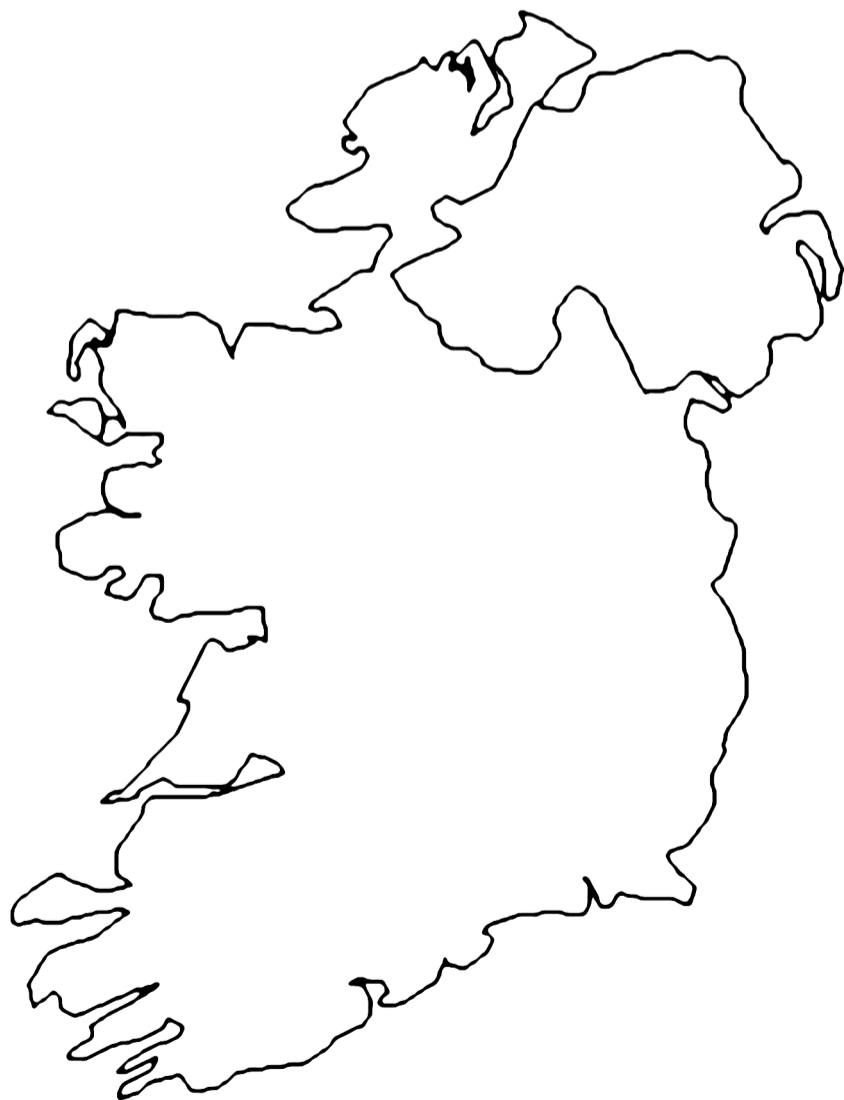


# The Metropolitan Complex





## Roundtable Discussion

**Daniel Jewesbury, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, Declan Long (Chair), Rachael Thomas, and Sarah Pierce.**

**On Monday 28 January 2008, the following conversation took place at the National College of Arts and Design in Dublin. Declan Long invited the participants to have a roundtable discussion on issues around contemporary art and national representation. There was no audience present.**

**Declan Long** How can we best begin to frame questions about contemporary art and nationality today? What are the problems and possibilities presented by such a conversation? Among younger artists nowadays, there often seems to be a consensus regarding the irrelevance of the national – in the face of more international opportunities and expectations, more ‘globalised’ systems and experiences – and though this is in many respects a justifiable and even welcome proposition, it is worth asking, as a way of starting this discussion, if there are specific ways in which each of us continues to be affected by national contexts and ideas. How do the particular social and cultural conditions of Ireland today shape the styles of artistic, critical or curatorial activity that you have sought to develop? How does an Irish ‘background’ affect the way your work can be perceived and positioned internationally? And, just as importantly, how does the experience of working in Ireland, North or South, influence your view of a much wider art world? Such questions might well lead us to reflect on the particular types of art being made in Ireland today and in so doing, perhaps we could also consider what our critical co-ordinates are for identifying especially significant figures in ‘Irish’ art today. By extension, it may be worth commenting on institutions, markets and other necessary networks of support and distribution, comparing views on how the present generation of artists based in or born in Ireland are promoted and received internationally. Is a significant amount of Irish art visible on the major stages of the global art world? How does it find its way there? And is its provenance of any real relevance? But let’s begin, then, with our own immediate experience. How can we compare what we do or see regularly in the world of visual art with what tends to be written or spoken about art and Ireland in academia? Going to you first Sarah, it might be interesting to hear how you would respond to any of these questions as someone from the United States, but based primarily in Dublin for almost a decade.

