

Introductory essay: writing Irish art histories

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At the time of writing (September 2013), the gallery at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) on Dublin's Thomas Street is holding an exhibition titled '*more adventurous thinking...*' This takes the form of artist Seamus Nolan's response to the archive of art writer and cultural commentator Dorothy Walker (1929 – 2002), which became part of NIVAL (the National Irish Visual Arts Library at NCAD) in 2004. Nolan contacted prominent art collectors and institutions and invited them to consider the suitability of the relatively new gallery space at the art college for particular works of art.¹ The art works specified were those that had been included in Walker's 1997 publication, *Modern Art in Ireland*, seen by many as a key text in the historiography of modern Irish painting. The gallery itself was measured and assessed in terms of its temperature, humidity and the UV light levels.² This exhibition marks and explores Walker's legacy, as well as the shifts in value, both in canonical and monetary terms, of these art works from the time that *Modern Art in Ireland* was first published, through the years of the economic boom, to the present precarious moment. It also acts as a test track for our current models of art history – the receptacles and hanging spaces, the tools and the words – allowing us to ask whether they are still fit for purpose sixteen years later, to kick the tyres and knock on the walls. It is almost indisputable to say that Walker's book has a formative and important place in the development of the historiography of Irish art, and it is fitting that her achievement should be acknowledged and celebrated. Nolan's intervention, however, also reveals a reflective, reflexive turn in practices of writing and thinking about Irish art – a desire to assess the directions of art historical enquiry and scholarship, to critically question the terms of the discipline as it has developed, and to begin to imagine and to investigate the critical landscape of the future.³ It is in this context that this group of essays has been gathered. They each address various moments in the construction of the discipline of Irish art history, excavating the palimpsest of texts, actions, exhibitions, judgements and statements which have

¹ The gallery at NCAD is housed in Harry Clarke house, which was designed around the existing early twentieth-century fire station by *Murray Ó Laoire Architects* and was completed in 2010.

<http://www.molaarchitecture.com/projects/Harry-Clarke-NCAD.html> Accessed 10 September 2013.

² The exhibition also included a text which drew on the works of art mentioned by Walker in her book, as well as several paintings by Anne Madden, Nano Reid and Norah McGuinness which were loaned by the Allied Irish Bank Collection. <http://www.ncad.ie/gallery-event/view/more-adventurous-thinking> Accessed 07 November 2013.

³ It is important to note that critically reflectiveness and reflexivity has characterized much of the work on Irish art by scholars and writers, in particular over the last two decades. This section of the *Journal of Art Historiography* is dealing specifically with writing that looks at the construction of the discipline of art history, and issues in methodology and historiographical practice.

formed at different times around the works of art themselves, and which contribute to the texture of our understanding in different ways.⁴

In many ways, Irish art history is a fledgling field of enquiry, its youth creating both challenges and opportunities for its practitioners.⁵ On one level, the work of recovery is underway – gathering information, collecting images, creating archives, identifying artists and tracking down their work and its provenance. This work is carried out at the same time as the definition of the discipline and its terms.⁶ What is meant by ‘Irish’ art, and what is Irish art history? Does it involve both research on ‘Irish artists’ (whoever they are) and research done in Ireland on the art of elsewhere? Does it include the study of non-Irish artists residing in Ireland, as well as artists of Irish birth, descent, affiliation or self-identification making art elsewhere in the world? Does it include work by Irish historians abroad, and research on the art of Ireland carried out outside the country? And what about the various ways in which artists from ‘elsewhere’ have engaged, or disengaged, with artists from ‘here’? The answer, I would suggest, is all of the above. These various strands of discourse materially inform each other in a continual way, an example of the density of intertextuality as explored by Julia Kristeva, as well as Michel Foucault’s explication of the ‘residual existence’ of all texts and statements; the ways in which texts, or statements, must be considered in terms of the ‘relations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors are unaware of each other’s existence); relations between groups of statements thus established (even if these groups do not share the same, or even adjacent, fields; even if they do not possess the same formal level; even if they are not the locus of assignable exchanges); relations between statements and groups of statements of a quite different kind (technical, economic, social, political).’⁷ While this might seem like a dazzlingly, and possibly dishearteningly, ambitious methodological standard, it is valuable and perhaps necessary to keep it at the heart of critical or reflexive historiographical writing. In

⁴ An important work which focused attention on issues of historiography and the development of critical modes and practices art in Ireland is Fintan Cullen, *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2000.

