



CARLOW, IRELAND

Brian Duggan

VISUAL CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

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Instead of a slick contemporary gallery, a high-beamed wooden barn; instead of twenty-first-century clothes, Wild West costume; and instead of solitary, contemplative observation, communal roller-skating. This was the mixed-up *mise-en-scène* proposed by Brian Duggan in *Everything can be done, in principle*, 2012, a participatory installation commissioned for the enormous main exhibition space at Visual Centre for Contemporary Art. Inserting a huge timber structure into this austere white box (part of a recently built venue that is therefore already a vast architectural relic of a more affluent era), Duggan reimagined the gallery as a strange, anachronistic skating rink: at first glance more like a corny country-and-western version of a 1980s roller disco than a space for exhibiting art.

But Duggan's absurdly ambitious intervention had a more precise historical source, a scene from an equally grandiose movie: Michael Cimino's catastrophic western epic *Heaven's Gate*. This film, a singular vision of class conflict in late-nineteenth-century Wyoming, was a colossal financial and critical failure upon its release in 1980. Cimino bankrupted his studio making it, and his efforts were overwhelmingly dismissed by reviewers and resisted by bored and baffled audiences. But some have since hailed *Heaven's Gate* as an underrated, misunderstood masterpiece. And Duggan focuses on one segment of the film that is often singled out by fans of Cimino's extravagant flop as demonstrating its cinematic greatness. This is the bizarre sequence involving the titular *Heaven's Gate*—a country town skating rink that is the lively gathering place for a community of European immigrants forced to defend themselves from murderous attacks ordered by ruthless landowners. Cimino shows the assembled townspeople skating around the rink as a gloriously dynamic body of linked individuals, creating an atmosphere of spirited, chaotic conviviality. Freewheeling camerawork offers fleeting shots of the skaters supporting and then falling with one another as they collectively strive to maintain stability and move forward.

For Duggan, this eccentric image of social interaction survives the other (supposed) failures of the film, and in *Everything can be done, in principle* the scene has been appropriated to serve as an experimental framework for reexamining the construct of "community" today. Invited to dress up as movie characters and skate around the meticulous reconstruction of the rink, visitors entered a situation of exceptional,



Brian Duggan,
Everything can be done, in principle,
2012, timber, canvas,
roller skates, 1890s
Wyoming period
costume, sound.
Installation view.

potentially energetic coming-together. But has Duggan's investigation into the implicit politics of *Heaven's Gate* merely presented—albeit in highly entertaining form—the intriguing details of a historical curio? The accompanying display of related archival material might seem to place things at a safe historical distance. And certainly, as one joined the other mostly solitary skaters to nervously negotiate the circuit, a revived sense of community was not necessarily what came to mind. Yet even if Duggan has overreached in his aspirations (perhaps aptly), it is worth registering the wholly unfamiliar atmosphere—a disconcerting combination of high anxiety and low-key giddiness—that prevailed in the converted gallery. For as he brought to life, among the problems of the present, this failed image of the past, Duggan's winningly ludicrous social gathering hinted, through its very uncertainties and absurdities, at something new.

—Declan Long