**Sarah Pierce** I think that first it would be useful to consider what it means to insert the word ‘Ireland’ into this set of questions and second, to ask what happens when that occurs in the context of the art world. I guess in my own work, I not only wonder what happens when we think about Ireland as a context but also what happens when we describe this context as a site of identification or representation. As we ask these questions we should also wonder who is speaking, who brings the notion of national representation to the fore, and whose agenda we are serving by the answers we return.

**Declan Long** It’s worth pointing out that the text resulting from this conversation is to be distributed in two ways: as one of the Metropolitan Complex papers that are a core part of your art practice Sarah, and as a section in the Irish Studies journal, The

Irish Review. This strategy arises from a desire to reflect on meeting-points between the world of scholarship on Irish culture and the sphere of living practices – and so to ask if there may be a mismatch in perceptions about the value of thematising Ireland and Irishness. Caoimhín, as someone who engages professionally with both of these worlds, how do you understand the relevance of national contexts?

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Well, my background is in literature, specifically Irish-language literature, where one might imagine that questions of Irishness arise inevitably, even when they’re not overtly thematised by the writers themselves. There are, of course, writers and artists for whom ‘the matter of Ireland’ is a central concern. Beyond that, one can also think of artists for whom, let’s say, questions of sexual politics are crucial, and these questions will often be addressed within the very particular contexts of Ireland, North or South. I started to write occasionally about contemporary art in the early 1990s, with no academic qualifications to do so, having stumbled into the visual arts from this literary background; and as I was based in Dublin, I inevitably wrote, or was commissioned to write about Irish art at this time. As it happens, the artists I first wrote about didn’t overtly thematise the matter of Ireland. Subsequently, others did and that clearly had to be taken into account when writing about them. In recent years most of my art writing has little to do with Ireland. Sometimes, however, I have been asked to write about the work of non-Irish artists who could be from anywhere, but who happen to have an exhibition in Ireland, and who may or may not choose to inflect their work accordingly. For example, Rachael was very specific when she commissioned me, not so long ago, to write an essay about the German artist Franz Ackermann whose work in general is concerned with questions of globalism, travel, nomadism, the intercultural, the transnational etc. She asked me to address the work of an artist about whom there has been a reasonable amount written, but to situate it differently by responding to it on the specific occasion of its arrival in Dublin in the form of a solo exhibition at IMMA. So, here was a request to write about the work of an internationally well-known artist, but within an explicitly Irish context. My response, for better or worse, was to focus on what I thought was a neglected aspect of Ackermann’s work, its persistent attempt to drive a wedge between language and locus, word and place, toponymy and topography, in a manner that was curiously inimical to Irish attitudes to such matters, or so I believe. Another type of critical commission that has cropped up in the past, and which was alluded to in your opening remarks Declan, is the invitation to write in conjunction with the showcasing of a chunk of the cultural capital of the nation in something like an international biennial. The current artworld calendar is chock-full of such events, though fewer and fewer of them adopt the old Venice Biennale and Sao Paulo Biennale model of national representation. In fact, the newer events are more likely to reject that format categorically. Even the powers-that-be in Sao Paulo have recently decided that this notion of national representation is no longer valid, or at least no longer desirable for their purposes.

**Sarah Pierce** Your comments about nation in relation to cultural capital interest me. I think that there are other times when making context explicit can be a strategy to address the ideas and ideologies of national identity. Recently, Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher developed a large-scale

curatorial project at the Van Abbemuseum called *Be(com)ing Dutch* which posits a particular set of questions to a particular audience, and then requires that audience to consider the answers within or through the context of the Netherlands. There is a tendency in art to imagine ‘the other’ or another’s identity through difference. Annie and Charles are putting these differences under pressure by examining the processes of inclusion and exclusion that form Holland’s cultural identity. There are artists who make work about Ireland, about the context here, but most often, this work implicates someone else, someone other than those of us looking at the work, or writing about it, or making it. What if we begin to see ourselves implicated in the politics we are so critical of? For instance, when do we, despite ourselves, desire cohesiveness and a kind of reformed national identity and when does that desire reform an idea of Ireland through what it means to work within a specific geography?

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Of course, I should stress that not all writing about the visual arts falls into the category or categories I mentioned. I just happen to write a lot of commissioned catalogue essays. So that’s a very particular mode of writing, very different from more-or-less independent academic writing in general, on topics that one chooses for oneself.

**Declan Long** Though academic choices are, of course, often determined by research funding priorities, which might be thought to compromise that sense of independence somewhat. Rachael, you’re involved in commissioning many essays – and also in writing them – through your role as a curator at a national institution, the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Could you say something about your perception of this role?

