

Feminism, Democratic Politics and Citizenship

Valerie Connor

I

By setting out an inventory of rights and obligations, the 1937 Constitution of Ireland assigns a place in the world to the citizen-reader. These defining conditions are grounded in the idea that citizenship is based on commonality. The citizen-reader is written into existence through this essentially rights-based document. The effect of the text is felt outside of itself and in ‘the people’. But in article 42:2.1, the idea of democracy, equally and energetically embodied by all (the same), and publicly performed in concert, becomes more melodramatic: ‘In particular by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.’¹ The quality of stability that this image conveys might reasonably be read and judged as an approximation of the wellness of the common good. Julia Kristeva suggests that materialising the image of ‘woman’, precisely to fill an ideological space, renders the figure symbolically static and its meaning fixed. The maternal figure becomes an index of symbolised social relations and community.² I am citing Kristeva, conscious that she had a full house turnout to hear a paper given by her late last year in Dublin. This would seem to indicate that a large local audience exists for her ideas.

Although Kristeva has not often written about the sublime (as she has about ‘sublimation’), her writing maintains an oblique relationship to it, not least in her theorising of abjection and subjectivity. But she has written overtly on the need for an aesthetic practice, which she articulates around the maternal metaphor. Unlike the allegorical, frozen figure of the woman within the home, described in the Constitution, Kristeva’s maternal metaphor gives rise to what she has called the ‘revolutionary subject’, the subject-in-process, the subject-on-trial, or the ‘*rejet*’ (constructed in the collision of ideas). This is not to suggest that subjectivity simply *is* contested, but rather that subjectivity *must* be

1. Other articles in addition to article 42:2.1 in the 1937 Constitution of Ireland explicitly refer to women, pertaining to motherhood/abortion and marriage/divorce. These alterations were added over the last 20 years. The referenda at these times brought women to the fore in the media and on the political agenda. Women’s experience on these occasions became a lens to view society.
2. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p 123.



**'Longed
in letter**

**EX-
IN**

**Today's polling
is big test of
public opinion**

[Faded, illegible text, likely a continuation of the article or a separate column of text.]

The Evening Herald, Dublin, final edition, December 2nd 1970. Courtesy The Evening Herald and Dublin City Archive.

contested. So it appears that conflict is a key part of human society, mediated as it is by representations and their interpretation.

In the Constitutional text, it is presented as being especially within the gift of the 'woman' inscribed by article 42 to give. Resonant of anthropological and antiquity studies on the function of the gift in establishing social identities, such gifting denotes concepts of symbolic exchange that connect sacrifice to obligation in modern European thought.³ In the case of the 'woman' in article 42, however, there is no precise inventory of what exactly is given, neither is the material value of what she gives to the state available to any kind of basic analysis. Nevertheless, by way of a remittance, there is the tacit protection of the state. The social participation peculiar to the 'woman' of article 42 is written in terms of a 'sacrificial logic'.⁴ The 'woman' in article 42 is not the product of clumsy writing. As she is written in, so she is written out.

II

It is an enchanted, perverted topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things. (emphasis added)⁵

Karl Marx

The artists Dorothy Cross and Alice Maher have often been presented as being as good as equivalent in their concerns. This may have become the case by virtue of the liberal use of psychoanalytic theory in rendering into writing critical interpretations of their imagery and, likewise, through the production of critical art histories that draw on feminist critiques. Less well documented have been these artists' dissenting voices. Not as adversaries, not against one another, rather against the status quo in regard to their espousal of particular ethico-political views about the political world and the material society in which they live and work as artists. In protest against French nuclear testing in the Mururoa Atoll in French Polynesia, Dorothy Cross refused an invitation to take part in 'l'Imaginaire Irlandais', a government-funded cultural event celebrating Irish art and culture in France throughout 1996. At the end of the 1990s, on the cusp of the new millennium, Alice Maher published an 'op-ed' newspaper article about the impact of the economic prosperity of the 1990s on the visual arts in Ireland. Art, she wrote, 'is just about where it was before people started thinking about traffic and house prices'. Moreover, as the Irish became the busy bees of Europe, cultural ambitions were conspicuously limited, and burning issues did not extend much further than contemplating 'where to put the new TV'.⁶

Nonetheless, despite their oppositionality on public interest matters, the art historical narrative that to date connects the art of Dorothy Cross and Alice Maher tends to diminish critical differences in their work vis-à-vis the social and political environment in which it has been produced, and magnifies similarity, most conspicuously so either explicitly or implicitly in psycho-sexually inflected critical analyses. Of course, criticism and academic scholarship drawing on feminist theories of representation, images of women and female sexuality in Western visual

3. Jacques Derrida, 'Secrets of European Responsibility', in *The Gift of Death*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, pp 4–10.

