

Multiple Agendas, Impossible Dialogues: Where Irish Studies and History of Art Meet

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In an article entitled ‘Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,’ Stuart Hall describes how we think of democracy as “a nice polite consensual discussion” whereas when it really takes place, it sounds more like an unending row. He writes: “That row, that sound of people actually negotiating their differences in the open, behind the collective program, is the sound I am waiting for.” The purpose of that row is the possibility of one group taking on the agenda of the other. “It has to transform itself in the course of coming into alliance... It doesn’t mistake itself that it becomes it but it has to take it on board.”¹ Art History and Irish Studies do not share a collective programme but given the overlap of their discourses, it was with this kind of face-to-face negotiation of agendas in mind that I convened a conference session reflecting on the potential for interdisciplinary dialogue. ‘Irish Studies and History of Art: Impossible Dialogues?’ was one of twenty-two strands in the Association of Art Historians 2007 conference, which was hosted by the University of Ulster in Belfast this April.² The one-day session consisted of nine formal papers, a panel discussion reflecting on the papers and an open floor discussion, which I will look at here in brief. I apologise in advance for not being able to do justice to the full contents of the papers or to the complexity and diversity of the discussions that arose.

Firstly, I would like to quickly put the overall dialogue in context. Over the past ten years some individual art historians of Irish art have considered Irish art’s relationship to broader cultural discourses – Fintan Cullen being an obvious example – while a small number of Irish Studies academics (such as Colin Graham, David Lloyd and Luke Gibbons) have dealt specifically with Irish art. These writings have often been criticised for using art as an illustration of theory and not in terms of its particularity as a medium and discourse. Unlike many in the Irish art world, I see this as grounds for *more* interdisciplinary dialogue. This dialogue might in turn offer Art History resources and methodologies for further negotiating Irish art’s relationship to wider cultural discourses. The main point of tension in such an interdisciplinary dialogue is the function and status of the national – which is central to Irish Studies and often seen as reductive in Art History.

These tensions were borne out most strongly in a paper by Gavin Murphy. Entitled ‘Unsanctioned Transgressions: The Limits of Irishness in the Works of Willie Doherty and Gerard Byrne,’ the paper asked what the role of the national might be in the context of two artists working in a global arena, as much informed by private and corporate concerns as by Irish culture. This question was examined in relation to the three intertwining contexts in which the artists worked – the Venice Biennale, the context of local representation and the blurring of the terrain, not only between the local and the global, but between state-funded art infrastructures and the commercial interests of private galleries. His paper might have been read as an illustration of the fact that national structures and processes are now secondary to

and cannot be defined in isolation from broader global pressures. However Murphy himself concluded that the national had become an irrelevant referent within this scenario as Byrne’s and Doherty’s works were not “bound by notions of Irishness” and “to acknowledge international market forces at play...[was] also to recognize the limits of Irishness as a marker of value in contemporary circumstance.” For Murphy, to acknowledge the nation as a significant unit of study was to be ‘bound by Irishness’ and to see Irishness as a ‘marker of value.’ This conclusion made it clear that Irish Studies needs to define its contribution at what is widely conceived to be a postnational moment. It also demonstrated an implicit tension between long-term associations of the national with strategic essentialism and fixed notions of identity, and what some see as the potential for renegotiating the national as a point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions and social, economic and technological relations.

Many other disciplinary questions were raised by this interdisciplinary encounter – such as the relationship between Visual Culture and Art History, competing definitions of Area Studies and methodological questions regarding the use of cultural theory in history, to name just a few. The first three papers were intended to directly address these kinds of questions. Fintan Cullen reflected on some of the more pragmatic reasons for art historians’ branching into wider cultural reflections – not least to represent the visual within the literary and media-studies dominated domain of area studies and to carve out a bigger public for Art History. Using his own trajectory to date, he mapped out how an art historian’s research might develop in light of those motivations and how this process might open up new areas for further research. James Elkins’ paper considered the current make-up of art history curricula in Ireland, based on his tenure at

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the University College Cork, and reflected on how such curricula might transform should art history be seen as part of visual culture. His enthusiasm for visual culture was tempered by what he saw as the narrow remit of the discipline of ‘Visual Culture’ to date, which he felt was dominated by a sort of unofficial canon of theorists and subjects. Elkins pointed out that Visual Studies implicitly stands for politics or what he called ‘a neo-liberal mouthpiece’ and asked what the (political) ends of such critique might be.