**Rachael Thomas** An inherent part of my profession is to open dialogues from academic sources or relational practices. This research culminates in the expression of multiple points of view simultaneously. My background is as an art historian, although I am also involved in commissioning contemporary work, with a constant awareness of the present context, including the social and political frameworks. The concept of geography is inherent in this, the way our sense of place informs our identity. In 2001 I was involved with Cerith Wyn Evans in a plan to establish a Welsh representation at the Venice Biennale as at that time there was no representation by Wales. Cerith and I wanted to signal this is a positive way to engage the notion of Wales’s presence in this most established of art/political arenas, and re-establish the country as a centre of practice rather than being seen geographically on the periphery of the British Isles. In my research, I was interested in the notion of the periphery, taking account of, for example, Irit Rogoff’s concept of exhibitions as “spaces of appearance”, an idea derived from Hannah Arendt. ‘Wherever people gather together,’ Arendt wrote, ‘it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.’ The potential of situations is the most important factor in my practice. Having lived in Ireland for four and a half years, my observation of the local scene is crucial in informing my work. I believe that the current debate has shifted from the concept of the country to an emphasis on the capital. In this sense, a focus is more likely to occur on Dublin or Berlin, rather than Ireland or Germany. Over the last three years I have been involved (on a research level) with Oliver Dowling in a project for Dublin. Initially a Biennale event, this has evolved into a possible

Documenta-style project. In relation to this, we have initiated conversations with artists and curators, both local and international. Among these, Hans Ulrich Obrist has compared the contemporary evolution of Dublin to that of Glasgow in the last decade and referred to it as "The Dublin Miracle" Indeed, like Glasgow, Dublin now has a wealth of artists coming together, forming strong groups. This is an indicator of the city's great confidence. The last four years have witnessed a multiplication of studio initiatives, and artistic initiatives. Interestingly, the notion of the city on an international scale is embedded in current cultural discourse.

**Declan Long** Daniel, as someone based in Belfast, how do you see such ideas about cities? What does this emphasis suggest to you at a time when life in Belfast, and so perhaps art practice in Belfast, is undergoing definite, but undoubtedly difficult, change. There is evident pressure to build the brand of a 'new' Belfast, to increase what Sharon Zukin calls the 'symbolic capital of the city' – something which surely relates to the jostling for positioning on a global stage that the Biennial phenomenon is symptomatic of. How are forces of this kind impacting on cultural life in Northern Ireland? Is there an engagement with the exigencies of the present moment at the expense of a deeper history?

**Daniel Jewesbury** Well, this is very problematic. One of the things that I've concerned myself with during the twelve years that I've lived in Belfast is investigating the ways in which Northern Irish art has been historicised. One of the recent mainstream historicisations of Northern Irish art has been very much in terms of responses to landscape, responses to national questions, and so on, which can all be put under a rubric of questioning 'Northern Irishness'. And I've always thought that that characterisation of what was going on in art in the North was immensely problematic. But I think it's also problematised by the fact that Dublin generally has a very tenuous grasp of what's happening in Belfast. So Belfast tends to be perceived as a two-way funnel: people in Britain look through Belfast to elsewhere in Ireland, and people in Dublin look through Belfast to elsewhere in the United Kingdom. And it's not necessarily seen as containing anything very much that's distinctive of its own.

**Declan Long** This idea of Belfast as a point of connection has also of course been described in quite positive terms: Edna Longley's notion of the North as a type of cultural corridor, for example...

**Daniel Jewesbury** Well, the points of connection have in the past been quite valuable for Belfast. There's always been a connection with Glasgow; or rather, there used to be a connection with Glasgow, which isn't quite so active now. This model throws up opportunities, yes, but it also throws up particular problems when we start to think of how people in the North are responding to the concept of... let's call it Irishness or Northern Irishness, or being in some part of the island of Ireland. It's problematic also because there are artists I know in the North, who are certainly not making responses to 'the Troubles', whose work is still making reference to the political, economic, social contexts that have arisen out of the Troubles. But there's also work that's not making reference to that at all. I'm talking here about certain types of work which are about urban spaces or about the notion of how you

move in a city or about questions of memory and biography. They come through a certain frame which is connected to this being in a certain place.

**Declan Long** These questions about cities, memory, subjectivity – aren't they being asked everywhere?

**Daniel Jewesbury** I think they are. But I want to pose an idea – something which has been partly mentioned with regard to a kind of localism – that we're constantly being pushed, particularly in the North, towards a presumption of normativism, a normative presumption, let's put it that way.

**Declan Long** 'The Normative Presumption' – this sounds like a Northern Ireland novel by Robert Ludlum. But what does such a 'presumption' mean for artists today?