4. For a critical overview see Alison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1996.

5. Sarah Kofman, *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1999, p 59, quoting Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol 3, International Publishers, New York, 1967, p 830.

6. Alice Maher, 'The Celtic Tiger has no Eyes', *The Irish Times*, 28 December 1999, p 12.

culture has been crucial in creating a place for these artists in wider critical discourses. This then effectively legitimises the triumvirate of artist, subject and audience. However, it is surprising that there has been little if any critical appraisal – even appropriation of – Dorothy Cross’s current practice, for example, in terms of an ethico-aesthetic environmentalist paradigm. It is possible that the historical importance of these artists (and others of their contemporaries) in contributing to the story of contemporary art in Ireland in the early 1990s has overshadowed the necessity to consistently re-evaluate their work. Such re-evaluation is necessary in relation to the changing social, political and cultural climate both within and beyond Ireland. Urgently so in relation to the official positioning of the arts within emerging globalised debates about the autonomy, mobility and (some say) the fundamental necessity of the artist to democratic society.

Alice Maher’s allusion to a mythical time before there was not much more to be concerned about than worrying about where to put the new TV refers, I believe, to the 1980s. Through a series of referenda on divorce and abortion, on women’s issues, the Irish state and news media ultimately bound especially vivid images of women to the staging of especially complex tragic dramas in the public imagination. It follows that it can be claimed that in the Republic of Ireland this was a time when sexuality, and female sexuality in particular, became central to the Irish state’s re-figuring of citizenship in particularly gendered terms. So it was that traumatic and extraordinary images of female bodies were at the apex of imagined community in the Republic in the mid-1980s.

III

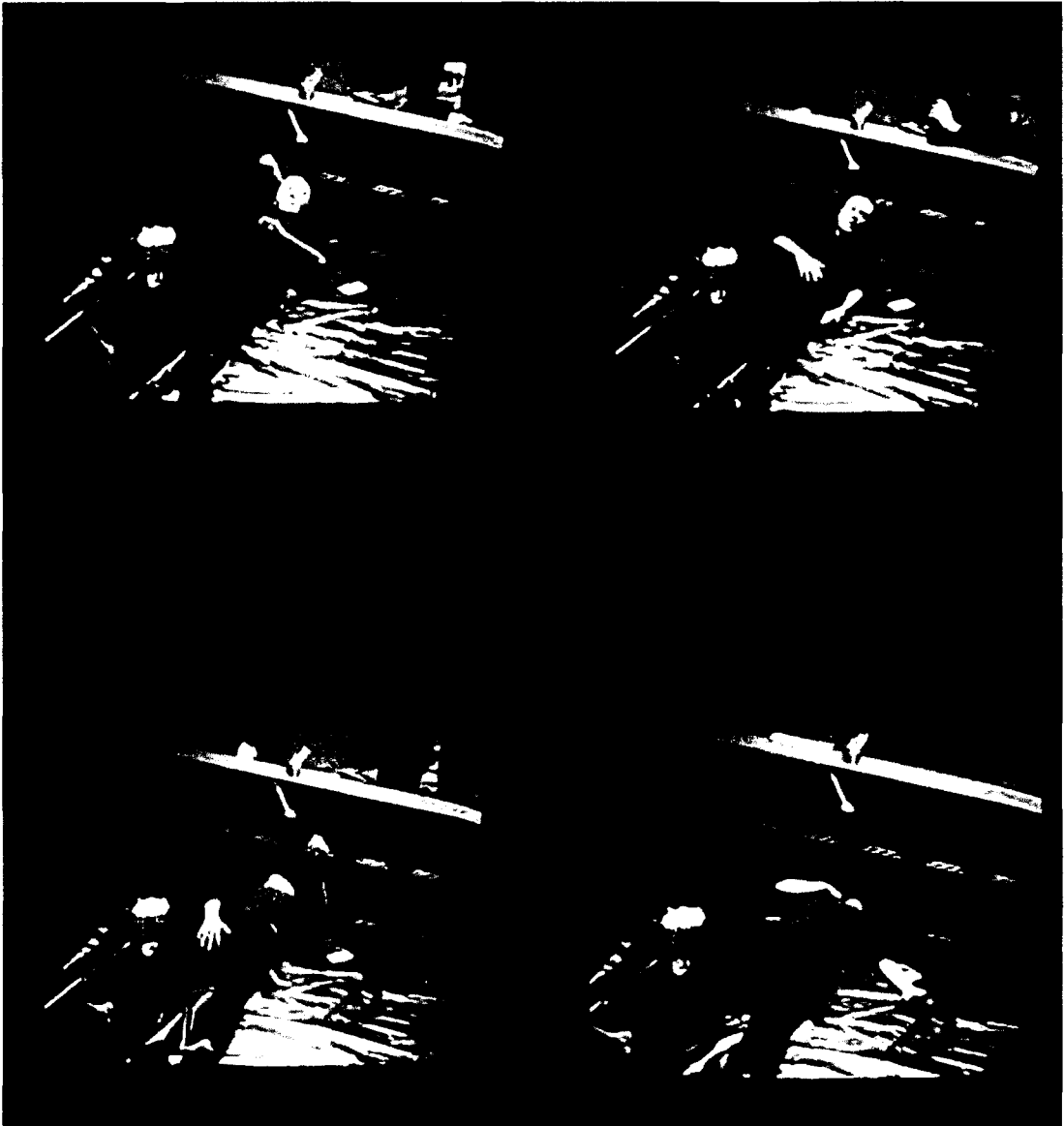
A man is not a thing. It is true that we speak of a young girl as a young thing, still too young for it, but only because we feel that being human is in a certain way missing here and think instead we have to deal here with the factor that constitutes the thingly character of things.⁷

