

That's the Art World for You.

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It is easy enough to have a harmonious and expeditious decision-making process if the dominant voices do not take seriously those opinions, analyses, perspectives, and arguments that they regard as extreme, dangerous to their interests or overly contentious.¹

Iris Marion Young.

Early in 2011, an art project was accessioned by the National Irish Visual Arts Library – an unusual type of addition for NIVAL to make.² Comprising indexed boxes of printed, audio and visual material about artists' groups in existence since the mid-1970s, in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the 'Artist-led Archive – Sustainable Activism and the Embrace of Flux' was assembled between 2006 and 2008 by artist, Megs Morley. The aim was to spur the development of artist-led culture in Ireland by "acknowledging past initiatives work and exposing the roots of some of our oldest cultural vehicles". The project toured to venues where "platforms and situations" were set up for conversations and to deal with the "multiple and contested histories" that the collected material represented.³ This project was indicative of a wider feeling among students of art and artists beginning to establish themselves in the late 1990s. Realising that artists working alone were still generally privileged in the received canon of recent art history over those working collaboratively or collectively, artists like Morley began to take action. Comparable initiatives addressing the history and activity of collaboration organised around the same time, albeit in different contexts, were the Moore Street Lending Library and the City Arts Archive.⁴ As the decade progressed, the emergence of new stand-alone opportunities for independent curators meant that more than ever before artistic and curatorial projects that are not institutionally affiliated have become increasingly commonplace and brought a new visibility to collective and collaborative work that would challenge aspects of the status quo.

In 2005, the year before the 'Artist-led Archive' project got underway, research staff at University College Cork's Centre for Co-operative Studies presented a paper in the city to the International Co-operative Alliance Conference. The paper was titled, 'Artists co-operatives and their potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts sector in Ireland' and the draft was posted on the 'Artist-led Archive' website. The researchers questioned whether the membership policies of artist-run organisations build member commitment. They recorded

views of representatives from two influential sectoral perspectives, that of the Arts Council and a local authority and discovered that visual art was still understood as a very insular practice. Furthermore, artists would feed off the benefits of co-operation and a natural selfishness was felt to exist in contrast to the performing arts.⁵ Also in Cork in the same year, a programme of meetings and events conceived of as an art project known as the ‘Cork Caucus’ was commissioned by the National Sculpture Factory and run by an invited curatorial team to thematically look at art and democracy in local and global contexts. A book of the same name documents the programme and includes reflections on the legacy of the Caucus, one year on. It includes many contributions by the artists, critics and theorists working internationally that took part. For example, Jan Verwoert, who made several public presentations during the Caucus, writes of his conviction that “history is intrinsically linked to a sense of freedom”.⁶ His argument that the crisis of history has gone hand in hand with a crisis in collective memory, promotes reflection on why current campaign and advocacy groups seem not to actively remember and remind how the visual arts of the last ten years has been animated in regard to history, community, the political voice and the politics of representation.

As competing and diverse standpoints across of the visual arts are being articulated, it is urgent that the work of artists, curators and all manner of managers, who have worked to ask questions together and with others (who are none of these things) be examined more closely to correctly recall what critique there has been of the culture of the last ten years. This is long project and access is not easy even if the information is technically in the public domain. For all the discussions and recorded events in galleries, museums, studios, halls, rooms and so on, it has been conspicuous that in making the arguments about the social and economic dividends the cultural sector can generate, the lively and vital contribution of the visual arts to civil society is by and large not promoted or brought to public attention by advocacy campaigns within the cultural sector. ‘Welcome to the Neighborhood’ in Askeaton, Co. Limerick, ‘Tulca’ in Galway City and the ‘X-PO’ in Kilnaboy, Co. Clare are projects conceived and produced in specific localities, involve repetition and programmatic approaches – examples to start with.

Multiple further examples of projects in Ireland have taken on the ideas, models, sentiments and styles of ‘situational’ or ‘conceptual’ practices from art’s recent past and critiques of how the institutionalizations of art has been manifested. Pursued by artists, freelance and staff curators, visual arts programmers, cultural managers and local government arts administrators, such approaches have established new scenarios for art in Irish city centres, suburbs, towns, rural townlands and islands. Recent projects like the Workhouse Test,