**Daniel Jewesbury** Well, we all want peace, and we all just want to get on. So the pressure is to forget all those parochial, local contexts. Forget all those boring Northern Irish contexts and get with the whole international context. And very particularly in the North we have to find ways of doing neither one nor the other, and of saying something that's particular and yet which can connect with universals as well.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** If, as a critic, one is repeatedly, consistently, or perhaps even exclusively addressing very located art practices – the art that is currently being made in Belfast or Dublin, let's say – then that's one thing. However, practically speaking, I write quite a lot about contemporary art these days and less than thirty percent of it has anything to do with Ireland. There was a time when I was in Belfast a lot. There have been times when I really knew Glasgow, or thought I did. These, however, are just the modulations of one critic's ongoing critical engagement with different communities of artists. Apart from the fact that I live in Dublin, I'm not sure my engagement with its visual arts community – at a critical, and perhaps even a social level – is materially different from the way I engage with communities of artists in other cities I visit very frequently such as London or, to a lesser extent, Berlin.

**Rachael Thomas** But there is certainly a sense of excitement, of urgency, in Dublin at present. Internationally, Ireland has acquired an important profile. Indeed, often we receive requests from abroad for "lists of artists", itself being a problematic concept.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** But the nature of those requests doesn't actually vary from country to country. The art world may decide en masse to take an interest in Ireland one year and Albania another. This can often be explained by superficial perceptions of the shifting international political landscape. A given country may be momentarily deemed interesting for a variety of non-visual arts reasons, and then be expected to produce interesting artists as a consequence of the fraught sociopolitical contexts with which those artists must engage, or from which they are emerging. Maybe I'm being cynical, but I remember, for instance, when you, Daniel, were selected for Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana. Now this is a Biennial event, which was set up in the mid-90s in explicit opposition to the decidedly located and nationally structured organization of the Venice Biennale. Manifesta's aim was to be nomadic, not located in a particular city every two years but instead moving around, and it would pay no attention to

provenance in the way it presented the work or chose the participating artists. Nevertheless, my memory is that the curators for that particular year, having chosen the theme of 'borderline syndrome', and having acknowledged that this event was taking place in Ljubljana as opposed to anywhere else, inflected this psychological construct of 'borderline syndrome' in politico-geographic terms. Of course they came to Northern Ireland, but I don't think they even bothered to visit Southern Ireland. And it was interesting to me at the time that they chose four artists from the North – which, generally speaking, was perceived, as quite a good representation in numerical terms – and none from the South. It's also interesting that they were all artists based in Northern Ireland who had been there for varying lengths of time, but they certainly weren't natives of Northern Ireland.

**Declan Long** Could you remind us who these were?

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Daniel, Phil Collins, Colin Darke and Susan Phillipsz. Now, I've absolutely no problem with the artists who were chosen, but I would be concerned about the depth of engagement, the care and consideration that might go into such choices when international curators arrive in a country like Ireland. It's an old debate, but to what extent do you actually come looking for something in particular and are therefore likely to find it? This phenomenon has local inflections, which vary from place to place but inevitably affect how a particular cultural scene is perceived internationally by influential critics and curators who may never bother to take a closer look for themselves.

**Daniel Jewesbury** That time was very peculiar, because this was the tail end of the Troubles and we used to get inundated, bombarded by critics coming to Belfast because they thought they were going to get some sort of edgy front-line experience and they were going to experience it viscerally: to really get to know what was happening in the North and understand it, and then communicate this to the rest of the world. And they did know exactly what they wanted to see when they came. But yet I don't think that the work they went for directly referenced Northern Ireland.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Obliquely, one might have said –

**Sarah Pierce** And there would have been political content.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Certainly in the case of Phil Collins, but the actual work wasn't about Ireland, as I recall.

**Daniel Jewesbury** There were photographs taken in Los Angeles. But it was weird, because as you said, Manifesta is meant, nominally, to be a non-national event and yet the curators branded everything: we all had these little NI initials next to our names. Suddenly we were branded as being from Northern Ireland, and that goes back to your question Sarah: about who introduces 'the national', the people who say 'this is Irish art' or 'this is Northern Irish Art'. Presumably, it's Culture Ireland, or it's the British Council ...

**Sarah Pierce** And it's universities. It's not an accident that this conversation is happening partly in the context of a university-based journal that is called The Irish Review. Caoimhín mentioned the word 'native'. Here, we might think about how certain outputs are nativised, so to speak. One thing that I've noticed in

producing the Metropolitan Complex Papers is that Glasgow is usually mentioned within the first couple of paragraphs of any paper where we are gathered to discuss the artworld in Dublin, so it amuses me that it arises here today. I've often wondered why this happens. I think one reason is that artists here recognise that a sense of belonging or being 'of' a certain locale worked to the advantage of a generation of artists in Glasgow, but at the same time they are wary of enlisting 'place' as a generalised factor in their work. There is a certain ambivalence in this that I share. There are many artists, myself included, who find that nation as a legitimising force is actually totally delegitimising.