Martin Heidegger

A young Ann Lovett died in Granard with her newborn baby, after giving birth at a grotto devoted to the Virgin Mary in 1984, bequeathing a powerfully symbolic image of life as synchronous with death, twice-over, on sacred ground. The following year, large crowds were drawn to Ballinaspittle to see a statue of the Virgin Mary which had purportedly moved. These ostensibly unseen and unwitnessed events gave rise to exceptionally powerful cultural images. The symbolic significance of these images is perhaps prefigured by Hilda Doolittle, a patient of Sigmund Freud, in her book *The Gift*, when she wrote that ‘beneath ... every temple to God-the-father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or cellar to Mary, *Mère*, mutter, pray for us’ [emphasis added].⁸ In psycho-analytical theory ‘sublimation’ or the transformation of the death-drive into cultural activity, aka art, is linked, semantically at least, to the sublime. So it is that the rendering of the aesthetic sublime in visual ciphers of modernity in eighteenth-century European Painting has left the now familiar residual images of Nature in states of disorder, rent

7. Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans Albert Hofstadter, London, Harper & Row, 1971, p 21.

8. Angela Moorjani, *The Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992, p 127.



Sandra Johnston *Sleep to Rise*, 2003, performance produced as part of 'RELATIONS' project featuring Asian and Irish performance work, organised by BBeyond, Belfast. (Action sourced in the Chapel of Adoration, Falls Road.) Courtesy Sandra Johnston.

apart, dizzy, fissured, gullied, the darkest recesses intermittently exposed by lightning flashes.

In a recent study of Edmund Burke, author of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), begun while still a student in Dublin, Luke Gibbons has extensively researched connections between Burke's sublime and his political writing, particularly with regard to the development of Burke's concept of justice, his recognition of an emerging colonial discourse, and

the human dynamics of social relations. Gibbons speculates, and where the evidence allows it, evaluates how contemporaneous events and images shaped the development of Burke's moral philosophy and his theorising of the political subject. Gibbons writes that 'it is the task of Irish cultural history' to explain how the sublime, 'this mythos of terror was formulated in the first place in the colonial context of eighteenth century Ireland'.⁹ Later Gibbons, marking the advent of postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment, cites Jean-François Lyotard as an exemplar of just such a critique. Lyotard has written in detail about the ultimate destructiveness that comes about through institutionalising the wholly abstract ideas of the Enlightenment, those ideas that constitute us as modern subjects in society. His approach suggests that the desirable effects of the sublime in political life are probably not produced through concrete representations of ideology, because to be successful 'an Idea in general has no presentation, and *that is the question of the sublime*'.¹⁰ But this is exactly where a sceptical and nuanced approach to gender and citizenship (an Enlightenment idea typically written and performed into political existence) is required.