Commonage, Collection of Minds and Ground Up are indicative of current approaches and concerns. As elsewhere, links with academic and educational programmes have meant the transfer of academic and professional knowledge has improved, although it seems publicly commissioned research has tended to stop using academic partners. In terms of artists alone, the last decade has seen an increase in instances where artists work with others, as well as together, in order to place art within very specific social and cultural environments. This said, the last decade has simultaneously seen popular art history continue to be typically told through biography and personal connoisseurship. The pattern is to editorialise rather than contextualise. Not surprisingly, the effect is to reinforce the cultural primacy of the individual artist. More novel has been the attention given to the fortunes of the market – the secondary market especially and the influence of auctioneers. The specific impact of sales from collections of recent contemporary art seems to be a minor interest for investigators and the importance of the private gallery in guiding taste and establishing reputation remains more obscure to the public. Artworks with more than one maker, complex installation or conservation specifications are all but invisible. In fairness, this is not such an anomaly. Leading public collections of contemporary art still tend not to acquire such work or ephemeral objects.⁷

Mid-2011 and public agitation for ‘open government’ has taken many forms, not least, in the emergence of new types of non-party affiliated citizenship initiatives aimed at challenging the political status quo and a National Campaign for the Arts, up and running since 2009.⁸ In the wake of the then Irish government’s 2009 Global Irish Economic Forum, the rhetorical appropriation and re-appropriation of ‘culture’ as a driver of reputational and economic recovery has become more tempered. The Forum’s own ‘Farmleigh – One Year On’ report more circumspectly describes a “critical and complex connection between culture, Ireland’s international reputation, and business”.⁹ In 2011, Dublin’s Temple Bar Cultural Trust held a meeting to encourage people working in the arts to contribute to a policy paper on the economic development of cultural industries across the EU.¹⁰ On that occasion, one of the invited contributors warned that the ongoing differences between what are alternatively called the cultural industries and the creative industries represent the main obstacle to the arts reaching their economic potential. Of course, this mirrors the view that the common good can only be achieved in workable democracies when citizens transcend the parochialism of their private associations, affections and affiliations. Unfortunately, by diminishing the reality and function of difference in our culture and society in order to ‘monetise’ creativity, complex ethical and political arguments are excluded, not least those about the place of art and artists in this context.

The space does not exist in this essay to do justice to everyone or all projects that have strategically, tactically and principally involved artistic work by more than one artist, curator or other creative participant, but the following artists have proven to be prominent among those who have been actively involved in the expansion of conventions in art and exhibition making. They have ultimately played a significant role in changing the reference points for the visual arts in Ireland in the last ten years: Michelle Horrigan, Sarah Browne, Deirdre O'Mahony, Rhona Byrne, Michelle Browne, Fiona Woods, Aileen Lambert, Ailbhe Murphy, Sally Timmons and Jesse Jones. All these artists work in such a way that to look in detail on any one will lead to another collaborator, setting, serial and episodic project and ever expanding circles of audiences and colleagues. In Ireland as elsewhere, practices and ideas of the historical avant-garde also figure in the philosophy and aesthetic practices within community and participatory arts. The contemporary hybrids of the two require particular attention. Those at either end of the spectrum are unpicking the terminology – designed for utility – that has come to be used to administrate differences in terms of the professional, amateur and participant.

Public appointments or appointments to grant funded art centres are key in developing job descriptions for curatorial roles not necessarily connected to collection management, conservation and display. The transition, at least on paper, from organizer to curator, seems swift. Arguably a newly extensive and broadly middle class cultural administration has emerged in Ireland as in similar countries. The question is, does this group opt to reproduce itself and defend its self-identity from within museums, galleries and visual arts programmes characterized as “research forums”, “post-exhibition arenas”, and “exchange networks” instead of as places of historical record, generic creativity, or humanist affirmation?¹¹ Since the mid-1980s, there have been a number of associations formed amongst exhibition organizers, visual arts curators and directors. An informal Directors Forum with representations from galleries in Dublin, Limerick, Kilkenny, Sligo and Cork emerged briefly in the mid 2000s and prior to that a Curator's Forum was convened annually from 1999 to 2001 in Kilkenny, Portlaoise and Limerick. The forerunner to these was the Exhibitions Organisers' Group. A summary consultation of local authority advertisements from the late 1980s and the staff recruitment by IMMA in the early 1990s presents evidence of the shift from the designation ‘exhibition organiser’ to ‘curator’.¹²

