
Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper

27 September 2017 0



In the summer of 2016, recent Slade School of Fine Art graduate, David Blackmore, was artist in residency with University College London's Art Museum. His resulting work, Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper was on display as part of 'Vault', the annual Slade/UCL Art Museum collaboration, during the autumn of that year. The work consisted of a sculptural intervention at various locations on UCL's Main Campus, and a bespoke archive that addressed institutional amnesia, examining the absence and representations of Constance Gore-Booth (better known as Constance Markievicz) within UCL's collections.

David Blackmore recounts his artistic journey to 3rd Dimension

When the opportunity to work with UCL Art Museum arose I instantly thought about Constance Markievicz (fig.1). The Countess came to mind not just because we shared an Anglo-Irish background and she had studied at the Slade like myself, but for a number of different reasons.

Markievicz was a student at the Slade during the years 1893-97 and later became an Irish politician and revolutionary nationalist (fig.2). Although an important figure in Irish history, her contribution to British History as the first female to be elected to the House of Commons, is less well-acknowledged. While Britain marked 2016 as the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, from

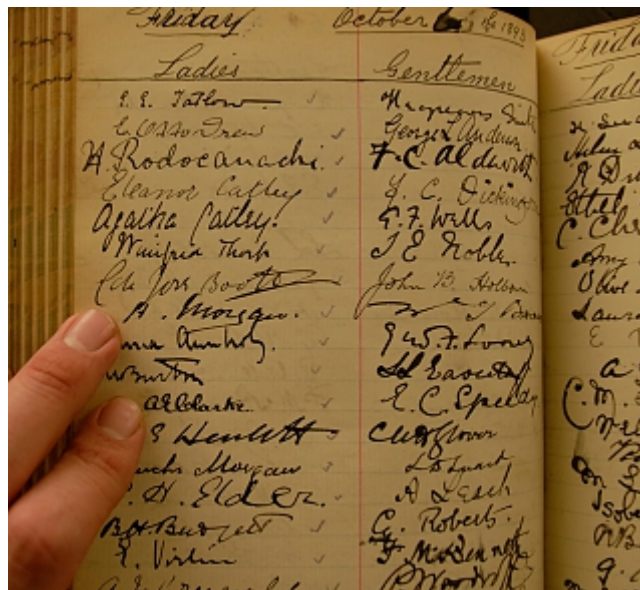


1. Countess Constance Georgine Markievicz née Gore-Booth (1868-1927), studio photograph c.1915.

an Irish perspective, the commemoration of the 100th-year anniversary of the Easter Rising against British rule in Ireland was paramount. Countess Markievicz played an active role in this revolt, which was a pivotal moment in Modern Irish history, and led to the establishment of an independent Irish state, the Republic of Ireland.

It was not until I was a

student at the Slade that I

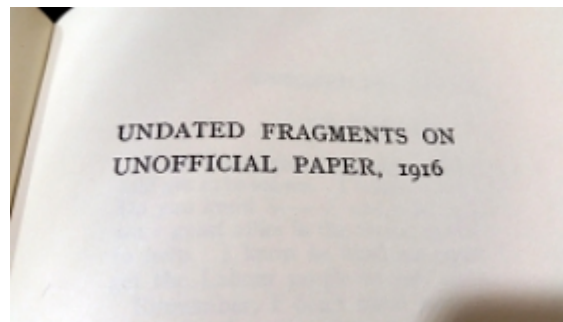


2. Signing-in book with Constance Gore-Booth's signature, October 1893, Slade School of Fine Art (photo: © Slade Archive, UCL)

became aware of Markievicz, which was probably either due to poor memory, my Anglo-Irish parentage or the fact that importantly, along with other women integral to the Easter Rising, she was overlooked in subsequent accounts of this crucial moment in Irish history. The omission of Markievicz and the other female activists in the cause for Irish independence is a glaring oversight which ran counter to the principles of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, the oration of which had marked the start of the Rising on 24th April 1916. Lasting only six days, the Rising failed for a variety of reasons, chief among which were poor communication which limited the revolt mainly to Dublin, a lack of support from the general population and the inability of a band

