoon scores and John Zorn's *Naked City* pieces. O'Connor's early paintings evince a deep concern with aurality, in "listening to paint", an interest which would later become his primary artistic focus. His 1997 series, *É@#*, plays with Manga-style textual descriptions of ambient sounds, from the slurping of noodles to the hiss of a tea bag steeped in water, with all the visual elements in the pictures blurred to unrecognisability. After discovering the work of Harry Partch and meeting Grúpat member Bulletin M, who convinced him that the *É@#* series were graphic scores rather than

paintings, O'Connor began to shift his artistic practice toward musical improvisation and composition.

O'Connor's practice as an improviser does not focus on a single instrument but on utilising many different sound sources. According to O'Connor, "My background as an artist allows me to approach instruments as objects. I have respect for them as sculptures and as structures, and so it's natural for me to find myself playing them in non-standard ways, preparing them by adding parts or taking them away, even using them as a sort of visual prop." This structural experimentation with musical instruments can be seen in *TETSUOROURKE* (2002), written for fellow Grúpat member and trumpet-player Turf Boon. *TETSUOROURKE* dissects both the sonic

palette and the physical form of the trumpet according to alchemical principles. The instrument is literally broken down—slides are removed and encased in glass bowls, valves are wrapped in felt padding—as the performer continues playing. At the same time as his control over the standard trumpet tone weakens, the range of non-traditional sounds available to him expands radically.

In the same way that O'Connor's background as a visual artist permeates his broad-ranging and unorthodox approach to instruments, so does his interest in the visual influence his scores. O'Connor's score practice differs from that of other Grúpat artists such as Detleva Verens and Flor Hartigan in that he does not focus primarily on graphic scores. Instead, he employs more traditional notational methods that





are augmented through the sophisticated deployment of visual elements. In *Three Songs* (2007), O'Connor couples extended vocal techniques with the ukulele. In this piece, O'Connor was particularly interested in what scholars of phonetics call the "vowel pool", the matrix of all possible vowels. No single language uses all the vowels contained in the vowel pool; English speakers use only a limited number. For *Three Songs* O'Connor extends his "pool" to include vowels used in Polish, Estonian, Chinese, Japanese and several other languages. These are notated using a combination of the International Phonetic Alphabet and photographs of the landscape around South Dublin County. The latter are used in conjunction with cross-sections of the vocal tract to indicate specific tongue-positions to the singer. In this work,

the macrological geographical structures of South Dublin are replicated micrologically in the singer's mouth, producing vowel sounds from Vilnius, Tibet and Berlin.

O'Connor's ability to mix both the visual and sonic is paralleled in his interest in combining different genres, musics and cultures in his work. He frequently employs a range of instruments from different cultures, scoring the koto, bouzouki and theremin alongside prepared piano, lute and voice. This concern can be seen in works such as O'Connor's opera *NOW you for to go* (2005), which is a theatrical mash-up of the Irish story of Oisín and Tír na nÓg and the Japanese narrative of Urashima Taro and Ryugujo, scored for three voices, Sicilian bagpipes, oud, viol quartet and Ondes Martenot. O'Connor's practice blends



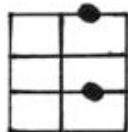
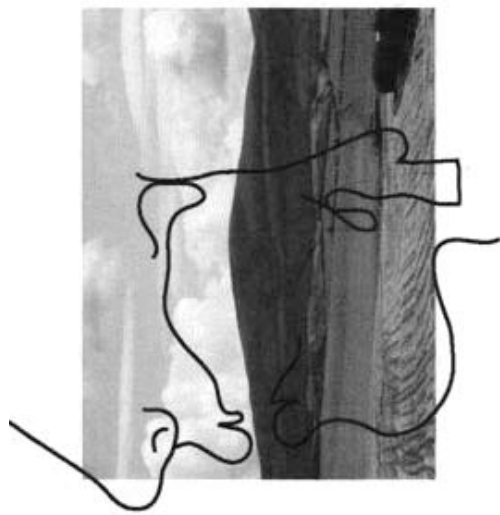


a rigorous concern for ethnomusicology with a deft improvisational approach, producing a practice of composition and performance that seeks to bring the multicultural tensions and energies of an increasingly globalised world into a musical dynamism that looks at the same time back and ahead, across the world and right at home, inside, outside, even upside down. O'Connor seeks to avoid the easy Orientalism that has plagued composers from Verdi to La Monte Young, instead creating a vibrant friction of seemingly-disparate elements, merging and complicating the definitions he finds himself struggling with, definitions like Irish, Japanese, composer, performer, experimental and traditional. His is the rough and tumble multiculturalism of Celtic Tiger Ireland, where Chinese immigrants rub shoulders with Bridie from

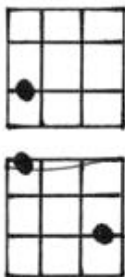


the Liberties, Polish women with Cork accents serve tea to German tourists on the Aran Islands and shops at Leonard's Corner specialise in "Irish, Asian and Oriental food." In the process, O'Connor's works mix the visual, the sonic, the traditional and the new into a lively, complex relation.

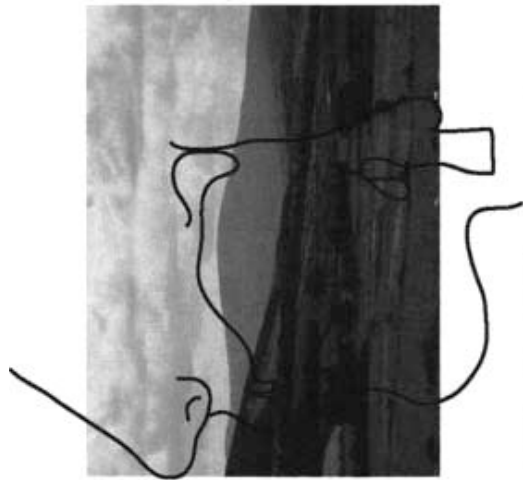




mp



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mf/f

3

eI

3