Kerstin Mey opened her informal paper by commenting that art had to show its awareness of its privilege, a comment that seemed to consolidate Cullen’s appeal to the importance of making the interest of art understandable to a broader audience, and Elkins’ situating art within a more mainstream array of visual culture. Mey went on to point to some of the different levels that might be negotiated within the session and productively named a problem at the root of area studies more generally – whether they refer to a geopolitical unit or whether they refer to identity discourse. These competing definitions of Irish Studies underpinned a number of the subsequent discussions. It appeared that many non-Irish Studies speakers considered Irish Studies research to necessarily focus on Irishness as a fixed identity, whereas Irish Studies academics present mostly referred to how Ireland was engaged in global cultural and political orders and the relevance of such in readings of Irish cultural production.

Luke Gibbons offered one such reflection, proposing that to consider the Irish identity of a writer or artist was to do more than name a nationality, but to inscribe them within an alternative modernism. He answered his opening question, ‘Is there something about the image that eludes the national or indeed all cultural boundaries?’, with a quote from Arthur Danto: ‘What we see is determined by what we don’t.’ Gibbons went on to propose an aesthetic dimension to ‘millepsis’ – the constant search for what is beyond the frame – which he associated with Irish modernism. He criticised Rosalind Krauss’ reluctance to engage with James Coleman’s Irishness, suggesting that rather than ‘looking down the wrong end of the telescope,’ it was important to consider whether certain formal devices might have had provenance in peripheral modernities. David Brett, a recurrent voice from the floor, added that Gibbon’s argument was interesting in relation to Jack Yeats’ uneasy figure/ground relationship. Liam Kelly commented on how politics was inscribed in the land in the Channel 4 documentary *Picturing Derry*, visible only to those who had inside knowledge.

In a later paper by Fionna Barber on Francis Bacon, there were interesting parallels between Gibbon’s reflection on millepsis and Bacon’s use of spatial devices. Barber examined how the construction and regulation of Bacon’s interiors with figures could be seen to evoke the uncanny spaces of the lost Big House, a recurrent trope emerging in Irish Gothic literature. She discussed the threatened safety of the Bacon family during the Civil War and how Anglo-Irish domestic space might be seen to be both a site of

traumatic memory and an anachronistic cultural formation. The subject of sexual orientation in relation to Irish identity came up in the brief floor discussion on Barber's paper. However, the issue was explored in more depth in a later paper by Riann Coulter that focused on suppressed homosexual narratives in Gerard Dillon's images of Connemara. As it traced the conflict between Dillon's self-proclaimed nationalism and his covert homosexuality, Coulter's paper drew on Colin Graham's call for a rethinking of Irish Studies along subaltern lines. Coulter also raised the question of belonging, mapping out Dillon's increasing sense of being at home in London.

The issue of suppressed cultural traumas, explored in different ways by Coulter and Barber, was brought to the fore by Niamh Ann Kelly's subsequent reflection on the difficulty of representing the Irish Famine. Kelly focused on the gap between historical remembrance in curated exhibitions and cultural memory. She situated the Famine within wider post-trauma discourses and considered how time-lags affected the representation of the Famine during the centenary events of the 1940s. Having sketched out disciplinary frameworks and looked at these research papers, the final formal paper was to have been Yvonne Scott's reflection on the current place of Art History in Irish studies. Unfortunately she fell ill the night before the conference, leaving the session at the loss of a serious analysis of the status quo.

In the subsequent panel discussion Karen Brown identified some of the recurrent areas that had come up during the day, which might productively point to areas for further research – especially post-trauma discourse, the issue of framing and gender and sexuality discourses. It was observed by a member of the audience that while the construction of male identity had been an important aspect of the day's discussion, the role of women artists and the question of Irish female identity had not even been broached. Nor for that matter had feminist re-readings of Art History even been mentioned and the case studies had centred on male artists throughout the session. Picking up on Kerstin Mey's comment that Art History had to show its awareness of its privilege, panellist Vera Ryan also raised the issue of the class bases of Irish art academies. She alluded both to the class make-up of art academy students and the profile of the staff, which had in the 1980s been dominated by British staff due to a government rule that staff must hold a B.A. in Fine Art – a qualification not available in Ireland at that time. While Pierre Bourdieu may have analysed the sociology of the discipline in theory, these observations suggested that it would be beneficial to analyse how specific class and cultural relations underpin the everyday workings of Irish academic institutions.