Writing about one of Daphne Wright's installations at the end of the 1990s, Orla Ryan points to the ideological subtexts that underwrite aesthetic directions in art. Of Wright's *Looking for the Home of the Sickness*, Ryan describes Wright's exploration of 'the cultural positions of Irish Southern Protestantism', and how 'the Big House of the Anglo Irish Ascendancy is figured', without a prescribed or fixed set of terms through which to read the work in any particularly proper way.¹¹ In his consideration of the construction of the postcolonial subject, Gibbons cites the 'intervention' into 'liberal and republican conceptions of citizenship in the West' as developed by Iris Marion Young. Using Young's approach, Gibbons shows how 'the public good' is defined as (quoting directly from Young): 'a realm of generality in which all particularities are left behind'.¹² However, in the end, Young's theory will fail in practice, according to Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe, suspicious of the baggage attached to liberal concepts of equality expounded by rights-based theories, sees Young's theorising of groups as doomed to defeat itself as it homogenises the very difference it seems to advocate, despite Young's intentions to the contrary.

IV

Chantal Mouffe's alternative is formulated to avoid what she sees as the pitfalls of a civic republicanism that homogenises group identities, and which she feels makes Young's project so self-defeating. Such is the centrality of Mouffe's idea of 'agonistic struggle' to her belief in the need for dissent at the core of public life. Some such friction is echoed in the phrasing of one of the songs from Daphne Wright's *Looking for the Home of Sickness*, which lilt: 'I don't want to play in your back yard if you won't be good to me.' Through feminist critique, Mouffe proposes a radical and plural democracy where citizenship:

... is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty.... A radical democratic interpretation

9. Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p 4.

10. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Complexity and the Sublime', in *Postmodernism*, ed Lisa Appignanesi, Free Association Books, London, 1989, p 23.

11. Orla Ryan, 'EV+A 98', in *Variants*, 2:7, 1999, p 21.

12. Gibbons, op cit, 2003, p 177.



Sandra Johnston *Coverage*, 2003, 10 day durational performance/installation. Commissioned by the Nottingham City Council. 'NOW' Festival & the Bonington Gallery, Nottingham and Trent University, England. Courtesy Sandra Johnston

will emphasise the numerous social relations in which situations of domination exist that must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply.¹³

Mouffe advocates an understanding of the social agent as 'constituted by an ensemble of "subject positions" that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences' because it is 'constructed by a diversity of discourses'. This, and not some erstwhile position-less ambiguity vis-à-vis the subject-viewer's sovereign proclivities, tallies with Daphne's Wright's early strategies of combining found images, popular song and unofficial cultural legacies. From another perspective, while seeking to problematise the value-laden rhetoric attached to the meaning and representation of 'community' in arts policy and practices since the early 1990s, Ailbhe Murphy has recently proposed that it may be 'time for artists working in community contexts to imagine and develop models of engagement that privilege the articulation of contemporary community experience as a cultural process over the collective making of art objects'. Simultaneously, suggests Murphy, the very terms by which collaborative art practice has been constructed and contained, 'the community, the artist, the art work and the audience', must be challenged.¹⁴ Murphy, whose own art practice

13. Chantal Mouffe, 'Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics', in *Feminists Theorise the Political*, eds Judith Butler and Joan W Scott, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 378.
14. Ailbhe Murphy, 'The Fine Art of Floating Horses', in *An Outburst of Frankness - Community Arts in Ireland: a Reader*, ed Sandy Fitzgerald, tasc/New Island, Dublin, 2004, pp. 190-1.

involves trying to materially renegotiate ever-changing creative relationships through collaborative cultural projects, seems to share similar concerns to those expressed in Lyotard's questioning of whether it is possible to share with others a feeling so deep and exchangeable as community.

Perhaps by taking a positive approach to contingency and precariousness, Chantal Mouffe is less intimidated by the gulf between experience and representation on the one hand, and ideas and abstraction on the other (the critical mass of absented fear and recollected anxiety that has been theorised as the sublime – not so much a thing represented as substituted):

Such an approach is extremely important to understand feminist as well as other contemporary struggles. Their central characteristic is that an ensemble of subject positions linked through inscription in social relations, hitherto considered as apolitical, have become the loci of conflict and antagonism and have led to political mobilization.¹⁵