⁵ The relative youth of the discipline of art history within Irish universities and higher education institutes has recently been discussed by Francis Halsall, ‘Strategic Amnesia: Modernism and Art History in Ireland in the Twenty-First Century’, *The Irish Review*, Winter 2008, 18 – 35.

⁶ Important and formative events and documents in the development of reflexive and reflective practices within the historiography of Irish art include Fintan Cullen’s 1997 book *Visual Politics: the representation of Ireland 1750 – 1930*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1997, which examined established narratives, their contemporary legitimacy and historical position, as well as the session titled ‘Irish Studies and History of Art: Impossible Dialogues’ at the 2007 Association of Art Historians annual conference. This was organized by Lucy Cotter, and while the proceedings were not published, the conference programme, (available here www.aah.org.uk/photos/conf%20programme%20final%281%29.pdf) provides some detail of the questions which were addressed by art historians and theorists of Irish art history and its construction. The 2003 – 2006 contribution of James Elkins and others to this debate is given in some more detail in footnote 14 of this essay. More recently, there has been a reassessment of the role of women artists in Ireland, in particular in the edited collection of essays by Éimear O’Connor, *Irish Women Artists, 1800 – 2009: Familiar but Unknown*, Dublin: Four Courts Press in association with TRIARC, 2010.

⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (revised edition), Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds. Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, 421 – 422.

thinking critically about Irish art history as a discipline, it is important to question the terms of its value judgements, its audience, the conditions of its production, and its disciplinary boundaries (and the extent to which they might be permeable). What models of scholarship have been adopted and used to date? Where do its disciplinary alliances lie, and what does it uniquely have to offer to a broader, multivalent understanding of Irish culture and history, or to the history of art and visual studies more generally? One of the potentially positive aspects of being ‘young’ is a certain disciplinary flexibility – it has not been around for long enough to fall into static or predictable patterns of thought or inquiry, and the field, and how we construct it, is open to change and reinterpretation.

However, it is also misleading to insist on the ‘youth’ of Irish art history as a discipline. While third-level courses began to be offered in Irish universities in the 1960s, spearheaded by figures such as Françoise Henry and Anne Crookshank, the act of defining, describing and critiquing art in Ireland has a much longer history.⁸ In any study of the historiography of Irish art, the critical apparatus that developed in tandem with the production of art in Ireland must be taken into account as essential and formative. Consider, for example, the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux on Malachy of Armagh’s church at Bangor in the early twelfth century, made ‘of polished boards, firmly and tightly fastened together – an Irish work, as beautiful as you could wish (*opus Scoticum pulchrum satis*).’ What is this if not critical appraisal, within an international frame of reference? Indeed, even in the most recent research on Irish medieval architecture, Bernard’s contribution is still cited as an important critical statement in understanding the forms of the early church.⁹ Moving forward to the emergence of history writing and, by extension, the writing of cultural histories as part of an increasingly scientific and supposedly empirical discipline in the nineteenth century, the project of national definition was central to the texts produced.¹⁰ In his study of archaeology as a profession in Ireland, Gabriel Cooney argues that its development during a time of intensifying nationalism in the nineteenth century has had a formative influence on the discipline.¹¹ Similarly, the political and cultural contexts of many texts on Irish art produced in this period and, in particular, during the first half of the twentieth century necessitate careful close reading and analysis.¹² Moreover, the dynamics of art collecting, valuing and

⁸ The role of these women in forming university courses for the study of art history in Ireland is discussed by Catherine Marshall, ‘“The liveliest of living painters’: women and the visual arts in Ireland’, in O’Connor, ed. *Irish Women Artists*, 28 – 36.

⁹ Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, (New Haven and London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2010), 15.

¹⁰ Philippa Levine, *The amateur and the professional: antiquarians, historians and archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838 – 1886*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

¹¹ Gabriel Cooney, ‘Building the future on the past: archaeology and the construction of national identity in Ireland’ in Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Timothy Champion, eds., *Nationalism and Archaeology*, London: UCL Press, 1996.