of poets, teachers, artists and socialists to compete with the fire-power of the British army. Following the rebels' surrender, Markievicz was sentenced to death along with the other ring leaders. Fearful of creating martyrs, the British Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith travelled to Dublin to stop the executions, but by the time he arrived General Maxwell had already executed 16 of the condemned by firing squad. Due to Asquith's intervention, however, Markievicz and the three other remaining rebels were spared the Stone breakers yard (the site of the executions in Kilmainham Gaol, now a national memorial) and her sentence was commuted to life.

In the aftermath of the Rising, Markievicz spent a number of separate periods in prisons in Ireland, Wales and England. She was released in 1917 along with the remaining prisoners from the Easter Rising, under a General Amnesty from the British Government; only to be imprisoned again a year later for anti-World War I conscription activities. It was while incarcerated, for this offence in HM Prison Holloway, that Markievicz was elected as a Sinn Féin MP for the Dublin St Patrick's constituency in 1918.



3. Detail from *The Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz*
(photo: David Blackmore)

During her incarceration Markievicz wrote a series of letters to her sister, Eva Gore-Booth, a pacifist, but militant trade unionist and suffragette, who lived openly in a

same sex relationship in Manchester. Following her death, Gore-Booth's partner, Esther Roper, published an anthology of all the letters Markievicz had sent to her sister whilst in prison. These letters begin with lengthy discussions of the Rising, the cause of Irish liberation, her life in prison and requests for Eva to ensure certain individuals were looked after. They quickly became more hurried, however, and convey a sense of urgency, using abbreviations or initials instead of full names. These notes, written on scraps of paper and smuggled out of prison, were described in this anthology as 'Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper' (fig.3). I later appropriated this phrase for the title of my work because it resonated meaning in this context and summed up why Markievicz intrigued me. The term reflected her militant, subversive behaviour and her strength of conviction – whilst echoing the concerns of my practice.

In my work, I am drawn to materials extracted from the everyday which articulate or can be worked with to convey a sense of underlying frustration. A frustration with the way our lives are dictated to by structures beyond our immediate control. My practice memorialises dissent or archives its relics – imagining a future reality where the divisory aspects of the present order have been broken down. My methodology, informed by a Catholic childhood, is repetitive, durational and aggressive; often involving the repeated molesting of mundane and abject materials through illicit acts as a form of dissent such as burning, bleaching, breaking and squandering.

As the result of being born in Dublin to an Irish mother and English father, my perspective towards nationality is of a less fixed and more transnational nature. Earlier in 2016, I made *Neckties* (fig.4), a piece of work which provided an alternative record of relations between the countries of my



4. David Blackmore, *Neckties*, 2015, hand-sewn military standard flag, ceremonial flagpole, leather flag pole holster 305×91×60cm. (photo: David Blackmore)

parents' births. This consisted of a hand-sewn military standard flag made as a response and a remediation of the first meeting of HRH Prince Charles and the leader of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams TD, in the Republic of Ireland on 19 May 2015. The flag's design was determined by the choice of tie each of these figures, and an innocent bystander, made on the day. This work was activated through a performance in Dublin during the Easter Rising's commemoration week as a visual record of the present state of affairs between the two nations, where both Markievicz and I have divided most of our lives.

My residency began with a speculative inquiry into UCL Art Museum's collection, which yielded no results and it quickly became apparent that there was not any material relating to Markievicz. I was nevertheless surprised that she had not

become an iconic figure within UCL, considering her contribution to political history in Britain and Ireland. Although one person's freedom fighter is another's terrorist, when she ran for parliament she did so from a British prison cell – an act of resistance against the British establishment. Regardless of whether Markievicz had been a free woman or not, she would never have taken her seat as an MP because she was a member of Sinn Féin. It is for this reason, along with her involvement in the Rising itself and her political activism for the cause of Irish independence that she has been neglected in British and UCL's history.