V

The successes and failures of finding loci of conflict and antagonism that can lead to the quality of political mobilisation that Mouffe describes have lately been reviewed in an Irish context by the sociologist and novelist Ronit Lentin and the art historian Hilary Robinson. Working within ostensibly different disciplinary fields, they are both critical of what they perceive as a lack of self-reflexivity in sociology and art history, respectively, and both make use of references to article 42 of the 1937 Constitution. Lentin, writing in 1998, claimed that 'Irishness' had not been sufficiently problematised in relation to gender and ethnicity in discussions of Irish national identity, nor had the term 'Irish woman' been ethnically problematised:

Most studies addressing citizenship and Irish women presume a homogeneity of 'Irish women' and of feminist struggle, and fail to address the impact of both racist discourses and the multi-tiered access to citizenship on women of ethnic minorities.¹⁶

In an article published in 2000, on Luce Irigaray's concept of 'productive mimesis', Hilary Robinson paraphrased Griselda Pollock to urgently propose that:

... a central task for feminists in Ireland (including artists and art historians) is to critique the concept 'Irish woman', not just as a way of writing about the lives of actual women, but as an institutionalised ideological practice of representation in and of culture.¹⁷

Lentin (directly) and Robinson (indirectly) propose alternative paradigms for research and criticism that draw on feminist methodologies and theory. In 1993, Lentin wrote of the invisibility of debate about feminist research methodologies in Ireland, and consequently her wish to launch such a debate.¹⁸ Lentin makes the point that feminist research in all academic disciplines needs to transform the research process if the limitations imposed by 'patriarchal academic and research structures' are to be transformed.¹⁹ The possibility of a separate paradigm of

15. Mouffe, *op cit*, 1992, p 372.
16. Ronit Lentin, "'Irishness', the 1937 Constitution and Citizenship: A Gender and Ethnicity View", *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 8, 1998, p 6.
17. Hilary Robinson, 'Disruptive Women Artists: An Irigarayan Reading of Irish Visual Culture', *Irish Studies Review*, 8:1, 2000, p 58. Robinson is paraphrasing Griselda Pollock's assertion that 'a central task for feminist art historians should be to critique art history itself, not just as a way of writing about the art of the past, but as an institutionalised ideological practice', from 'Women, Art, and Ideology' (1983), in *Visibly Female*, Camden Press, London, 1987, p 204.
18. Ronit Lentin, 'Feminist Research Methodologies: A Separate Paradigm', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 3, 1993, p 120.
19. Lentin, *op cit*, 1993, p 122.

enquiry linked to collective agency and social change is in turn linked to refusing to view feminist research as fixed or unitary. Vis-à-vis the potential to re-symbolise the patriarchal social order, Robinson quotes Luce Irigaray's proposal to 'anyone who cares about social justice today' that they make direct interventions into public space that disrupt the symbolic status quo:

I suggest putting up posters in all public places with beautiful pictures representing the mother daughter couple.... Putting up images – photographs, paintings, sculptures, etc., not advertisements – of mother daughter couples in all public places....²⁰

However, Robinson suggests that Irigaray is not fully aware of how the visual signifiers work and warns against what she evaluates as Irigaray's propagandistic approach. Irigaray's imagistic intervention is potentially damned too by Chantal Mouffe's assertion that: 'Since democracy is a condition in which individuals aim at being equals, the mother-child relationship cannot provide an adequate model of citizenship.'²¹ In 1989, the Third International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women was held in Dublin. In delivering her contribution, the sociologist Mary Daly claimed that Ireland could not lay claim to a body of feminist scholarship. Daly held that sociology in Ireland was limited to producing data for policy-makers and the accumulation of academic studies. For Daly, the vitality of feminist research lay not only in the pursuit of knowledge, but in making connections between political and intellectual practices in which 'its ultimate goal is to effect some form of change'. Daly emphasised process, self-reflexivity, the renunciation of the normative influence of positivism in the social sciences, and transparency on the matter that no research is value-free. She pointed out that access to journals, jobs and intellectual legitimacy was denied through exclusionary 'gate-keeping' practices, that there was little or no collaboration in academe, and the practice of creating content by 'adding on' women to established research narratives was bogus.²² Hilary Robinson's assessment of Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams's positioning of feminism in relation to Republican struggle and its future imaginary is symptomatic of the 'adding on' approach to creating added value in political discourse. She points out examples whereby Adams:

... reduces 'feminism' to an emblem of diversity. Tellingly, by standing this term alone among other terms in pairs in various degrees of antagonism, he also constructs 'feminism' as uniquely removed from any sense of discourse, context, difference, or engagement.²³

20. Robinson, *op cit*, 2000, p 64.

21. Mouffe, *op cit*, 1992, p 374.

22. Mary Daly, 'Feminist Research Methodology: The Case of Ireland', in *(Re)Searching Women*, eds Anne Byrne and Ronit Lentin, IPA, Dublin, 2001, pp 70-1.