Much later in the day, I raised the practical issue of publication opportunities hinted at in Fintan Cullen's paper. Due to time constraints, the issue was never developed which I regretted as so much serious interdisciplinary visual research in Ireland has remained in the box under the bed. It seems to be caught 'between a rock and a hard place' given that non-art journals will not cover colour illustration costs and art journals have little space for academic essays. One of the panellists, Eoin Flannery, has plans to launch an Irish Visual Culture journal at the University of Limerick in the near future, which I hope will partly redress the current situation, yet he was modest in not suggesting the significance of this endeavour during his panel participation. Rather, he 'admitted' to his outsider status in Art History and openly expressed his admiration for the rigour of contemporary art discourse. Flannery also brought up an important aspect of Irish Studies – namely how the discipline had become globally recognised through its engagement with postcolonial and minority discourses, particularly in the US. Panellist Victor Merriman further discussed this role. One audience member intervened to

support their observation of Irish Studies' broader appeal by describing how, as a Chicano woman based in New York, she had felt drawn to study Irish Studies. Merriman went on to discuss how Ireland's growing importance as a global player had prompted a sort of 'policing' of Irish Studies discourses, which one might imagine would have implications for this aspect of Irish Studies. These observations raised many issues which were not elaborated on – including the racial construction of Irish identity and the relationship between ethnic minority discourses, race and citizenship in the aftermath of Celtic Tiger prosperity. Time constraints aside, it is worth speculating on why fundamental issues like these seemed to remain 'between the lines' of discussion.

In the open-floor discussion that followed the papers and panel reflection there was a continuous flow of observations and much cross-referencing to individual papers and earlier comments. There were also critiques of specific aspects of individual papers and suggestions for further research and reflection. However, the session was closer to 'a nice polite consensual discussion' than a row where people were openly negotiating their differences. Karen Brown criticised how the framing in my abstract on the session made Irish Studies seem synonymous with postcolonial methodology, which was a fair observation, given internal debates within the discipline. However, this internal contestation within Irish Studies, together with the dominant contestation of Ireland's postcolonial status with Art History, did not prompt discussion within the session. Rather, potentially controversial observations – such as Victor Merriman's reference to contemporary Ireland as neo-colonial – met with no response. Perhaps when one feels moments of resistance to what one hears, it takes more time than was available to negotiate what exactly is at stake. As an artist in the audience suggested after the session, there was little to be said at such moments that would not have been viewed as entirely reactionary and oppositional. In this sense, it appeared that the paradigms of thought worlds did not always come close enough to negotiate; that the dialogue *was* perhaps an impossible one. It was certainly the case that passing comments often revealed entire systems of thought that could not adequately be engaged with in a spontaneous oral engagement. This left me wondering about the best means of establishing such a deeper dialogue, which the conference format could open but not fully contend with.

An art historian in the audience, who had remained silent for the most part of the discussion, confided afterwards that she felt outnumbered as an art historian. Given the context of the session within the Art Historians Association conference, this might seem an odd comment, but in retrospect it made me reconsider the make-up of the session. I was conscious that Yvonne Scott's absence had meant the disciplinary bases of the discussion were not represented from a purely Art History perspective, which silenced issues that were not redressed by the subsequent discussion. In my selection of papers, I had tried to maintain a balance between speakers with Irish Studies and Arts History backgrounds. However, this observation made me more aware of the fact that all of the art historians who had presented papers were already engaged in some way with interdisciplinarity to a level that is not the norm within the discipline of Art History in Ireland. This might look like a strategic selection of papers, but no papers had been submitted which contended an interdisciplinary approach. Perhaps this meant that art historians who do not consider interdisciplinary research of benefit found no reason to engage in the discussion. One can only speculate on how Yvonne Scott's contribution might have altered or engaged with this situation. The presence of a number of highly engaged Irish Studies academics was also not representative of the fact that my call for papers to Irish Studies departments had largely been left unanswered.

However, the marginality of art within Irish Studies was a recurrent topic of discussion during the session.

At the end of the day, I received a lot of positive feedback about the level of engagement, the interest of the subjects being discussed and the value of the session as a whole. Response from various participants and audience members suggests that the coming together of so many engaged voices generated food-for-thought and grounds for further critique. A number of individuals intended to follow up on issues raised in subsequent research and writings. I look forward to that ripple effect and hope that the sound of people negotiating their differences in the open keeps growing.

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Notes

1. Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,' *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 41-68, 65.
2. The session abstract, names and affiliations of speakers and their paper titles can be found in the AAH conference on-line archive at <http://www.aah.org.uk/conference/2007session03.php>