¹² The context of nationalism has probably received the most critical attention in relation to practices of historical writing (both in terms of art and also more generally), but it is also essential not to overlook other equally formative contexts, such as, for example, the impact of Modernist aesthetics on engagements with medieval sculptural forms in the early years of the twentieth century. Recent works on this subject include Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology and the British Landscape 1927 – 1955*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, and Janet T. Marquardt, ‘Defining French

selling, and exhibition in Ireland must also be considered as having an impact on the understanding, judgement and production of Irish art, and as central to the historiography of the discipline. Anna Brzyski, in her interrogation of canons, value and art history, writes that key questions to be asked in the critical examination of historiographical processes include ‘how and where canons are formed, by whom and why, how they function under particular circumstances, how they are maintained, and why they may undergo change’.¹³ In an Irish context, these questions need to be asked of historical texts as well as of current practice in order to explore inherited or inherent value systems which may continue to exert an influence on contemporary practice.¹⁴ Such biases may well have positive and enabling attributes for some scholars and writers, and the attempt to gain greater self-awareness cannot be seen as necessarily ‘improving’ the discourse or creating a more objective approach. Nonetheless, this kind of historiographical reflexivity does have a value in its potential to investigate and highlight influential, but often unexamined, assumptions or value judgements around art and art history.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century traditions of history writing and critical judgement and analysis form the bedrock of contemporary practices of art historical writing, and the awareness and exploration of this is at the heart of current developments and critical expansion. The publication of this collection of essays comes at an apposite moment, prior to the publication of the Royal Irish Academy’s four-volume *Art and Architecture of Ireland* project, self-described as a ‘work of national cultural significance’.¹⁵ This project, which is a major act of definition for the discipline, commemorates the centenary of Walter Strickland’s (1850 – 1928) *A Dictionary of Irish Artists*, published in 1913. Led by editorial teams drawn from the major educational and exhibiting institutions across the country, and comprised of contributions by a broad range of scholars, working in both national and international contexts, it will no doubt form an essential source of information as well as a necessary provocation for historians of Irish art for many years. Similarly, Fionna Barber’s recently-published *Art in Ireland Since 1910* is further evidence of this move towards reassessment and redefinition, as is the growth of the centres of research within Irish third level educational institutions.¹⁶

‘Romanesque’: the *Zodiaque* series’, *The Journal of Art Historiography*, 1, December 2009, <http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-1-december-2009/> (accessed 27 October 2013).

¹³ Anna Brzyski, *Partisan Canons*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 3.

¹⁴ Important events which contribute to the development of reflexive historiography in Irish art historical practice include the session titled ‘Irish Studies and History of Art: Impossible Dialogues?’ at the 2007 Association of Art Historians annual conference, organized by Lucy Cotter (programme: <http://www.aah.org.uk/photos/conf%20programme%20final%281%29.pdf>) The now-defunct magazine *Circa* also published several articles in 2003 and 2006 on the conditions of Irish art history, with notable contributions by the art historian James Elkins and responses by Irish art historians. James Elkins, ‘The State of Irish Art History’, *Circa*, 106 (2003), 48 – 55, James Elkins, ‘The State of Art History in Ireland, Revisited’, *Circa*, 116, (2006), 48 – 55 and Joan Fowler, Lucy Cotter, Maeve Connolly, Mia Lerm Hayes, Róisín Kennedy, Rosemarie Mulcahy, Sheila Dickinson, Siún Hanrahan, James Elkins, ‘The State of Art History in Ireland, Replies and Responses’, *Circa*, 118 (2006), 36 – 74.

¹⁵ <http://www.ria.ie/research/aai.aspx>, website of the Art and Architecture of Ireland project, accessed 21 August 2013.

¹⁶ Fionna Barber, *Art in Ireland Since 1910*, London: Reaktion Books, 2013.