**Declan Long** Could you unravel that a little bit more? Why is this 'legitimising' force so problematic?

**Sarah Pierce** Well, just because I am making work here doesn't mean that work 'represents' Ireland in any way. To say that it does actually delegitimises the discussion my work is participating in. For instance, my project for the Venice Biennale used Robert Smithson's concept of entropy as a way to undermine national representation as it plays out through the designation of a national pavilion. Smithson describes a sandbox filled with two colours of sand clearly divided, say black and white. If you stir the sand clockwise, eventually it mixes and becomes grey. If you reverse the direction that you are stirring counterclockwise, you do not return to black sand and white sand; that is a type of entropy. Nationhood is another. When it comes to the breakdown of Irishness or what it means to be Irish, entropy is both a threat and a promise!

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** On the point of the recurring Glasgow example that you raise Sarah, I think that Dublin's interest in Glasgow as a place where quite a few prominent, successful artists were working, say ten or fifteen years ago, was really an interest in, and even an envy of a community that happened to be based in a comparably sized city. There have over the past two decades been several generations of artists who are intimately associated with Scotland or with Glasgow. But how much of the work they produced overtly thematises Scottishness, or even that resistance to the gravitational pull of metropolitan London that once seemed so remarkable? What is interesting is that there were a lot of artists who didn't choose to move to London but chose to base themselves in Glasgow instead. Some of these artists were born and grew up in Scotland, but not all of them did. It's just that there is a community of artists there who managed to survive and exhibit in various ways and to develop careers internationally. Most recently there has appeared to be a critical mass of artists with similar interests, both at the level of form and of subject matter. But if there currently seems to be a shared Glaswegian interest in, let's say, addressing the residue of utopian modernism in the form of insistently 'unmonumental' sculpture, or whatever, couldn't that interest be equally pursued elsewhere? In fact, is it not also being done elsewhere, if not everywhere, of late? So, I think that the question of this recurring Glasgow comparison is slightly different from the question of how, as I mentioned earlier, the lazy attention of critical academia or the international curatorium might suddenly focus on the art communities of, say, various countries in Central Europe who are currently undergoing radical political change. Take, for example, the case of artists such as Anri Sala or Adrian Paci

from Albania, or Deimantas Narkevicius and other artists in Lithuania. There's a significant aspect of the work of most of these artists that is quite localised. They are quite often talking about a specific recent history and a specific built environment, particular monuments as well as a particular experience of modernity. And that's an important difference. Because that tendency is more obviously comparable to the type of work developed by Willie Doherty, for example, than to that of most Glasgow-based artists.

**Declan Long** And of course there is an evident tension in Willie Doherty's recent work, especially in films such as *Non-Specific Threat* or *Ghost Story* – both of which have gained a substantial international audience by being shown at the Venice Biennale – between sustained scrutiny of traumatic local situations and anxious acknowledgement of less geographically defined, or more recognisably global, 'troubles'. Given such tensions, and given the various opinions that have been offered so far on questions of local specificity, I'm interested in how you might view another curious project relating to Northern Ireland – one that seems almost defiantly local in its interests. I'm thinking here of the *Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art*, a series of twelve exhibitions being staged over several years by the Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast, covering what seems to be every conceivable aspect of art in the North since the Second World War, from almost every conceivable direction. In the context of the contemporary artworld's 'normative presumptions', there is surely something strikingly perverse about the stubborn, parochial focus of this long-term plan. Daniel, what do you make of this curatorial venture? Have you become part of the *Collective Histories* yet?

**Daniel Jewesbury** I was included in a show in this series called *The Double Image* that Dougal McKenzie organised recently – on relations between painting and photography. But this exhibition seemed to stand to one side of the whole historicising effort to some extent. I think that there is a desire amongst people in the North to find multiple ways, rather than a single way, of approaching some kind of history of visual arts there. Peter Richards and the Golden Thread have chosen 1945 as a starting point, which seems as good a point as any. There are a few ways in which you wouldn't necessarily get the interest in Dublin for such a project, because the history of Irish art has probably been done to death. I mean, God Almighty, you can get that any day of the week, you can get it in a few places at the same time.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Well, it's had institutional support of different kinds, various institutional presentations over the years.

**Daniel Jewesbury** Yes. But because there's a caesura in terms of historicising Northern Irish practice, there is now an interest in finding out about things that existed prior to the 70s, and things that carried on into the 70s and 80s, and then just disappeared, things which were flourishing in Belfast in the 70s and stopped happening because the galleries closed down, galleries that were really branches of London galleries, that had characters who represented a Northern Irish arm of English modernism, who came from a tradition whereby Belfast was in a sense like Leeds or Edinburgh. It was a provincial feeder point for a commercial modernist market in London. So people are interested in uncovering some of that and placing it now in a context of where we find ourselves now, after the last thirty-five years.