23. Robinson, *op cit*, 2000, p 64.

VI

On Mary Daly's other points, similarities can be seen regarding access to galleries, funding and positions of authority in art education, as well as the additive approach to bolstering the established narratives of art history evident in the governing ethos of academic departments in art colleges. However, balancing the books, three years after Daly's hope that historians were producing feminist critique and three years prior to Lentin's pessimism about the invisibility of feminist research in Ireland, a



Sandra Johnston *Composure* (detail), 2004, performance produced as part of 'RELATIONS' project featuring Asian and Irish performance work, organized by BBEYOND, Belfast. (Action sourced in the Chapel of Adoration, Falls Road.) Courtesy Sandra Johnston.

survey show of Irish art from the 1980s – held at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin in 1990 – included the publication of several specially commissioned essays reviewing art and culture in the Republic and Northern Ireland. The art historian Joan Fowler contributed two important essays. She wrote that 'feminism has not so much slowed down, as that during the 1970s and 80s there was an extension of the line between social/political activity and theoretical practice'. Moreover, she observed that the 'more significant themes in visual art in the 1980s ... are bound up with socio-political issues of some consequence'. Fowler records the particular rise of Neo-Expression in Ireland:

Word had gone out that a new, figurative and dynamic style of painting had assumed dominance in the international art scene; a style which broke the mould of abstraction and conceptualism.... In the course of ... 1982, Aidan Dunne wrote an article entitled, 'A Quiet Revolution in Irish Art', which was clearly intended to signal, as he put it, 'an upsurge of coherent artistic activity' that was specifically related to painting.²⁴

It should not be underestimated how this 'unmediated' style assumed ideological dominance despite contemporaneous claims to the contrary. Henry Sharpe, curator of an exhibition titled *Making Sense*, which showcased the style, wrote:

Expressionist artists feel strongly and seek to translate ... feelings as directly and in as undiluted a form as possible, into the medium with which they are working. Style does not enter into it. And real feeling cannot be adequately mimed – you either feel it intensely or you don't.²⁵

The Irish Neo-Expressionist aesthetic undoubtedly privileged the male subject position.²⁶ At its worst, the rhetorical drive of its criticism drew an apparently unproblematic comparison between a very particular, quintessential experience of the world, per se, as essentially equivalent to the human condition as such – the human condition being frequently characterised by excesses of machismo. Maybe more seriously, the linking of Neo-Expressionism to the practice of social critique, whether by

24. Joan Fowler, 'Speaking of Gender: Expressionism, Feminism, and Sexuality', in *A New Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties*, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 1990, p 53.

25. *Ibid.*, 1990, p 54.

26. Micky Donnelly, 'Patrick Graham, Brian Maguire', *Circa*, 18, 1984, pp 35–36.

intention or by interpretation, is especially important as at the same time art practices that utilised photography, graphic media, video, professional or amateur gauge film were eclipsed from dominant discourses on art and the human condition. Writing about how video and photography ultimately did become naturalised into artistic practice, Shirley MacWilliam has described how:

In the late eighties, I heard, as a student, Alanna O’Kelly describe making *Chant Down Greenham*, an audio work for Sound Moves, which was an event consisting of women artists’ sound works heard by telephone. The event illustrates several then current assumptions: that women artists’ use of time-based media was politically inflected; that to work in sound might be to subvert the phallic logic of visual culture; that technological means of dissemination might access new spaces and audiences; and that the most pressing concerns were around cultural identity and position, language and privilege, personal and public space.²⁷

By last year, assessing the collectability of ‘new media’, Noel Sheridan, artist and erstwhile director of the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, could claim that: ‘Some of the most important art being made in Ireland now is in photography, image and text and video’, adding the caveat, ‘but it’s sold internationally. Exiled.’²⁸ Perhaps none of this would matter, maybe not any more, but for the fact that as the editors of the recently published book, *Documenting Irish Feminisms: the Second Wave*, record how central photography, posters, badges and generally ‘ephemeral’ media are especially bound to representations of social activism and the popular inscription of marginalised cultural identities through the 1970s and into the ’80s. Material from the Attic Press archive dominates the pictorial content of the book.²⁹

27. Shirley MacWilliam, ‘Screen and Screen Again’, *Circa*, 100, 2002, p 43.

28. Noel Sheridan, ‘Enigma Variations: Collecting New Media’, *Circa*, 108, 2004, pp 28–30.

29. Linda Connolly and Tina O’Toole, eds, *Documenting Irish Feminisms: the Second Wave*, Woodfield Press, Dublin, 2005.

30. Brian McAvera, *Directions Out: An Investigation into a Selection of Artists whose Work has been Formed by the post-1969 Situation in Northern Ireland*, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 1987, not paginated.