The aim of this section is to explore the nature of Irish art history, and to critically examine specific moments in its development – the exhibitions, texts, public events, and discourses which comprise the texture of the discipline. Ranging from the exhibition of painting in the eighteenth century to the consideration of Irish contemporary art practices, the authors offer close readings of particular moments or events in Irish art history, as well as offering critical readings of disciplinary practices and norms. In her essay on historiographical practices around Irish genre painting produced in Ireland during the nineteenth century, Mary Jane Boland questions the limits of the discipline, and proposes new methods in expanding both the range and the depth of critical inquiry. Her essay emphasises the extent to which well-known paintings, such as Joseph Peacock’s depiction of the feast of St. Kevin at Glendalough, can be cited as ‘evidence’ within other disciplinary contexts without fully taking cognizance of the specificity of the work or the context of its production.¹⁷ Addressing the methodological fault-lines in previous engagements with Irish genre painting, she redresses the historiographical ground through a rigorous definition of terms, and of the different ‘frames’ through which various groups of people would have engaged with this type of work.¹⁸ Addressing some of the critical comments of James Elkins in his valuable reflection on Irish art history, Boland has embedded her work within broader practices of art historical inquiry, while ensuring that connections created are meaningful rather than tokenistic.¹⁹ Crucially, Boland locates her own investigation into the ‘painting of everyday life’ within the context of the discourse around Irish painting of this type as it developed from the late twentieth century, foregrounding an awareness of the connoisseurial direction of this discourse, and of both the value and limitations of this. Boland’s essay, which draws on religious history, the history of folklore and of Irish theatre, also demonstrates the capacity for Irish art historical research to engage fruitfully in interdisciplinary research, while remaining cognizant of the potential methodological difficulties which this approach can present.

In his contribution to this project, Gabriel Gee has focused on the Orchard Gallery in Derry and the role of individual galleries to the development of locations for artistic practice and engagement, but also as publishers of texts by and about artists. In considering the development of the historiography of art in Ireland, the role of gallery publications and exhibition texts is essential, if sometimes difficult to trace. With the development of NIVAL and the collections of institutions such as

¹⁷ Tom Dunne has also critically engaged with the interpretation of particular paintings within related disciplines, and the cumulative impact of this on how those works are understood more broadly in his exploration of the reception of *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* (1854), by Daniel Maclise, in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. Tom Dunne, ‘Chivalry, the harp and Maclise’s contribution to the creation of national identity’, in Peter Murray, ed., *Daniel Maclise 1806 – 1870: Romancing the Past*, Cork: Crawford Art Gallery with Gandon Editions, 2008, 38 – 51.

¹⁸ The concept of the ‘frame’ of engagement within particular types of participation comes from the work of Erving Goffman, as discussed in Albert Piette, ‘Play, Reality, and Fiction: Toward a Theoretical and Methodological Approach to the Festival Framework’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 15: 1, 1992, 37 – 52.

¹⁹ One of the criticisms made by Elkins was that ‘the nearly inevitable settling and retrenchment of art history in smaller countries such as Ireland makes it unlikely that art historians engage new interpretative methods or multicultural concerns; and it means that each country’s art historical scholarship is poorly known outside its borders’. James Elkins, ‘The State of Irish Art History’, *Circa*, 106, (2003), 56 – 59.

National Library of Ireland, it is possible to access some of the publications produced by important galleries such as (to name but a few) the Hendriks Gallery in Dublin, the early records of the Project gallery and exhibitions such as the Oireachtas exhibition or EV+A (now EVA International) in Limerick. However, the posters, pamphlets and exhibitions texts and publications printed by galleries are often considered as ephemera, resulting in the loss of much important material for research into Irish art and art in Ireland. Gee, in his essay, has brought together both surviving publications from the Orchard gallery with the oral history of the gallery and its founding ethos, given by the original director Declan McGonagle. In the case of the Orchard, the gallery's publications functioned not only as an exploratory record of work shown in the gallery, but also as a means of communicating beyond its local context, positioning the artists and the ideas surrounding the work being produced in that space in a more international discourse. Crucially, Gee focuses on the way in which the gallery was able to build a strong ideological identity through the development of its publications, and through this, to participate in the dialogue around the troubled contemporary history of its place, as well as the discourses of contemporary art. Extending Gee's conceptualisation of the Orchard's publications, then, both such publications and the gallery itself can be considered as palimpsests, with the traces and memory of past exhibitions and ideas informing the development of the new, and the meaning of both past, present and future exhibitions altered and changed by the existence of each other.²⁰ In this sense, close attention must be paid in the development of a critical historiography around art history to the lives of gallery spaces, to their central ethos and its own development, and the extent to which the context of a particular gallery impacts on the understanding and interpretation of the work being presented within its environment, as well as the impact of the art work on that environment. It is a reciprocal and constantly shifting relationship, but one which is very rich and which does materially impact both the conceptualisation of art practice in an Irish context and the image of art practice in Ireland as seem from elsewhere. Gee's work also draws attention to the importance of fine-grained readings of texts and their modes of engagement within the specific contexts of place and political reality. Gee's own close readings of the essays produced by the Orchard Gallery throughout the 1970s and 1980s reveal the extraordinary density of meaning and the tension in interpretation around visual art at this time and in this context. In focusing on the texts produced by one gallery, Gee highlights the depth and breadth of art practice and thought brought together in one space as part of the history of art on the island of Ireland, as well as providing a valuable and necessary record of the energy, attention and work within one place by a group of people, and their contribution to understanding art, history and the nature of human dwelling in place and time.