**Rachael Thomas** The audience is a point to bear in mind here. With greater intensity of activity and focus there may also be an increased public, and enhanced visual literacy. As we think about audience, we should explore other interesting forms of debate. The widespread fear of critique should be transformed into a form of creative critique, a space for multiple voices to engage dialogically. Nicolaus Schafhausen is of particular interest here. Schafhausen developed the European Kunsthalle a web forum and platform for cultural encounters reflecting on an exchange between art and its audiences. I believe that such connections are relevant to the great changes occurring in Ireland today, and I am interested in how such activities could engage with the audience on multiple levels, and then how this can filter into the general awareness of the place of the visual arts in contemporary society.

**Declan Long** Furthering public debate is clearly one of the aims of a project such as the *Collective Histories*. Above all it appears to be about creating a platform for multiple, possibly contradictory, perspectives on a changing scene, over a prolonged period – so raising the question of the role or potential of critical engagement seems vital here.

**Daniel Jewesbury** I think there remains an enormous amount of potential for developing opportunities for criticism. One of the things that's interesting about my role as an editor at *Variant* magazine – and one of the things that sometimes makes me bang my head against a wall – is that we are editing it between Glasgow and Belfast so people often want to feed in things that are very specifically about campaigns or issues that are affecting people in Scotland, when I'm feeding in things that are looking at, for instance, notions of race in Ireland and in Northern Ireland. Sometimes when we're going through a list of contents for a forthcoming issue, we wonder what's the meeting point of all of these different things which can seem quite disparate and unrelated. But then most of the time, I ultimately find even in the most apparently specific, and I suppose in some senses parochial, pieces of text, that they then refer outwards to what else is going on in the magazine. So we actually succeed most when the magazine manages to link these different things together and present a constituency that's got nothing to do with the particular geographical location in which it's produced.

**Declan Long** And does this relate, Sarah, to your ambitions for the Metropolitan Complex papers? You've written that this project is partly about discovering 'the common points of reference that declare a local scene'.

**Sarah Pierce** What makes *Variant* interesting – and this relates to how the Metropolitan Complex started – is the way it deals with what it means to stake a critical claim on conversations that are taking place among people who are working in the same geographic location, but staking that critical claim isn't necessarily about instilling some sense of cohesion. It's about showing that 'here' is in dialogue with 'there' – which means the conversation 'here' matters.

**Declan Long** This seems to be a way of dealing with geography or community in relation to art practice that differs significantly to approaches taken within the field of Irish Studies.

**Daniel Jewesbury** When the art historians' conference was on in Belfast last year, there was a session chaired by Lucy Cotter with Fintan Cullen, Luke Gibbons and all of the great and the good, and I found it interesting because a lot of these people were writers I would ordinarily be laying into, but because I'd been asked by Lucy to video the session I decided that I could become invisible. I was just a guy behind the video camera, even though a lot of these people may have been thinking 'he wrote that nasty thing about me a few years ago'. So behind the video camera I quite enjoyed listening to the conversation, and listening to the ways in which people like Luke Gibbons were finding new languages for orientating what were to me more and more tortuous connections between contemporary visual culture in Ireland and the discipline of Irish studies, and pulling new, disparate elements into Irish studies through whatever kind of rhetorical contortions he could manage. The whole point of that session was to see what the relationship between Irish studies and contemporary visual culture was and I thought then that there was a real divergence of language, more than there ever has been, between the art historians, the visual culture people, the people who were able to talk about contemporary art, and the people from – I don't know how you describe the Irish studies field – more of an area studies approach.

**Rachael Thomas** The artist James Coleman deftly illustrates this point, especially in this context. We are currently preparing for an exhibition of his work in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, scheduled to take place in early 2009. Coleman's work is highly conceptual, and our interest is to highlight both his sensitive engagement with Ireland and his international profile. It will be interesting, I believe to consider the type of critical success he has achieved with a particular focus on the notion of national identities and the international art world.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** There are artists who are more or less deliberate in their strategic presentation of the culturally-specific aspects of their work, whether directly or via their preferred critical exegetes. In the case of James Coleman, he is a highly acclaimed artist who has deservedly gained canonical status in the pantheon of late 20th-century art, which is independent of any consideration of Irishness. Nevertheless, if you look at the critical commentary on Coleman, you find that it is substantial and involves the imprimatur of some very exalted figures in American academic art criticism, a number of whom are associated with the journal *October*. The resistance by some of these critics to any invocation of the matter of Ireland, which happens to be folded into the seams of many of Coleman's early works in particular, is quite pronounced. On the other hand, you have critics like Luke Gibbons, or Jean Fisher or, to a lesser extent, Michael Newman, who do not exhibit the same resistance. On the contrary, in the case of Luke Gibbons, whose primary commitment has been to debates within Irish and Postcolonial studies, the matter of Ireland is precisely what he might be expected to look for, and find in Coleman's work. And that is what will be emphasised in such critics' treatment of this oeuvre, and in their choice of specific works to write about.

