

# ALREADY THERE

*lektonic traces, the bones of the fantasy that must adjoin a "rhythmic" "plastic" dimension to what is too visible, an enigma that does not stare you in the face<sup>1</sup>*

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In 1977, the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was legally available north but not south of the political border that divides the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. *Spare Rib* was listed as a banned publication in the Republic of Ireland. However, copies did move from north to south – mostly handled by women. One method of transport was the train service that ran between Dublin and Belfast. A day-return service nick-named the 'shopping train' facilitated cross border consumer spending in Northern Ireland. Shopping 'irregulars', as they might be described, brought *Spare Rib* south in their bags. This was done in defiance of the law and in direct contradiction of the state in the Republic at that time. A little later the same year, the Field Day group in Derry first published the academic journal *The Crane Bag*.

In the case of both publications, the representational *corpus delicti* was the signifying figure of a woman: as a narrative object in each story, the figure of the woman works as a link, an indexical sign, representing some potential thing or some thing transformed. Something else. Unlike the material transformation or transubstantiation myth of the spare rib from Christian doctrine, the crane bag was metaphor for transcendence. In the case of *Spare Rib*, some irony might be read into the choice of the name. With *The Crane Bag*, there is no irony. The story of the crane bag, derived from Irish legend, functions as a modernist myth for the eponymous publication. *The Crane Bag's* positioning of myth at the heart of its contemporary vision was fundamental to the dynamic that sustained its critical analysis of ideological base in Irish culture at a time of refreshed conflict in Irish political history.

In the first issue of *The Crane Bag*, the editors explained why it was so-named. The editorial was split into two parts, which were printed at either end of the publication: To the front, "Endodermis" and at the back, "Epidermis". It is explained that, according to Irish legend, a crane bag was made from the skin of a woman who has been magically transformed into a crane. Furthermore, a crane bag does not have the material quality of a tangible thing – rather it exists only as a metaphor or symbol. A crane bag was animated by secrets – secrets known only to the priests and poets. "Our choice of it [the name *The Crane Bag*] was something like the success of a nick-name. You sit around and you discuss someone, their essential traits and defining gesture. Suddenly a name goes up. It hangs in the air and everyone recognises it as perfect. It is just what we want to describe what we were after."

The journal was also likened to a province (invoking the legend of the 'fifth province'); a place or a floating centre. This centre was emphatically not a political position. Indeed, if it was a position at all, it was *marked by the absence (sic) of any particular political and geographical delineation, something more like a dis-position*. In view of the

political division of the island, the position-less place that *The Crane Bag* occupied and represented permitted the editors and contributors to have an expectation that their exchanges with readers and peers alike could be made in spite of and not because of the contemporary political culture. The journal was conceived as a place where discourses on art and politics, aesthetics and ideology, could be considered with intellectual freedom and with poetic licence. *The Crane Bag* project was launched only five years after Bloody Sunday in Derry. The journal stopped publication in 1985.

*The Crane Bag* is an important part of the history of critical writing in Ireland in terms of its ambitious engagement with critical issues, both in and from an Irish context. *The Crane Bag* heralded key language and concepts that, through the 1990s, had become fundamental and crucial to how Irish art was represented in an international context. Arguably, it was not until the 1980s had passed that the language of 'continental philosophy' successfully entered official discourses on Irish culture's postcolonial identity. By the 1990s, it became very clear that substantial aspects of Irish art practice that had previously been regarded as at sea on its own shore was in fact keeping time with rhythms in international art criticism. At the same time, the curator's role as cultural critic and as a primary author of the national narrative was developing.

Nevertheless, in that first issue of *The Crane Bag* there was a remarkably unconscious use of language with regard to the central image conjured by the editors in order to demonstrate their freedom, their ownership of that freedom and the intellectual independence of the journal. The language used to describe how the crane bag would be used was manifestly unconscious of the politics of representation and gender performed in the symbolising ritual. For example, instructions in the editorial read that: "the important thing is to leave the mouth of the crane bag open so that each one can break the silence and the spell (the myth of literacy) by jumping into this skin and shedding the one that has satisfied up to now."