The photograph used in the design of the invitation for the Irish Museum of Modern Art's 20th anniversary celebrations in 2011 shows a crowd in the courtyard of Dublin's Royal Hospital Kilmainham, where IMMA is housed. Their attention has been captured by something we cannot see, away to the left, and the body of nearly every person in the

photograph is squarely facing in the same direction, several heads are turned, chatting, daydreaming, a smile or a measured look at the photographer – a camera is raised self-consciously capture the moment of being photographed. Is the crowd waiting in anticipation of something about to happen or beginning to drift toward at the end of something that's gone on a bit too long. The door from the courtyard to the Great Hall is ajar. In this hall, some eighteen years later, IMMA held a public forum on a proposal by government to amalgamate the national cultural institutions, IMMA, the National Gallery of Ireland and the Crawford Gallery, Cork. The amalgamation did not proceed, but the arguments and cases made on the day marked an opportunity for the museum to think again about its governance, constituencies and relationship to the public.¹³

The question of what subject position artists, curators, writers, managers, administrators collectively and individually will inhabit is especially charged now as large visual arts institutions and small organizations alike adapt their operations to suit the dictum of 'do more for less'. With the unregulated growth of unpaid internships the pressure increases to justify unfair and exploitative work practices and shrinking social responsibility. Attending events in the past year where the myths of entrepreneurial culture, policy and the arts have been debated, some salutary points have been tabled. Not least, the identification of a lack of public intellectuals in Ireland – singled out as an almost insurmountable obstacle in the expectation of quality public discourse in Ireland. The inference is that this status is out of the reach of the numerous artists, curators, writers and others in the visual arts who actively contribute to public discourse. Perhaps it is in this context then that the question of the public role of directors in the larger visual arts institutions arose at a symposium titled 'Work It' held at Project Arts Centre early in 2011, convened to look at working conditions in the visual arts.

Of course, questions of what gets on the agenda of political discussion and how seriously participants take positions put forward in a discussion are crucial for an inclusive democratic process.¹⁴

There are strong indications that artists, curators, writers and administrators still have an appetite for re-appraising their circumstances in terms of their connection to the bigger picture. The newer print and online publications that now carry writing and criticism about art, such as Paper Visual Art Journal, +BILLION-, or Enclave Review, are starting to deal with harder questions about where the cultural hegemony that pertains now has left things for contemporary art in Ireland. Circa magazine's archive remains invaluable.¹⁵

- 1 Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 67.
- 2 The National Irish Visual Arts Library is open to the public, funded by the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and supported by the National College of Art & Design.
- 3 Find information on the 'Artist-led Archive' exhibitions, talks and events at www.theartistledarchive.com (Accessed 29/04/2011).
- 4 The catalogue for the City Arts archive completed by Jane Speller can be obtained by contacting City Arts, Dublin and the Moore Street Lending Library is housed at Fire Station Artists Studios, Dublin and the catalogue can be accessed through their website.
- 5 A draft of the research paper by Noreen Byrne & Bridget Carroll, Michael Ward, 'Artists co-operatives and their potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts sector in Ireland' is available on the 'Artist-led Archive' website.
- 6 Jan Verwoert, 'The Crisis of History', *Cork Caucus: Art, Possibility and Democracy*. National Sculpture Factory & Revolver, 2005: 332 – 224.
- 7 For example, Robert O'Byrne's *Dictionary of Living Artists*, Plurabelle Publishing, 2010; Eamon Delaney's *Breaking the Mould: A Story of Art and Ireland*, New Island, 2009; Vera Ryan's *Movers and Shapers 3: Conversations in the Irish Art World*, Galley Head Press, 2011; and John Byrne's *Sold! The Inside Story of How Ireland Got Bitten by the Art Bug*, Red Rock Press, 2008.
- 8 For example, *We the Citizens, The Second Republic, and Claiming Our Future*.
9. *The Global Irish Economic Forum One Year On*. Available at www.globalirishforum.ie/2009ForumReports.aspx
- 10 The Temple Bar Cultural Trust's public forum on the EU Green Paper 'Unlocking the potential of cultural and creative industries' was held on 7 July at Project Arts Centre, Dublin.
- 11 John Roberts, 'Situational Authorship', *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, Verso, 2007.
- 12 See Tom Weir's account of the Exhibition Organisers' Group, the emergence of the curatorial role and the arrival of 'curation' in film on his blog, *Tiny Planet*, at www.tinyplanet.eu/index.php?id=6157793736472148019
- 13 A summary of the 'Public Forum on Amalgamation', 18 November 2009, is available from the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Contributors included Michael Houlihan, Sune Nordgren, Patrick T Murphy, Jaki Irvine, Brian Fay, Anthony Cronin, Jacinta Lynch, Noel Kelly, Jim Power, Mike Fitzpatrick, Pat Cooke, Hughie O'Donoghue and Jerome O'Driscóil.
- 14 Young, 2002, 67.
- 15 At the time of writing *Circa* is still publishing articles, interviews and reviews online, but its future is uncertain since the loss of Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon funding in 2011.