**Declan Long** This might return us to the point raised earlier about the extent to which notions of Ireland are understood to be stifling by some artists or critics, too

readily pigeon-holing particular bodies of work. It's sometimes argued that academic Irish studies often fails to grasp the peculiarity of art being made today – critical writing of this kind is largely historicist, relying on a notion that art represents history at some simple level. It seems to me that contemporary art tends to stray way beyond that.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Mick Wilson has written provocatively about the improbable frequency with which a small number of artists crop up in Irish studies articles because of their obvious instrumental value – the ease with which these artists' works can act as placeholders in arguments that come from outside the field of visual culture. The arguments may not be invalid, but may rely on practices that are not found nearly as compelling by critics whose interests are not formed within Irish studies. I'm sure this is not unique to Ireland. But it's very particular and very obvious.

**Declan Long** Mick argues that any move to problematise the use of 'Ireland' as a master term in critical accounts of art and culture here is represented by post-colonialist critics as a symptom of a damaging post-colonial disorder – a state of denial about the circumstances from which we speak. This argument with, or in fact against, Irish Studies partly emerges from what Mick views as a profound disconnect between the critical interests of academics and of artists – and I would have some sympathy with this position. I recall, for instance, how at a seminar launching a special Ireland issue of *Third Text* – in which Mick's essay on contemporary art and the Irish Studies industry was published – a number of artists in the audience were quite irked by arguments made by the journal's guest editor Lucy Cotter about the need for Irish artists to, above all, come to terms with their post-colonial condition. Lucy was quite prescriptive on this point and though she's made efforts to nuance her position since, her line during this event seemed to be that artists need to make this type of work, deal with these themes, and there are great possibilities for Irish art if everyone would just pay more attention to post-colonialist critics.

**Sarah Pierce** I'm not that familiar with Lucy Cotter's project, so this might be a misrepresentation of her position ...

**Declan Long** Or perhaps even more of a misrepresentation than I've already offered...

**Sarah Pierce** But it is not acceptable to prescribe a condition – whether that condition is post-colonialism or something else – to a group of people, and then tell them to 'come to terms with it.' It is hugely problematic if only for the reason that these 'conditions' most often land on places or people that are perceived to be on the periphery, on the margins. This isn't to say that an artwork or a poem or a novel can't thematise a post-colonialist condition. But isn't the ultimate scourge of colonialism to tell someone to come to terms with their post-colonial condition? It reminds me of something I heard Paul Gilroy say about sociologists who label people 'mixed-race' and then go on to say that they must therefore be suffering an identity crisis. Perhaps the crisis, if there is one, is that post-colonialism does not adequately deal with the racism inherent in some notions of being Irish, and yet these are the very notions of an Irish identity played out through post-colonialism.

**Daniel Jewesbury** One of the things I became interested in researching sometime ago was the whole link between Ireland, before and after independence, and empire, thinking, for instance, about the reputation that certain Irish regiments in the British Indian army had for particular viciousness, and this coexisted with a mythic idea of colonial fraternity that was put forward by the leaders of the state, which was convenient but which was never really reciprocal. When a country like India tried to extend bonds of friendship in the twenty years between Irish independence and Indian independence, the Irish more or less said thanks but no thanks. My contention is that the supposed post-coloniality of Ireland is itself a kind of affect, and that the sooner Ireland gets over itself in those terms – as soon as that nod to post-coloniality is dispensed with – which so many people in places around the world find a little bit of an affront anyway – I think we'll maybe get some more truthful relationship between disparate and shifting, transitory notions of Irishness, instead of just replacing one blocky kind of nationality with another.

**Sarah Pierce** Amnesia is the best way out of any condition, right?

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Amnesia is a very useful term in relation to various types of art produced over recent years, and not just within a context that might be characterised as postcolonial. Sometimes significant leaps can be made in a generation or in an art community by some form of willed amnesia, such as always seemed to characterise classic YBA art to me. It was almost as if those artists chose to forget that there were precedents – in some cases very specific ones – for the work they were making. And then there is the opposite: 'the archival impulse' that Hal Foster has observed over recent years, which involves an increasing number of artists who are not particularly connected to each other, springing up in very different communities, though mostly from North America and Northern Europe.