Re-imagine the scene, no less spectacularly: a suit of human skin on a dressmaker's armature. The suit has been made of skins harvested from women – victims of the serial killer from Thomas Harris' novel *The Silence of the Lambs*. The exchange of one spectacle for the other seems easy. Is the drama imagined in *The Crane Bag* a quintessentially 'modern horror' (a fifth essence for a fifth province) – cathartic, transformational – a redemption myth? Is the ritual of the crane bag a serial event – is this critique itself, a process of endless repetition?<sup>2</sup>

In an article for *Artforum* in 1992, Luke Gibbons wrote of the "silencing of women's stories and of marginalised voices during the referendum campaigns of the 80s [that] allowed Irish people to delude themselves that they were dealing with cut and dried issues." But there was a reliance on the embodying female body to dramatise his basic question: "What was it about narratives of sexuality in Ireland, for example, that earlier

this year turned the private trauma of a 14-year old girl into a crisis that *convulsed the entire nation*" (my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> It is crucial to remember that among the most politically contested social issues throughout the 1980s in the Republic were abortion, divorce and infanticide. Also at the start of the 1990s, Gerardine Meaney argued that in "post-colonial southern Ireland a particular construction of the sexual and family roles became the very substance of what it meant to be Irish."<sup>4</sup>

In a 1985 essay for *Circa* magazine, the English artist Eddie Chambers describes the dashing of his hopes for drawing an analogy between black (community based) artists and Irish artists during a visit made by him to Ireland. He did find artists sharing a stand "against cultural domination." In fact, he never then returns to the longed for but failed scenario. In the same article he cites his support for a rejection of 'ethnic arts' as a term generated by a white establishment as a limiting, legislative control over ethnic minorities' cultural identities. Chambers is also opposed to the racist development of 'ethnic art' into "an integral component of the ideology now known as 'cultural nationalism'... the reclamation... in a contemporary context, of traditional tribal culture".<sup>5</sup>

The disappointment of Chambers following his Irish trip is resonant also in the words Lucy Lippard in an article titled 'Activating Activist Art' printed in *Circa* in 1984. She described a visit at about the same time that she made to Ireland as follows: "I saw very little 'activist art' in Ireland, although I was told that I did see most of the 'more political artists'. By the end of the trip I had begun to perceive the subtle, and local, social imagery that was invisible in my initial ignorance. The complexity of Irish political life seems to be paralleled by the layered, contradictory images that I often found tantalizingly direct..."

"In the U.S., cultural activists reject neutral stances, no matter which side they are on, while in Ireland, in some curious way this seems the most radical position for the artist."<sup>6</sup>

Lippard made these comments in *Circa* magazine in 1984. Reviewing her experience just over a decade later in 1996, she remembers: "when I spent some time in Ireland selecting an exhibition, I had to revise my expectations of Irish political art; ...I had to disconnect my own fascination with Irish prehistory and take the word of Chris Coppock, who wrote, "the future of Irish art lies in the abandonment of myths – and that includes modernist ones". Both romanticism and formalism have at times inclined toward fascism."<sup>7</sup>

Christopher Coppock offered an answer to the question of *thinking* Ireland and Irish art in a 1987 catalogue essay for the exhibition *3 Artists from Northern Ireland* which was held at the Cornerhouse in Manchester. The three artists were Willie Doherty, Anthony Davies and Christopher Wilson: "who... make a conscious decision to address their immediate social conditions... we need to consider the role of the three artists in this exhibition as commentators". In his essay, 'A line of Country,' he writes of the previously usual

emphasis in such Irish art shows on Irish artists who were: "resident in or native to the 26 counties. This is to be expected. Eire, as a relatively young nation is inevitably anxious to assert itself... The belief that culture travels well and is an affirmation of nationhood... Secondly, the matter of the border dividing the North and South of Ireland has been deliberately blurred. The inference here is that art – a high priest of civilisation – transcends all national boundaries."<sup>8</sup>

Thereafter it is clear that his concern lies in the tension between Britain and the Northern Irish "statelet" where after "years of seeking integration with the 'global conversation' artists are now beginning to address the native attributes they were so keen to shed."