31. Ursula Burke & Daniel Jewesbury, *Archive: Lisburn Road: The Material Culture of a Belfast Suburb*, Belfast Exposed, Belfast, 2004, pp 15–17.

VII

By 1987, Brian McAvera wrote of how almost 20 years of photo-journalism and television coverage had already ‘inbred a distrust of the direct image’ in Northern Ireland. He describes the photographic image as a distortion, simplistic and vulnerable ‘to being hijacked for political ends’.³⁰ Almost 20 years on from McAvera’s remarks, the artists Daniel Jewesbury and Ursula Burke have written of how in photojournalism, art, the movies and TV, the ‘accretion of representational ties focused exclusively on one class of people’ in Northern Ireland and how over 30 years, ‘it became increasingly easy for the middle class to hold the belief that they were not in any way implicated in the failure of politics in Northern Ireland’. They add that now the problem lies not with the photographic image as distortion, but rather in the mediation of it.³¹ Burke is based in Belfast’s Flax Art Studios where Sandra Johnston also works. In Johnston’s case, her recent research has taken her into private and ‘security’ environments and she has presented performance-centred work in buildings with institutional histories of maintaining the common good, in health and through the law. She has recently been representing rushes from Ulster Television’s archive, gleaned from tapes made about specific incidents of loss of life during the Troubles.



Caroline McCarthy, *Greetings*, 1996, video installation, dimensions variable. Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art, purchase, 1996. Image © the artist

In *Sleep to Rise* (2003), she performed at the Galleries of Justice (decommissioned, now a museum), in Nottingham, during an exchange with the city's police Mobile Response Unit. Also in Nottingham, for *Coverage* (2003), which was commissioned by the City Council and produced by the Bonnington Gallery, Johnston met with a member of the public daily (mediated by the gallery), and went home with that person at the end of each of the 10 working days that circumscribed the duration of the work. She stayed with her/him until the next morning, when they were joined by a filmmaker for about an hour before leaving. The video footage was edited the same morning and Johnston returned, with a gifted object and the memory of a specified gesture, to the exhibition space, wherein she recalled the gesture given to her, and deposited the item lent to her alongside the edited video showing on a small monitor. In *Composure* (2004), Johnston made a public performance that included mouthing, albeit imperceptibly, the vowel sounds within the spoken words of Jane Ewart-Biggs, whose television appearance on the death of her husband – the British Ambassador to Ireland, killed in a politically motivated act of violence in 1976 – played on a monitor adjacent to the physical space occupied by Johnston. The television footage was not taken from the edited broadcast, but instead from the unedited tape, and shows how the composure of Mrs Ewart Biggs (her posture) fails at the conclusion of her conciliatory remarks about her husband's

killers. This work is as much a critique on the televising of the Troubles as the production of centrally traumatic images for public broadcast, as it is about the enactment of empathy and the incorporation of another's experience into the experience of self.

The interiorising of the tongue of another who is at a loss in the politics of strangers, in Johnston's *Composure*, is reminiscent of Fran Hegarty's *Turas* (1996). On her website, Hegarty describes this work in terms of her own daughter's relationship to 'the mother-tongue' which is 'not only gendered but predicated on a genealogical link with the maternal body'.³² A soundtrack presented fragments of speech – Hegarty asking, in her now stilted mother-tongue, whether or not she will ever speak Gaelic again. She draws 'an analogy between the separation from the mother and the emigrant's trauma of lost access to both language and the physical landscape'.³³ The differences between Johnston's and Hegarty's works reflect the changed circumstances surrounding their production. Likewise, Johnston's methods in *Coverage* recall similar approaches taken by the artist Anne Tallentire. Tallentire changed direction in her material practice, mid-1980s, moving from conventional painting to photographic, electronic and digital media, and this shift has been described by Sabina Sharkey as a turn to the aesthetic sublime.³⁴ Her collaborative work with John Seth has been described by Uriel Orlow as producing an 'image-event-agency'.³⁵ Tallentire's focus on dislocated subjectivities lends symbolic gravity to individuals increasingly legislated for in terms of their economic exclusion and social invisibility. Her intimate but 'impersonal' collaborations with the people, places and things of the observable world extend to more discrete project collaborations with colleagues and peers.³⁶