Out of curiosity I turned to the Library catalogue to see what material UCL as a whole held on Markievicz. This search gleaned only three books which had her name in key phrases. However, considering Markievicz's role in Irish and British History I was sure she must figure more prominently within the Library's collection. I knew that there was a large amount of material exploring Britain's relationship with Ireland so I then focused on the historical events in which she played a part.

I decided to redress Markievicz's absence in the Art Museum and UCL's collection through a fragmented and dispersed monument which would inhabit a number of sites, beyond the museum, in the wider UCL domain. I intended to highlight this omission as a form of institutional amnesia through a sculptural intervention within UCL's Main Library by casting each book where her name appeared in the index. The casts were to replace the original books on the library's shelves and the books themselves would be housed within UCL Art Museum forming a bespoke archive of how Markievicz herself had been cast over the past one hundred years.

Liz Lawes, the UCL Art Librarian, was open to the idea of working with the library collection from the start; the only condition being that whatever method was used to make the moulds, it didn't cause damage to the books. As a result, there were a couple of mould making options available to me, 3D printing and making vacuum formed moulds to be used for making plaster casts. Irrespective of how the casts would be made, however, I wanted the objects to be green as a reference to Markievicz's political allegiance and also because I had been led to believe by Karin Ruggaber, a sculpture tutor at the Slade, that green had been the colour of the walls at the Slade when the Countess was a student there.

As a result of this anecdote, Jo Volley, then Acting Head of the Slade, asked a historic paint analyst, Phillipa McDonnell, from the University of Lincoln, to make a site visit and excavate over a

century's worth of paint from one of the walls, in order to ascertain proof. The initial visual results suggested that the walls had indeed been green and she explained how interiors during the Victorian era were often painted dark green in order to hide visible signs of industrial pollution. Indeed a common pigment known as 'Scheele's green', which is now known to be poisonous was used widely during this period.



5. David Blackmore, *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper*, 2016, plaster cast of book, library books and bookshelf, UCL Main Library, British History section
(photo: Leonie Summers)

Initially I pursued the digital avenue, mainly out of curiosity, however I quickly realised that the process was too lengthy, unreliable and costly. Vacuum forming was appealing because I feel more at ease working with my hands and the technique was more immediate than 3D printing, which would also have taken over eight hours to print a single book. With potentially over 100 books to scan and print, the time frame rendered this route impractical. Unfortunately the vacuum forming method

made it impossible to make a complete cast of each book. Because the spines of the books would be the part immediately visible to the viewer, once the work was installed on the library shelves, I decided to make casts of these (fig.5). This meant, however, that with the opposite side, the edges of the books' pages themselves, could not be moulded. Although this was not ideal, given the constraints surrounding the use of the books from the library and the budget for the production of the work this was the most realistic method.

Anyone who has used plaster will be aware of the problems in achieving a strong colour with this material. Plaster is gypsum, a material composed of calcium sulphate, which has been ground down and heated to a high temperature. This is why plaster is so water hungry and difficult to colour strongly. It continues to absorb water from the pigment and effectively bleaches it, weakening the pigment's intensity. At the beginning of the residency, I spent a lot of time exploring ways of colouring plaster, from painting the casts themselves to mixing different pigments in with the plaster as it was being prepared. I experimented with a variety of professional and amateur

pigments resulting in a diverse range of greens; from the colder spectrum of green where the boundary between blue and green blurs, to an acidic greeny yellow. The results were varied, and not strong enough for my needs, because over the course of weeks the colours gradually became less and less vibrant as the plaster dried out.