In the same year, the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin held the exhibition, *Directions Out*, curated by Brian McAvera. The exhibition took the giant step of defining 'politics' and 'identity' in Irish art at that time, and was subtitled: 'An investigation into a selection of artists whose work has been formed by the post-1969 situation in Northern Ireland'. The exhibition caused a great deal of controversy, not least due to its interpretation of what constituted political art. The very particular issues he defined depended on the political and national significance of the North-South border. None of the participating artists were women. In the catalogue essay, McAvera makes this statement: "...the most glaring omission of all, that of women, needs some explanation."

"I was very conscious of the need for a woman artist. Women occupy an increasingly important position in the map of Northern work, and it seemed natural that a number would be included. However, I refuse to bow to totemism (sic) just to satisfy some numerical notion of representation. The blunt fact is that women do not seem to be working in the area considered by this show. I think there are a number of reasons for this. In a provincial, insular, male-dominated society which is usually twenty years behind the times, the female counter-reaction – the assertion of feminine individuality – is pre-occupying them."<sup>9</sup>

Now we have something of a bottom line in looking at women artists positioning in Irish art of the 1980s that traded most profitably and purposefully in the symbolic and political value of the political Border between North and South. Nevertheless, McAvera has been criticised elsewhere by Sighle Breathnach Lynch in relation to how he has applied his interpretation of politics to cultural history. She cites Mary Stinson Cosgrove's argument that Romantic myth and a modernist theory of subjectivity have privileged the position of art above politics in Irish art writing.<sup>10</sup>

Concluding his earlier remarks on Irish women artists, Brian McAvera opts to account for the omitted artistic practices by quoting from the catalogue of the exhibition *Women on Women*, which had been held at the Fenderesky Gallery in Belfast the previous year: "Mary McGowan, for example, in a series of witty demolitions of the role of the female in religion, has as her aim to 'change the viewpoint to correspond to a non-male

sons". She is clear in her view that Irish women are in a double-bind. Asking what it means for a man to be an Irish man she finds it a complex although singular question. Asking what it means to be a woman she finds two questions, "double complexity." The "requirements of national identity have usurped other needs, drowning out other voices".<sup>13</sup> In his Field Day Pamphlet, 'Nationalism, Irony and Commitment,' published in 1988, Terry Eagleton outlined a kind of "emancipatory politics" where the issue of freedom depends on specificity and self-determination: "not the freedom to 'be Irish' or 'be a woman', whatever that may mean, but simply the freedom now enjoyed by certain other groups to determine their identity as they may wish".<sup>14</sup>

Smyth derides the vacant iconography of "Folta, Banba, Eriu: triune goddess, symbol of the land of Ireland, from the beginning of history and before" in Prionsias Mac Cana's essay for *The Crane Bag*, "Women in Irish Mythology" published in 1980.<sup>15</sup> Instead, she suggested looking forward to representations of a "plurally heterogeneous" group of women and away from the symbolically "singular". In Catherine Nash's writing about Kathy Prendergast, she is careful to record Prendergast's rejection of the interpretation of her images as feminist statements but claims the work as a "representation of a personal geography". Although it is Nash's intention to raise "the possibility of a feminist and postcolonial identification with place which avoids the biologism and essentialism of the idea of a natural, organic and intuitive closeness to nature..."

Through the 1990s, the struggle to situate Irish artists and their practices might be book-ended by two curatorial statements. From September 1990 to March 1991, the Douglas Hyde Gallery presented a series of exhibitions titled *A New Tradition: Irish Art in the Eighties*. The exhibitions were categorised thematically: 'Nature and Culture', 'Sexuality and Gender', 'Myth and Mystification', 'Abstraction' and 'Politics and Polemics'. In 1999, *From the Poetic to the Political* opened at the Museum of Modern Art (the show subsequently toured to institutions in America). The artists included in *From the Poetic to the Political* were selected from the collection acquired by IMMA since it opened in 1991. Many of these artists are included in *Something Else*. For example: Dorothy Cross, Willie Doherty, Alice Maher, Kathy Prendergast and Billy Quinn. What has happened in the interval between the two exhibitions is a reconciliation of many of the issues that were rawly exposed in the critical and curatorial inclusions and omissions conspicuous in efforts to position Irish art, per se, in the 1980s. In the range of artists in *Something Else* many have a great deal of experience in showing their work in Irish art shows.

