

I commissioned [Bill Drummond](#) to write this essay.
It subsequently appeared as chapter in his book *The 17*.

WHAT IS REAL?

13 September 2006

A couple of weeks back I got an email from an Irish artist named Dennis McNulty. He had read something about The17 in a Dublin magazine which had prompted his email. He reckoned there were similarities in our approach to working. There was a link in his email to an artist's statement on his site. I clicked and read this:

'I am an artist/musician who works in a process-driven way. This frequently manifests itself in the creation of site-specific performances. The sonic content of these performances is improvised i.e. each sound performance is unique and unrepeatable.'

He goes on to explain how earlier this year he had sent out an email to the 2000 names on a mailing list of a Brazilian record label, some sort of underground specialist label. He was inviting the recipients of the email to email him back and to invite him round to their place to perform his music. But he stipulated that only those who lived on the higher floors of tower blocks should respond and that his performance could only happen at the magic hour just before sunset.

In the email to me he also said that he was about to have an exhibition in a gallery in Derry in Northern Ireland. The exhibition was to be a record of what he had done in Brazil: sound, video, photos, text, all the usual media of documentation. Now, although this did not fit completely with my hardline approach on where music should be heading – for a start he was recording it for posterity when I don't think we should be giving a shit about posterity – but I liked that it was site-specific. I liked that it had to be done in a tower block at a certain time of day when the light was right. I like that he'd gone to Brazil to do it. And I like that he called the show Magic Hour.

So I emailed this Dennis McNulty back. And then we spoke on the phone, arrangements were made and now I'm sitting on a window seat on a Ryanair flight 28,000 feet up somewhere between Stansted and Derry. I can't be any more site-specific because below, as in out of the window, all I can see is cloud.

The term magic hour is something I first came across when Jimmy Cauty and I were attempting to make a film. The lighting cameraman we were working with was always going on about magic hour, always trying to get all the filming done in this period of time he called magic hour. As far as he was concerned it wasn't worth filming outside at any other time of day. But according to Henry (the lighting cameraman, I've just remembered his name) there were two magic hours. The first is just after sunrise; the second is the one that Dennis McNulty refers to, just before sunset. It is the time when shadows are at their longest, when physical forms are at their most defined and everything has a golden luminous quality. Once Jimmy Cauty and I saw the rushes of the film we had shot we realised that what Henry had been going on about was a fact. Everything that was shot outside of the early morning or evening magic hours looked flat, dull and unusable.

Ever since then the idea of the magic hour has had a special significance for me: a time when things work, fall into place. The idea of someone making music only to be played at that time and in a setting where it can be fully appreciated has a really strong draw for me. I only wish the idea had come to me first.

It's about 7.30 at the moment. Through the window I can see that the sun has just risen above the eastern rim, casting its rays across the top of the clouds. Everything I can see of creation from this one little window looks stunningly beautiful. 'His wondrous beauties to behold' is the line that comes to mind. It's the magic hour all right. In my head Dennis McNulty's music is providing the soundtrack. It sounds great. I will have to tell him when we meet. The thing is, I've not heard any of his music as yet.

Two and a bit hours later I'm sitting in the Void's foyer/café bit chatting with Dennis McNulty about his ideas and how the trip to Brazil got set up and what his background is and how come he is doing this show in Derry. My first impression on meeting him was that he looked like a younger, better-looking Gerry Adams, but maybe I'm only thinking this because I'm in Northern Ireland. After chatting with him for a bit I go into the gallery space where his show is. It has the usual white walls, the ceiling is low, but it is a good-sized room. Hanging from the ceiling are 116 A6-size photographs (I counted them). Each photograph is attached to a red thread. The thread is attached to the ceiling. The photos hang at various heights between crotch and eye level. The air movement caused by me coming into the room causes the photographs to turn and twist gently. A couple of low-level lights in the room positioned about four feet from the floor cast shadows of these turning and twisting photos on the white walls. Music is playing. It's an abstract music that seems itself to turn and twist in time to the hanging photos and the shadows on the wall. The music sounds uncannily like what I was hearing in my head two-and-a-half hours earlier, while 28,000 feet up in the air. Actually it doesn't totally, but it would be great if it did. The main difference between what I imagined and what I heard with my ears is that what I heard was music that had originally been made using a guitar and the music that I heard in my head in the magic hour above the clouds was celestial and was made using instruments as yet unknown to mankind.

In one corner of the room was a red leather sofa. I sat down on it and lost myself in the music while watching the still slowly rotating photos and shifting shadows. On the floor near the sofa was a video monitor. Playing on this was documentation of what I assumed was one of the performances in an apartment in a Brazilian high-rise. I wanted this video documentation to be of the lengthening shadows, high across the cityscape in Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo or somewhere down there. But it wasn't. It was just of a bunch of smart-looking arty people lying around an apartment and Dennis McNulty sitting by a window with his laptop open in front of him on a small table. The fingers on his left hand are twiddling the knobs on a little black box. The fingers of his right hand press keys on his iBook. He is wearing a red Fast Food Nation T-shirt.