Art and design historian Úna Walker is well placed to offer a considered reading of the influential 1962 *Design in Ireland: Report of the Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland*, having worked extensively on the archives of the Kilkenny Design Workshop, now held at NIVAL. Focusing on the report on Irish design

²⁰ This idea was presented by Bart de Baere at the Museum 21: Institution Idea Practice symposium at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2008, <http://www.imma.ie/museum21/symposium2008.html> Accessed 25 October 2013.

commissioned by the Irish Export Board/ An Córas Tráchtála, Walker both provides a close reading of the dynamics and tensions within it, as well as extending her investigation outwards, and considering its precedents, contexts and critics. Finally, she considers the impact of this influential report on the subsequent development of the discourse around design in Ireland. Walker's essay positions policy documents and official reports and decisions at the heart of this investigation into the historiography of Irish art. As her study demonstrates, they have been, in many cases, among the most influential texts in the development of artistic practice. Through the close and critical reading of official documents and reports, the ideologies informing the decisions taken and structures created around the production of art and design can be examined – these include, for example, the official aims in founding a particular institute or department, or in commissioning a report, which will necessarily have a bearing on its content. An understanding of the founding aims and objectives of institutions, official bodies, working groups, and government departments, as well as the political, social, cultural and economic objectives of certain decisions and actions relating to art and design in Ireland are central to a more comprehensive view of both the development of art practice, as well as its presentation and critique. Official support and the provision of educational and practical facilities materially influence the development of art practices and the place for debate and discourse around those practices. In her research, Walker has also pointed to the recommendations of critical voices, such as that of Thomas Bodkin, on the state of the support for and development of art and design in Ireland. She has also drawn attention to the decisions recommended within official documents and debates which were never acted upon, positioning these potential actions and the fact of their abandonment as part of the narrative of art and design history in an Irish context.

The contribution of John Hewitt to the development of a canon of Ulster art is explored by Riann Coulter, art historian and curator at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Studio in Banbridge, Co. Down. Coulter has focused on the way in which, through his essays, criticism and curatorial work, Hewitt effectively lobbied for the recognition of a distinctive school of art for Ulster. Coulter's essay is an important reminder of the importance of nuance and differentiation in writing about art within a nation – not only can there be endless difference on the microcosmic level of the person, individual regions are very often characterised by their own needs, cultural influences and impetuses. Considering Hewitt's desire to define and disseminate a regional school of art within Ulster, Coulter explores both the local and international contexts and the tension between them. Hewitt wanted to present Colin Middleton and John Luke as painters who were both representative of and rooted in their place, but who could take their place on an international stage, absorbing and using the language of the avant-garde. Coulter creates an important comparison with Herbert Read, positioning his regionalist ideology within the context of mid-century and post-War fragmentation across Europe, rather than focusing solely on an exotic or exceptional Irish experience. However, Coulter also draws attention to the tension between regionalism and the need for validation by adherence to *the* avant-garde, revealing the centre-periphery dynamic at the centre of an increasingly-centralised art world. Hewitt's references, including Picasso and Epstein, reveal his