**Declan Long** And Ireland, of course. Foster identifies Gerard Byrne as a key exemplar of this tendency.

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Yes. Foster finds that there are at the moment a significant number of artists internationally who are looking closely at the history of modernity or modernisation or modern art, and attempting in sometimes quite oblique or eccentric ways to retrieve the radical potential of incompletely realised projects from the recent past. This involves addressing the transnational past of modernism. But it might also involve addressing the ways in which modernism was inflected locally, and has its own local histories. It seems worth asking whether at any given moment there's a lot of amnesiac art or anamnesiac art being made in a specific place, and how particular its view of the past might be, how localised its view of the past might be. Another phenomenon worth mentioning in this context is, of course, that of 'relational aesthetics'. Nicolas Bourriaud's term may seem a little hoary these days, but there was a moment in the early to mid-90s when, once again, a critical mass of artists working in various parts of Northern Europe and North America seemed to be producing a particular type of art. But, unlike most many of the artists associated by Foster with the 'archival impulse' (though there is some overlap), in this case they were working collaboratively to a huge degree. And it's at least possible that the persistently collaborative nature of the art produced by these artists – who happened to be living in various different

places at the time, and were constantly travelling in any case – had the effect of masking, if not erasing, the locatedness, the situatedness, of those practices.

**Declan Long** But isn't one of the outcomes of that mode of practice, or those connected modes of practice, that there is now an ongoing and broadening emphasis on art as means of exploring ways of living together? Relational practices might be seen to have problematised the debate around pre-existing forms of participatory and self-consciously 'inclusive' art practice but out of that, maybe, we see the emergence of new efforts to understand locatedness – revitalised debates about subjectivity and situation, identity and nation, all of those things that were ostensibly left behind by YBAs. Sarah mentioned Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher earlier – the latter being one of the most significant Irish figures in the international contemporary art world today – and I think we could see some of their projects, such as *Becoming Dutch* at the Van Abbenmuseum, and also the Cork Caucus, in this light. I can't help seeing this type of 'experimental institutionalism' as part of what Claire Bishop has called the 'social turn' in contemporary art: a shift that incorporates, or to an extent follows from, certain aspects of relational aesthetics. Daniel, you were itching to tell me off there.

**Daniel Jewesbury** No, no, not really. It's just that I have a problem with this term relational aesthetics. I think it's like a syndrome. A syndrome doesn't exist until you name it. And I think that there was no such thing as relational aesthetics until Nicolas Bourriaud wrote this book.

**Declan Long** A book about the projects he was curating at the Palais de Tokyo. It remains an interesting, and quite bold, set of propositions...

**Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith** Whether you like it or not, he discussed about twenty different art practices, as I recall; and whether you find his arguments persuasive or not, the correspondences he identified were striking at the time.

**Sarah Pierce** Well, maybe characteristics like 'postproduction' and 'relational aesthetics' are merely among the ways to describe these correspondences. Unfortunately, the terms set out by Bourriaud now subsume entire projects: as if the only way to situate an artist's work such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's is through the lens of relational aesthetics. This obscures other perhaps more relevant and compelling conflicts in his practice beyond Bourriaud's initial observations.

**Rachael Thomas** Recently, having participated in a roundtable at the Guggenheim Museum in New York we engaged with the seemly complex definition of post-relational aesthetics, in an attempt to identify its key concepts and characteristics. Personally, however, I felt a resistance to terms that pin down specific art forms, while potentially suffocating their creative scope. The Guggenheim Museum are planning a show October 2008 entitled *theanyspacewhatever*. This exhibition will be an effort by an institution to define the idea of relational aesthetics, taking a European concept and understanding its ramifications in an American context. The perspectives on this were extremely interesting. The danger in this form of exercise, of course, is that the most exciting points of juncture get lost – indeed artists associated with relational aesthetics are already beginning to work against that set of ideas – Pierre Huyghe's practice is an excellent

example of this. Playing with institutional conventions has become a legitimate and, in many ways, indispensable mode of artistic enquiry, especially when one considers the discourse surrounding the nature of the "exhibition". Playing with accepted conventions allows stereotypical forms of reception to be confronted and challenged. It also encourages subjects to be rephrased and thought of anew, to expand the idiom. Postmodern cultural practices have rarely advocated silence in the forms and language of art, instead promoting notions of pastiche, repetition and intertextuality that, in retrospect, have encouraged the loss of agency and singularity. Having looked at John Cage's notion of fluidity, I feel that Cage's concepts of chance is all the more relevant here, especially reintroducing the silence of the exhibition space in Ireland, where multiple themes can exist and even grow out of a non-uniform pathway of encounters.

**Declan Long** Perhaps in one final effort to bring these questions about the global art world back to Ireland, I might mention that someone at NCAD recently proposed setting up an Institute of Relational Aesthetics at the College – until it was noticed that the initials would give us the 'NCAD IRA'. It would appear that awkward local specifics seem to have away of making themselves present whether we like it or not.

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