I stop looking at the video because it is boring. Instead I allow my attention to drift through the music and the sliding shadows on the walls. After a while I realised I had started to sing along to the music. Not so much singing as long-drawn-out aaahhhs. In my head The17 were singing along with the abstract guitar music.

I could see that something had been written or drawn on the back of each of the photos, but from my vantage point on the red leather sofa I could see neither what was written or drawn nor what the photo depicted. I guessed it must have been more documentation of the actual performances.

After about 20 minutes of just sitting there I get up to go. It was then that I noticed a microphone stand with a microphone on it in the far corner of the gallery and on the wall 14 sheets of A4 paper, Blu-Tacked up in a line. Two of these are emails from Dennis McNulty, one in English, the other I assume is a translation in Portuguese. On reading it I realise it is the invitation that he had sent out. The other 12 A4 sheets were printouts of emails he received back, all responding positively to his invitation.

I liked this. It's the sort of stuff I liked to do. I liked the mistakes in their English and their descriptions of their apartments. I must remember what my English teacher taught us about using the word 'like'.

Outside the gallery space I met up with Dennis again, told him I wanted to go for a walk around the Derry city walls while having a think about what he has done. I asked him if he could read some of the stuff I had written about The17 and on my return from the walk we could have a chat before I got down to the writing.

Outside and heading along Strand Road I can see dark clouds gathering in the west. A very fine rain is already falling.

Back in the late 50s and early 60s we had a couple of family holidays in County Donegal. To get there we had to drive through Derry. I have this very clear memory of being up on the city walls looking down across the slums of the Bogside. Up on the walls now I am met by a very different view. Long gone are the Victorian tenement slums, replaced by a whole mix of social housing. The first thing that most visitors would notice is all the Republican gable-end artwork commemorating Bloody Sunday. What I am noticing is the house martins fluttering, diving and swooping above the Bogside homes below. I wondered how many generations of house martins there have been since Bloody Sunday. For that matter, how many generations have there been since the siege of Derry back in 1688? And I wonder what birds were outside the blocks of apartments that Dennis McNulty was playing in Rio and São Paulo. I could smell autumn in the air, the faint hint of peat smoke and distant heather moors. The house martins must be thinking of packing in these northern climes for the year and heading back down to Africa for the winter. I wonder what music they will be hearing down there. I carried on my walk around the city wall formulating topics of conversation to have with McNulty when we meet up back at Void.

We boil the kettle. Well, the kettle boils itself. We are both having mugs of camomile and we settle down to have our chat. These sorts of chats with people you have never met before are always difficult, you don't know where the boundaries are. You have to get on familiar terms straight away but you know sod all about each other. The other thing is that you can be in serious danger of coming on seriously pretentious in your desire to sound like you know what the fuck you are talking about – what names to reference and which ones to leave in case they cause offence or make you look stupid.

We start talking. We talk about frustrations with the way music exists. We talk about this being his first exhibition in a gallery. I was later to read that he represented Ireland in the São Paulo Bienal a couple of years ago, so I don't know how he did that if he's never had an exhibition. We talk about how he never went to art school but did a degree in engineering and how that has helped him see music. He quotes a line from Spinal Tap, something about music sounding like strands intertwining. Although this line was written and used in the film as a total send-up of the pretensions of musicians it nevertheless defines how McNulty sees the music he makes.

We talk about the guitar, how he still finds it a useful tool, how the love affair with the guitar is never over. I ask him about Vinny Reilly, but I don't think he really knew who he was. He answers by telling me how someone said that his music reminded them of Pink Floyd and this was supposed to be a compliment. He then made it clear that he imagined that what Pink Floyd stood for was everything he was against. I failed to mention that at 17 I thought that Atom Heart Mother by the Floyd was one of the greatest albums ever made.

We talked about burn out and finding new ways to work, about Stockhausen and Cage, about a bloke called Alvin Lucifer, who I'd never heard of. He told me I should visit the site ubu.com to listen to some of Alvin Lucifer's work. We talked about how often it happens that you read about a composer or some experimental music and you love the ideas and the theories but when you hear the recordings it often lets you down. That this type of music should never have been recorded for other ears; that hearing it, outside of the context of the time, often renders them useless as a piece of music to listen to and enjoy, although the idea still stands up. It is those ideas that can continue to inform what you are trying to do in the present.

We talked about not really knowing what we are doing or how it should be done. And how it is only in the doing of it that we get any idea of how we should be doing it; how, when he first opened up his laptop to start his first performance in Brazil he had no real idea of how it was going to work; and that it is through the process of doing it that you get closer to whatever it is.