Aside from finding a way of achieving a permanence of colour, the most significant decision I faced was which tone of green to use. Initially I had intended to use a single colour for all the casts, the green closest to that in the Irish tricolour, No. 347 on the Pantone colour chart (fig.6). Whilst I continued to pursue the elusive and stable green, I began to open up to approaches that

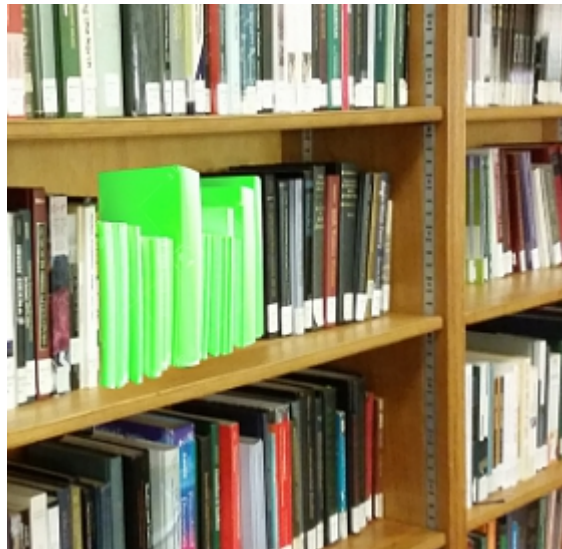


6. Example of the green paint tests
(photo: David Blackmore)

would enable the full breadth of this green spectrum to be utilized in the work. Though this needed to be a well-judged decision, adding to the antagonistic nature of the work – rather than based on aesthetics. I then considered the idea of using the different greens to denote on how many pages in each book Markievicz had been mentioned. Thus the colder weaker colours would indicate the books in which she appeared once, with the intensity and warmth of the colour increasing in proportion to the occurrences of her name in each book.

With the help of a number of interns from UCL Art Museum, I set out to ascertain how many pages she featured on in each book. This took time, but it also gave me the opportunity to revisit the books again; leaving green markers on each page where she was mentioned as a visual indicator to visitors. Out of the 126 books in which she was mentioned, Markievicz appeared on a single page in 40 of these books, and in 30 of them she featured twice. The number of pages on which her name appeared in the remaining 56 books became more erratic, leaping to 16 then 40 and up to 316.

As a result, it was hard to envisage how the work would look and flow once installed, because the library installation was determined by the original place of each book on the shelves. I knew how many books would be in each room and therefore I was able to estimate how much of a visible presence the casts would make in each space, ranging from 90 in the British History section to a single cast in the Celtic section. Despite being able to judge the amount of books, the actual presence of the work itself was an unknown quantity. To present my proposal to the commissioning panel, I had made a digital representation of a number of green books grouped together on the library shelves (fig.7), yet I didn't know how many of the casts would actually end up side by side on the shelves. I could have spent time working out exactly where each book belonged on the shelf and predicting the eventual aesthetic of the installation, and even have used this information to explore the full range of greens involved to denote the number of mentions in each book. This felt too long winded, contrived and more of an info-graphic – another layer of meaning to be conveyed to visitors through an interpretative text.



7. David Blackmore's initial visualisation for *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper* (photo: David Blackmore)

My original intention had been to highlight the absence of substantial records in UCL's archives by making the presence of Markievicz visible. Yet I did not feel that the weaker tones of green truly represented her because Markievicz was

certainly not a person who could be defined by a pastel shade. Of the 126 books, approximately 80 would have been cast in weaker hues and this simply did not represent my intentions for the work. Markievicz was an intense and passionate character, a woman who 101 years ago was willing, and most probably would have preferred, to have died for her role in the Easter Rising. Instead, she suffered greatly spending time being transferred from prison to prison as a political prisoner or terrorist, depending on one's perspective, yet regardless of her subversive intent Markievicz was the first women to run for

parliament in Britain. In essence, she was not a woman known for her polite behaviour, but for her militant conviction and self-sacrifice. I wanted to create an intervention which at first glance looked as though someone had literally highlighted each instance of Markievicz in UCL's Main Library with a vivid, caustic green marker and not a soft, subdued, pastel hue. It was all the more important that there was consistency in the use of colour, because despite her apparent ego, Markievicz believed in collective action.

During the residency, I had always wanted the work, or an iteration of it, to have a presence in the Slade School itself.