own canon of value, which informed his advocacy of particular artists over others, and the emphasis of particular aspects of their practice. Complicating this facet of this work, Coulter also positions Hewitt's choice of Middleton and Luke as champions of a new Ulster regionalism within both his own need for a definitive Ulster identity, but also against the comparatively strongly-articulated identity and image of art emerging from the Irish Free State. The post-colonial condition of the island of Ireland, then, is explored as being central to this dynamic of differentiation – the desire to create an identifiable artistic and literary tradition for a defined community living in Northern Ireland being explored by Coulter as Hewitt's desire to move towards a hybrid Ulster society, with shared artistic experiences at its centre. This negotiation between an intensely local and distinctive artistic identity, as well as the need for validation and evaluation by what were seen as the centres of cultural authority and innovation is at the centre of much writing about Irish art, architecture and design throughout the twentieth century in Ireland. This dialectical tension is explored in Coulter's essay on Hewitt, but is also at the heart of Walker's exploration of the relationship with Scandinavian design, and Róisín Kennedy's reading of the representation and interpretation of Irish painting in the 1970s.

Róisín Kennedy, a scholar who has contributed much to an increasingly critically reflexive direction in the historiography of Irish art, has focused on one particular text in her essay 'The Irish Imagination, 1971 – Romanticism or Pragmatism'. This text was written by the artist and critic Brian O'Doherty for the catalogue accompanying *The Irish Imagination, 1959 – 71*, an exhibition of Irish painting. Foregrounding particular registers or modes of writing about Irish art, as well as the geographical and ideological position of those registers, Kennedy offers a close reading of the ways in which an influential text can direct the trajectory of engaging with past and contemporary art practices, as well as future directions in art-making.

In her close reading of the text within its context, Kennedy draws attention to O'Doherty's position as cultural 'translator' or broker of identities, bringing work produced in an Irish context into the ideological sphere of the then centre of the global art world.²¹ In order to have currency, Irish art had to be recognisable as working within the modes of expression validated by the cultural centres of New York and London, but remain in some way essentially or recognisably Irish. As with Hewitt's desire for an internationally-recognised but identifiably regional Ulster school of art, and the Irish Government's need to develop a commercially viable yet distinctively Irish design culture, Kennedy's essay also draws attention to this difficult negotiation between cultural centre and periphery, and the dynamics of nationalism in both a politically troubled and increasingly globalised world. Through its focus on O'Doherty's interpretation of Irish painting in the 1970s, Kennedy explores the impact of this influential piece of work on later writers and commentators, but also on the reception of Irish art abroad. Kennedy's examination of O'Doherty's text is contextualised by the different economic and political pressures which influenced the representation of Irish art at home and to an

²¹ The idea of the critic or curator as broker of identities is discussed by Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'Brokering Identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation', in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, (eds.), *Thinking about exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996, 15 – 26.

international audience. These included the need to avoid overtly political statements in an official representations of Irish art due to the escalating violence in Northern Ireland, evidenced by the rejection of O'Doherty's *Name Change* by *Rosc '77* due to its politically sensitive nature. Moreover, in the absence of established exhibition spaces for the development of an audience for contemporary art in Ireland in the period, and the relative paucity of opportunities for publishing about art, Kennedy argues that temporary exhibitions, often mounted with the expressed aim of increasing Ireland's visibility as a tourist-friendly country, had undue influence over the trajectory of criticism and art writing. Kennedy's work on writing and its relationship to the value of art in an international context also brings to the fore the often-uncomfortable dialectic between the meaning and value of art (both economic and in terms of perception). Her study of the interpretation and reception of Irish painting in the 1970s reveals both successes and failures of writing in this regard, convincing in the local context, and yet insufficiently persuasive to an international audience. These issues of writing, validation and valuation are intimately connected, and could form the heart of a broader investigation into the positioning and reception of Irish art in an increasingly global art world and market from the 1970s to the present.