I indicated my disappointment with the video documentation I had seen in the gallery space. He explained it was not something that he had planned. It had been shot by a friend of one of the hosts whose apartment he was performing in. He liked the idea that the documentation was something done by others and not mediated by him. I liked this. He then went on to explain that the photos hanging and twirling on the red thread were had arrived in the same way. They were all photos that people attending the performances had taken of their own accord and sent them to him. I liked this too. I asked him why he had hung them on red thread from the ceiling. He told me he wanted to break up any linear reading of the photos that would exist if they had been affixed to the wall. Being hung from the ceiling and subject to movement of the air in the room broke up all that. I asked about the red thread. He had an answer but I can't remember it. I wondered if I should have taped our conversation so things like that do not get forgotten. I'm wondering now what else might have been forgotten.

He told me how he is going to do it all again but this time in blocks of flats that were put up in Dublin in the 1990s; that the apartments in Brazil were all large and spacious, the homes of the moderately wealthy – what he was doing there didn't touch the underclass masses who lived in the sprawling shantytowns; that the blocks of flats in Dublin were totally different, they were small, cramped and shoddily built for the lower orders; and that they were built without much forethought, the authorities didn't want too many building regs to get in the way of the Celtic Tiger economy as it gathered pace. We stopped talking and ate some nuts from a large packet of assorted nuts. Then I told him I was going to go back into the gallery and sit on the red leather sofa and start writing. And that's just what I am doing now and am just about to stop.

Later. About an hour later. I've checked my email and had a talk with Maoliosa, the director of Void. Dennis McNulty asked me what I thought of the dark room. 'What dark room?' He explained so I went and found it. It was another gallery space but it was in almost complete darkness. There was one small faint light source at the other end of the room. Not enough for me to see if there was anyone else in the room, however much my eyes got accustomed to the darkness. Dennis had explained to me that the microphone on a stand in the main gallery space that I mentioned before, was there to pick up the music that was being played in that room, plus the ambient sound of the room, whatever that might be; people chatting or me singing along with it, as I had done earlier, and re-broadcasting it all in the dark gallery. I liked this. I wanted to lie on the floor of this dark room and lose myself in the sound but the concrete floor was too cold and I had only got a t-shirt on. So instead I wanted to find out what the source of the very dim light was at the other end of the room. I made my way carefully through the darkness, afraid that I was going to trip over something. The light was coming from a partly open laptop, Three books were being used to prop it open. Using my mobile as a torch I discover what books have been used for this job: A Complete Course In Understanding, Speaking and Writing Portuguese; Modern Music (A Concise History From

Debussy To Boulez) and When Brazil Was Modern (A Guide To Architecture 1928–1960).

I thought this was a nice touch. It also reminded me that I had forgotten one whole strand of our earlier conversation. And that was about modern architecture, about Brasilia the capital city, how he loved it and how it is one of the few places I want to visit in the world. Sod Machu Picchu; give me the city of Brasilia.

I am now on the plane back to Stansted. Things were held up at Derry airport. It is nearly 11.30. It has been a long day. Just before I left we did a short interview on the arts programme for BBC Radio Foyle. Dennis had to get what he was doing down to a soundbite. That is something that I have never been very good at. Dennis had a good go at it. The show's host wanted to know what attracted me to his work, I said something about it being time- and site-specific, but that I had no idea what it was going to sound like until I got here.

Just as I was leaving for the airport I picked up an A5-size glossy comic called Void Comix. The strip carton in it told the story of McNulty's show via a cartoon character called Arty. Arty is a teenage boy who visits the Void gallery and takes in what Dennis McNulty has been doing and then back home tries to do some sound art himself with disastrous consequences, or at least as far as his family is concerned. This comic was obviously aimed at the younger audience that Void may want to attract. It seems that Void do one of these Void Comix starring Arty for each of their shows. I wish I had read the comic before I had written all this, it seemed to get to the heart of Dennis McNulty's work far faster than I have been able to. I've also just remembered a topic of conversation that McNulty and I only touched on but now seems central. The topic was music and reality. The vast majority of music makers would like their music to be considered real. Dennis McNulty thinks no music is real and never has been real, for him it is music's unreality that is its source of power. People trying to make music real are heading in the wrong direction. Maybe it is just that McNulty's definition of what is real is different from other makers of music.

So back up here again, 28,000 feet above somewhere down there, the magic hour long gone, I will end this text by asking you questions. Should music be real? And if so, what should that reality be like?

Post Script: I emailed the above text to Dennis McNulty to make sure that I had got the facts right. In his return email he pointed out that the Alvin bloke was not called Lucifer but merely Lucier. More importantly the project in Brazil was called *anti-tour no.1 – magic hour* and the exhibition in Derry was called dx/dt. He also noted that I was not the first person to make the Gerry Adams comparison