Throughout my time studying there, I had been drawn to the glass vitrine



8. David Blackmore, *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper*, 2016, plaster casts, The Material Museum, Slade School of Fine Art (photo: David Blackmore)

in the entrance. This is known as the Material Museum, established by its Director Jo Volley in 2012, it is the smallest museum in the world. The Museum itself is a beautiful object with a rather Victorian aesthetic and was perfect for a temporary mausoleum to Markievicz. The ethos of the Material Museum is to promote appreciation of the role of material within making art. As a result, I felt it was the natural place to display the experimental pigment casts I had produced whilst making the work (fig.8). These casts not only represented a temporary memorial to Markievicz in the Slade, but formed a catalogue of the search for the right intensity of green to best represent her.

After I had committed to a specific shade of green, the making of the final pieces using the vacuum formed moulds to make the casts, took ten days of intensive casting and two weeks to dry out. Once the marathon of casting was finished the different iterations of the work were installed in a number of sites across UCL's Wilkins Building including UCL's Main Library, where the final 126 casts were installed, replacing the original books on the library shelves, and dispersed across a number of different rooms. The largest concentration was located in the British History section (fig.9). Despite being half British, I did find an illicit

gratification in the act of removing books from this section and replacing them with a silent memorial to Markievicz. The remainder of the casts were spread out across the American History, English Literature and Celtic sections.



9. Installation view, *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper*, 2016, plaster casts of books, library books and bookshelves, UCL Main Library, British History section (photo: David Blackmore)

Prior to the work being installed, I had conversations with the Museum and Library staff about individual casts being damaged, broken or stolen. This didn't bother me, in fact I wanted the book casts to be interacted with physically and because they were in the public realm they were literally touchable – unlike work in the rarefied space of a gallery. My intention had been to create a visible, physical presence of Markievicz, which made people curious enough to

handle the work in order to find out about her and thus I created a mental presence of her in the minds of the living. I even envisioned potential accidents as a consequences of the casts being handled, and thought that this too would become part of the work. Indeed I had a conversation about the feasibility of being notified by the library cleaners when a cast or casts had been broken so that I could then visit and record the result of smashed green plaster on the library floor. This, of course, could not be facilitated within such a large organisation which was subject to high footfall and had these spaces in use 24 hours a day.

As the installation approached, I did start contemplating the work being destroyed by those who may not have agreed with the memorialisation of a historical traitor to the Empire. I fully expected some of the casts to be irrevocably damaged during the show's three-month duration and at the outset made regular trips in the evenings to check and to dust the bookshelves down. I was satisfied each time I visited to notice light green dust marks on the shelves, where the casts themselves had been handled or moved around by visitors, students and staff. These

marks, and others that gradually began to appear on the sides of some casts from friction were clear evidence of interaction. I like the idea of the familiar becoming unfamiliar, with library users becoming intrigued by these strange green objects, which had just appeared in spaces they would have been familiar with. I didn't witness anyone actually encounter the casts, however, I was told anecdotally, by a tutor at the Slade that when he had visited one of the rooms to see the work, the librarian in charge of that particular area mistaking him for me had said 'So you are the person who has removed all of my books!'. I also heard from a friend, Leonie Summers, that she had witnessed a perplexed student pick up a cast, study it closely as if it had somehow alchemically changed – then replace it with annoyance that he could not find his book. Yet ironically, the removal of knowledge in this case could lead to a greater understanding of an overlooked aspect of history.

The original books from which I had made the moulds were housed in the UCL Art Museum. These were grouped together in a library display cabinet and installed at a height which rendered them only accessible via a library ladder (fig.10), which was detailed in green to connect the work in the Museum with the different locations in which the casts were situated. This bespoke archive provided an insight into how Markievicz has been cast over the past 101 years. UCL Art Museum functions as a multi-use space, and as a result, it was a requirement that the floor space remain free to allow for a range of activities. This meant that instead of having the library display case on the ground, as one would expect, it had to be installed at a height on one of the Museum's storage cabinets that marked the edge of the space.