In Johnston's other recent research, she has recorded audio-only interviews with individuals involved in the peace movement in Northern Ireland and the politics of reconciliation. In *Something You May Later Rely On* (2004), Johnston began making short video works using (again unedited) archival television footage from UTV as well as video recently taken by her. These are dubbed with very recently recorded audio testimonies and personal commentary from people with different historical entry points into the history of conflict in Northern Ireland. For example, she includes the voices of Mairead Corrigan Maguire (a co-founder of the Northern Irish Peace Movement, awarded a Nobel Prize for Peace in 1976 with Betty Williams) and Dr Maire Smyth who has worked locally to theorise and advance the practical realisation of a peaceful society in the stead of one constituted on immutable conflicts. In other instances Johnston has had to use visual strategies, which have involved visually abstract or 'anti-archival' images in response to the participants' sense of the impossibility of representation in relation to their memories.

VIII

The extent to which citizenship has assumed centre stage in the official reframing of national identity in Irish culture is reflected in important recent changes made to the Irish Constitution. In 1998, two new articles were inserted to demonstrate the Irish government's commitment to the terms of the Belfast ('Good Friday') Agreement. The articles affirmed the

32. See Katy Deepwell's interview with Fran Hegarty in which Hegarty cites an interest in 'what Julia Kristeva said in her book *Strangers to Ourselves* about displacement and loss of mother tongue in relation to abjection', in *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*, I B Tauris, London, 2004, p 60. Kristeva herself has recently acknowledged how her adventure into what she describes as the dangerous terrain of abjection has earned her support from 'American and international artists' who 'saw themselves in the experience of abjection, which in effect is similar to the psychotic states confronted by art'. See Julia Kristeva, 'Europhilia-Europhobia', in *Intimate Revolt*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p 261.

33. Fran Hegarty, text archived at <http://www.brighter.org>

34. Sabina Sharkey, 'Of Salt, Song, Stone, and Marrow-bone', in *Anne Tallentire*, ed Valerie Connor, Project Press, Dublin, 1999, p 27.

35. '...trailer...' by Uriel Orlow, at <http://www.urielorlow.net/writings.html>

36. Anne Tallentire has worked with John Seth since 1993. They have collaborated together under the name work=seth/tallentire since 1997.

entitlement of anyone born within the ‘island of Ireland’ to Irish citizenship and recognised the ‘diversity of identities and traditions on the island of Ireland’.³⁷ However, six years later, in 2004, the Irish hospitality of popular legend was tempered when a popular vote in the Republic on a Citizenship Referendum rescinded the standing legislation that automatically attributed citizenship to children born in Ireland. This surprised many by its clear majority endorsement of the exclusionary amendment. In a newspaper article published in the run-up to the Referendum the Minister of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform wrote of the administrative and political problem of prohibiting biological women (potential mothers) from entering the state across its political borders. Recognising that the impracticality of requiring non-national women of child-bearing age to make declarations of pregnancy or otherwise when arriving in the State, the ethical aspect of gendering the citizenship debate has remained obscure.

In conclusion, in 1996, Caroline McCarthy made a two-monitor video work *Greetings*, now in the collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which poses a counterpoint to the 1977 film *Self Portrait with a Red Car* directed by the (usually documentary) filmmaker Bob Quinn. Quinn’s film is a comedy of failure on the part of the figurative painter Brian Bourke to bring an eye for landscape to the built environment and vice-versa. There is much thumbing at rural and urban landscapes beyond the easel and associated physical *schtick*. McCarthy’s gag is the top of a woman’s head intermittently popping up into a fixed shot otherwise dominated by a generically familiar *Irishish* landscape. The various prohibitions and transgressions are represented humorously, as comedy:

... shifting in the mind now to one standpoint now to the other, to enable it to contemplate its object, may involve a corresponding and reciprocal straining and slackening of the elastic parts of our intestines, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (and resembles that felt by ticklish people), in the course of which the lungs expel the air with rapidly succeeding interruptions, resulting in a movement conducive to health.³⁸

37. Article 2: ‘It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.’

38. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1952, p 201.