For artists who have lived and developed their practices away from Ireland, especially in Britain and America, the theorising of the Irish diaspora in international art discourses has provided a context where their work can be understood in relation to artists based in Ireland. The establishment of this critical trope as part of the narrative of the travelling group show has provided a platform for artists to reflect on their practice alongside their contemporaries. Is it now time to hear from the artists? How has the

experience of exhibiting as an Irish artist changed over the last two decades? What is it like to negotiate with curatorial and critical directions that describe the culture and place your art practice? Exhibiting 'at home' and abroad presents interesting issues about how audiences both 'at home' and abroad may now be considered equivalent.

*something else, something already there, not supplementary, not given; something parenthetically, occasionally glimpsed in other works*<sup>16</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> From 'Fantasy and Cinema' in *Intimate Revolt* by Julia Kristeva (translated by Jeanine Herman). Columbia University Press, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> The three serial killer novels by Thomas Harris have been realised as films. Michael Mann's 1988 film *Manhunter*, is based on the first novel, *Red Dragon*. The character of Hannibal Lecter – a cannibal anti-Christ – assumes a more central role as the novels proceed. In *Red Dragon*, Doctor Hannibal Lecter (he is a psychiatrist) – a cannibal anti-Christ – communicates from prison with a serial killer (described by investigators as a secretor) operative on the outside by using a secret language. For an analysis of the monstrous and the visual, see Orla Ryan's essay "Teratology and the Televisual in 'Manhunter'" in *The Glass Eye* edited by Maeve Connolly and Orla Ryan. Project Press, 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> Gibbons, Luke 1992: "On the Beach", *Artforum* (October), 1992.
- <sup>4</sup> Meaney, Geraldine 1991: *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish culture and Politics*. A LIP Pamphlet, Attic Press.
- <sup>5</sup> Chambers, Eddie 1985: "Beyond Ethnic Arts", *Circa* (number 21), 1985.
- <sup>6</sup> Lippard, Lucy 1984: "Activating Activist Art", *Circa* (number 17), 1984.
- <sup>7</sup> From the 'Introduction' to the exhibition catalogue *Distant Relations: A dialogue among Chicano, Irish and Mexican artists* edited by Trisha Ziff. Smart Art, 1996.
- <sup>8</sup> Coppock, Christopher 1987: "A line of Country" in *3 Artists From Northern Ireland*. Cornerhouse Publications.
- <sup>9</sup> McAvera, Brian 1987: "Directions Out: An investigation into a selection of artists whose work has been formed by the post-1969 situation in Northern Ireland" in *Directions Out*. Douglas Hyde Gallery.
- <sup>10</sup> Breathnach Lynch, Sighle 1998: "Framing Ireland's History: Art, Politics and Representation 1914–1929" in *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Painting from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland*. Merrell Holberton.
- <sup>11</sup> Roberts, John: "Directions Out: A Critique" in *Selected Errors: writings on art 1981–1990*. Pluto Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Nash, Catherine 1993: "Remapping and Renaming: the new cartographies of identity, gender and landscape in Ireland", *Feminist Review: Nationalisms and Identities* (number 44), 1993.
- <sup>13</sup> Smyth, Ailbhe 1991: "Commonplaces, Properplaces" in *Strongholds: New Art from Ireland*. Tate Gallery.
- <sup>14</sup> Eagleton, Terry 1988: "Nationalism, Irony and Commitment". Field Day Pamphlet (number 13), 1988.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Crane Bag*, volume 14, number 1, 1980.
- <sup>16</sup> Schehr, Lawrence 1995: "Sade's Literary Space" in *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, edited by Allison, Roberts and Weiss. Cambridge University Press.