The point of having the books in the Museum was that they could potentially be read by students, academics and visitors to gain an insight into the role that Markievicz had played over the past century. Indeed, regardless of whether anyone would take time to study the contents in depth, just being able to read the titles of the books was important, because they demonstrated that not just Markievicz, but the very relationship between Britain and Ireland had been typecast over the past 100 years.

Although initially born out of necessity, for me the ladder came to suggest the executions of the leaders of the Easter Rising; a punishment that had originally been handed down to Markievicz and which she had been awaiting until Asquith's intervention. Despite the fact that those executed were shot by firing squad, the act of climbing a ladder has traditionally been associated

with another form of state sponsored execution. The height of the display case also served to further



10. Installation view, *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper*, 2016, library books, display cases, ladder and UCL archive artefacts, UCL Art Museum (photo: David Blackmore)

monumentalise Markievicz, presenting a remediation of her on a similar scale to that usually bestowed on public sculpture of historic significance.

I have been told that not many climbed the ladder during the duration of the show, which at first I found disheartening, though I feel the rarefied atmosphere of the Museum had a part to play in this. Having the casts on the actual library shelves made to be touched and experienced redressed this issue for me (fig.11). I did find satisfaction in the knowledge that I had created a setting where the original books were given greater gravitas within the show than the art objects, the casts themselves – which inversely could be accessed with ease.



11. David Blackmore, *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper*, 2016, plaster casts of books, library books and bookshelves, UCL Main Library (photo: Leonie Summers)

Despite the

conditions which set this work apart from my general practice, this residency offered the opportunity to realise a work in a non-conventional space, one that was not loaded with the

associations of a white walled gallery. Although the context of the library presented a particular set of challenges, both practical and conceptual – the final intervention emerged from these resolutions. The placement of the work confronted visitors with a strange and unfamiliar presence – an unexpected encounter in a familiar setting. This striking statement was an exciting way to address UCL’s institutional amnesia and raise awareness of one of its notable yet forgotten alumna, and her controversial, but important contribution to Britain and Ireland’s history (fig.12).

During the show itself I had often wondered what the work would be like if all the 126 casts had been housed together in a single cabinet.



12. David Blackmore, *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper*, 2016, detail of plaster casts of library books and bookshelf, UCL Main Library (photo: David Blackmore)

With the casts back in the studio (along with a gift of a cabinet from UCL Main Library), I decided to see how this would act as a re-imagining of the original installation. While I was excited to see the works housed en masse – I felt there was something lacking in the studio. The piece was not simply about Countess Markievicz, but about the absence of any substantial material relating to this important alumna in UCL’s collections. In order for the piece to become activated, regardless of the manner in which it was displayed, it needed to be within UCL because the location of the original installation was as much part of the work as the casts, or the books themselves. Taking account of this and the centenary next year of both Markievicz’s election as Britain’s first female MP and the Representation of the People’s Act (enabling women over the age of 30 to vote), I felt it was pertinent to offer a re-imagining of *Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper* as a permanent donation to UCL. I therefore proposed a donation of the casts housed together in a single cabinet within UCL’s Main Library as a lasting memorial to the Countess; the offer was accepted by UCL.

Before Easter this year, I met with UCL's Library and Estates team to view a number of possible locations for my donation. One of these, The Donaldson Reading Room is the oldest part of the library, which now houses the Law section and this particularly appealed to me. At the far end of the space, an ornate display cabinet with a large integral clock on top stands directly ahead of visitors as they enter the room and this we decided would be the ideal place for my donation to be installed. The provenance of this cabinet is unknown, but it has been there for a long time and is the focal point of the room. As this is the oldest part of UCL's Main Library, there is a good chance that Markievicz would have visited this room as a student, despite the fact that the art books would have been kept in the Slade at the time. The installation of my donation in the Donaldson Reading Room will take place towards the end of 2017.

Main image: David Blackmore, Undated Fragments on Unofficial Paper, 2016, plaster cast of book, library books and bookshelf, UCL Main Library, British History section (photo: David Blackmore)

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