The role of criticism and its success or failure in the creation or communication of value around art gestures towards to the idea of the 'performance' of criticism and writing in the world, the mode of its delivery, the conditions of its reception and its physical and temporal boundedness and reality. Nicholas Johnson has engaged, over a period of two years, with the 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit' by Samuel Beckett as a piece of critical writing which can exist within the sphere of performance. Johnson argues that although art criticism is traditionally presented as a monologue, or as a piece of writing 'after the fact', the performance of the 'Three Dialogues' allows it to be engaged with as a dialogue, with the potential for disagreement and derailment, as well as a greater focus on the temporal nature of its delivery and the mental, physical and emotional challenges which it entails. As Johnson demonstrates in his essay, the 'Three Dialogues' is an ideal work through which to engage with these ideas of delay, insecurity and irresolution, given its central concern with the process of argument, dialogue, contest, and finally, with compromise in the articulation and definition of meaning. Johnson raises two key questions from his work both in researching and in directing and performing in the 'Three Dialogues' – firstly, how can performance function as a tool of criticism, and secondly, how can performance be used within the discipline of art history to account for 'events' of criticism that may not be secured in print? Through his broader critical practice around the performance of Beckett's prose, Johnson explores the potential for a piece of prose, which can act as a piece of critical writing about art, to be performed as part of a critical investigation in the potential and boundaries of what can constitute art historical research.

In tracing the different reproductions and reprintings of the 'Three Dialogues', Johnson draws attention to the life of a piece of criticism beyond its original context and, indeed, beyond the author's intention. These iterations have their own agency, and contribute to the rhizomatic discourse in a multiplicity of places and contexts. Moreover, in focusing on the roots of Beckett's use of the

phrase ‘the artist’s occasion’, Johnson connects his use to the early modern metaphysicians and founders of the doctrine of Occasionalism, and also brings the figure of Bishop Berkeley to the fore as one ancestor for ‘Three Dialogues’. While this level of attention to influence and origin may be an example of the deep tracing required by Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, it is a salutary reminder to historians to consider the almost endlessly broad range of references which can inform a work of art or a piece of writing, and to be alive to the potential constellations which lie behind the performance of its first creation.

Crucially, Johnson’s work introduces the idea of interdisciplinary practice-based research to this exploration of historiographical practices in Irish art history. In this case, he directed three iterations of the ‘Three Dialogues’ as performance – recitation in an architectural space, intervention in an art history conference setting, and a more theatrical staging with a seated audience. This project relates to theatre, but the role of practice-based research in art history has much potential, from the engagement with materials or techniques, to the attention to the experience of the body in particular places and spaces by dancers and performance artists.²²

It is hoped that this group of essays will contribute to conversations about the nature and practice of writing, creating and curating Irish art history. It must, of course, be acknowledged that several crucial aspects have not been covered here, including, for example, issues of gender, sexuality, class identity and historiographical practices. There are many artists, writers, publishers and institutions who have not been mentioned in these essays nor in this introduction, but it is hoped that this project will take its place within a more comprehensive exploration of the subject in the future. Methods and modes of dissemination, particularly with the rise of the digital humanities and the increasing use of digital resource for scholarship, have also not been considered here. These are, however, central to both the development of historiographical practice around Irish art, architecture and design work and also on the emerging and continuing practices of artists, designers and architects. As well as the changing digital landscape, the changing shape of university departments and the interaction between institutions of art practice and art history will have a bearing on the discipline, as well as the creation of new alliances, such as the use of innovative technologies to reveal new information about the art and landscapes of the past. The shape of the future discipline is unknowable, but it is exciting to be in the position to contribute a layer towards its development, and I am grateful to the individual authors who have contributed their work, time and effort to this project, and to the readers and reviewers for their important contribution to its realisation.²³

²² An example of the latter was part of the ‘Mapping Spectral Traces V: Body – Space – Memory’ conference held in association with Dancing Days Festival, 19 – 21 April 2012 in Galway. This conference brought together visual artists, literary scholars, historians and featured performances by dancers investigating ideas of body, space and identity. This included a paper, appropriately for the context of this essay, titled ‘Fall, Fall again, Fall better’, by dancers Andrew Duggan and Cindy Cummings.

²³ Several of these papers build on the session ‘Writing Irish Art History’ at the 2010 annual conference Association of Art Historians at Warwick, jointly organized by Caroline McGee and the author (supported by the IRC-funded project ‘Reconstructions of the Gothic Past’ led by Professor Roger Stalley and Dr. Rachel Moss) and the 2009 seminar, also titled ‘Writing Irish Art Histories’ held at

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