# Dennis McNulty

LIMERICK CITY GALLERY OF ART

View of "Dennis McNulty," 2014. From left: *The Archivist*, 2014; *The Wall*, 2014; *Portable Framework*, 2010.

One way to begin decoding Dennis McNulty's tech-savvy, aesthetically impersonal work might be, perversely, to consider two key aspects of his biography. First, McNulty's main training was not in art but in engineering, and across an expansive range of subsequent artistic activities—installations, sculptures, films, sound works, performances—he
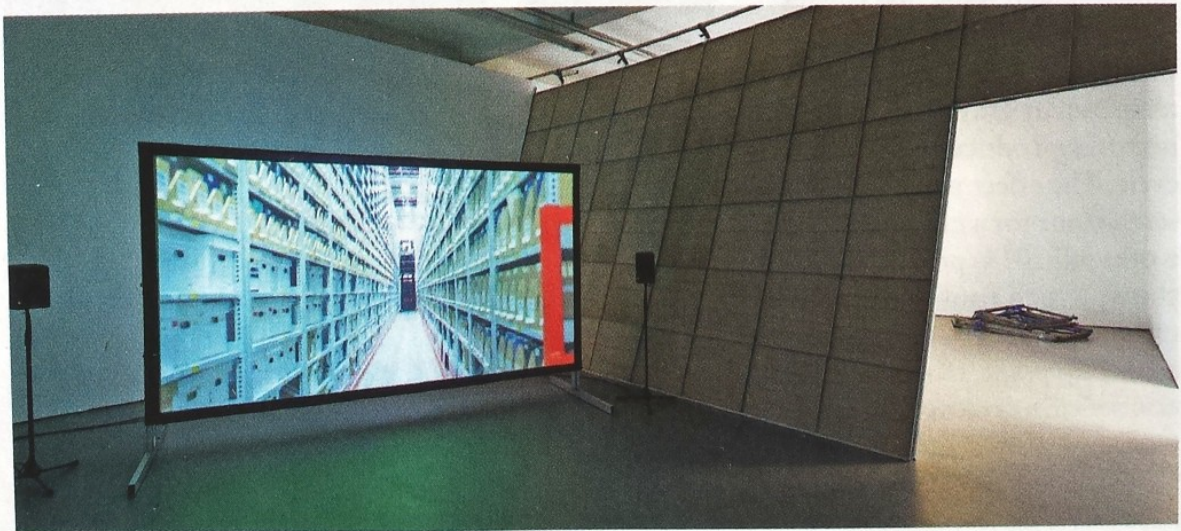
has continued to develop interests arising from that discipline. Second, during his postcollege years in the 1990s, McNulty's engineering talents were channeled into the production of electronic music: recording as part of an acclaimed duo, Decal, and running the pioneering Dublin electronic-music label Ultramack. Since then—driven, initially, by a desire to inventively tailor sound to specific architectural contexts—McNulty has incorporated into his work types of making and picturing associated with applied science. Through the artist's use of industrial materials, computer programming, electronic circuitry, technical drawings, and textbook diagrams, his work has continued to maintain a fascination with the sensory and cultural convulsions of popular music.

Such connections were evident in "Prototypes," McNulty's solo show at Limerick City Gallery. Partially hidden inside the tall, Minimalist sculpture *And you may ask yourself . . .* , 2014—a shiny three-sided enclosure assembled from plasterboard and ceiling-framework elements—is a tiny digital interface programmed to display just one glowing letter at a time. Character by character, curious messages become legible. Like the work's title, these are fragmentary quotes from the Talking Heads song "Once in a Lifetime": existentially troubling inquiries about the relation of inner consciousness to the outer structures of everyday modern life.

The most surprising and oddly pleasurable meeting point for McNulty's enduring sound-and-science preoccupations came in the short video *Unknown*, 2010/2014. Showing a hand flicking backward through the pages of *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Astronomy*, this silent video allows us to see sublime images of the cosmos alongside detailed text and complex diagrams. The back-to-front process of looking through the book seems to be a kind of revision—casting an eye over familiar material—or, more symbolically, a gradual reversal of learning: a slow return to the unknown. Close to the end, though, comes a pop-cultural *punctum*: an illustration immediately recognizable to many as the linear graphic from the cover of Joy Division's debut album, *Unknown Pleasures*. A diagrammatic representation of radio waves from a distant star, this image also invokes—for those with the relevant knowledge—the singular atmospheres and associations of Joy Division's bleak music.

At such points in McNulty's work, clear distinctions between spheres of knowledge and experience begin to collapse. Elsewhere in this exhibition, structures identified with demarcating physical space became the focus, as with a series of three corresponding sculptures made from the mass-produced components of suspended ceilings—cable ties, hardware, framework, and, of course, the tiles themselves. One version, *The Wall*, 2014, has a vertically fixed, room-dividing stability. Another, *Unstable Co-ordinates*, 2014, resembles a ceiling in the process of falling apart. A third—the tilted, hexagonal *Portal Fragment*, 2012/2014—allusively hints at alternative means of modeling and moving through space. Other sections in the show highlighted structures associated with the organization of time. A concise video called *The Archivist*, 2014, offered reflections on technology and memory retrieval from a fictional future perspective. Two algorithmically generated animations (*Flomatic* and *An Entirely Lyrical Instrument*, both 2014) center on moving-image sequences that are, theoretically, endless. Computing power was also applied to an existing set of organized and ostensibly stable images: Limerick City Gallery's permanent collection, from which the artist (with curator Mary Conlon) made a limited selection of works, all of them untitled, according to an algorithm. The resulting display, like McNulty's work more generally, was an involving, idiosyncratic reconfiguration of established categories of understanding, at once efficiently data-processed and winningly unpredictable.

—*Declan Long*