

The Metropolitan Complex

Roundtable Discussion

PART ONE: Ireland Slovenia

PARTICIPANTS: Aisling O'Beirn, Shane Cullen, Alan Phelan and Sarah Pierce.

On Sunday 8 February 2004, the following conversation took place in Alan Phelan's studio in the Fire Station, Dublin. The participants are artists who live and work in Ireland. Sarah Pierce invited them to have an informal discussion about Slovenia as the first of two discussions involving Ireland and Slovenia. Each conversation asks participants about the other country, specifically its art scene, taking into account how an image of a place forms through a combination of international and local points of reference. There was no audience present.

Sarah Pierce Who wants to begin?

Shane Cullen Do people drink tea in Slovenia?

Aisling O'Beirn They do. It's got all these herbs and spices, it's a Christmas tea.

Shane Cullen They wouldn't stop though and say, "Oh we must have a cup of tea."

Alan Phelan It's a massive coffee culture. People go to cafés, that's where they do their smoking and drinking.

Sarah Pierce I think we should we make it explicit that we are drinking tea during this conversation.

Shane Cullen Just like the British drink tea.

Alan Phelan We drink better tea. This is Bewley's.

Aisling O'Beirn Yes, we are having a postcolonial cup of tea here.

Alan Phelan Now don't get all political on us Aisling.

Shane Cullen Keep it secular.

Sarah Pierce We'll have a cup of tea and talk about Slovenia, as the Irish do. So what is the population of Slovenia?

Alan Phelan Around 2 million people.

Aisling O'Beirn Between 1 and 2 million people.

Sarah Pierce So less than half the size of Ireland?

Aisling O'Beirn There are about 5 million on the island.

Shane Cullen But with the new countries coming into the EU the population of Ireland will increase.

Alan Phelan After May 1st, since we are the only country that allows free labour. All the other countries have clamped up. Somehow the Irish government managed to stand by that informed, or uninformed, decision. It's great, it means that we are suddenly super liberal.

Shane Cullen One thing we should make clear to artists in every other nation is that they can work tax free in Ireland. The money they make from their work, their earnings if they base themselves here, won't be taxed. On sales or commissions.

Aisling O'Beirn Unless they live in the north of Ireland, then they pay 25p on the pound.

Sarah Pierce Artists around the world thank you for that Shane. So, you have all been to Slovenia and I haven't. Aisling, was the project you did there in 1997 your first contact with Slovenian artists?

Aisling O'Beirn Yes. It was an artist organised exchange that involved a number of us from Ireland who went to Slovenia— Sean Taylor, Amanda Dunsmore, Dougal McKenzie, Brian Connolly..

Alan Phelan Was it Catalyst that initiated it?

Aisling O'Beirn No. Sean Taylor lived in Glasgow where he met Franc Purg, who had been on a residency there, and they stayed in contact. Sean, Franc and his partner Nevenka Sivavec, who is a curator in Celje, were the initial contacts. Sean and Franc worked to get a group of Irish artists and a group of Slovene artists together. Nevenka runs a place called Likovni Salon in Celje where we showed. A publication was produced afterwards which Franc and Nevenka put together. We all went to Celje, and a year later a group of Slovenian artists had a show at Limerick City Gallery.

Alan Phelan Is Celje a small town? How would it compare to a town here size-wise?

Aisling O'Beirn Maybe like Athlone, but it would still be one of the major towns.

Alan Phelan I knew Sean Taylor did work in Poland that led to a few exchange shows in the last 5 or 6 years. I didn't know about this project in Slovenia. Not that I thought that we were cutting new turf, because of course there was Manifesta 3 which involved people from

the north.

Sarah Pierce Aisling, did you find that people in Slovenia, artists, were quite political and aware of their surroundings, in terms of a "politics of place"?

Aisling O'Beirn The interesting thing about Slovenia is that a lot of the artists are really on the ball in terms of looking at current affairs in a global way. For instance, a man I met in Celje named Marion was telling me about an idea called "provelution." As a way of thinking it's not a complete revolution, but is about taking an existing framework and gradually building on it, making incremental changes, small permutations. There is a real philosophical ground to work in Slovenia.

Sarah Pierce Are the institutions there, like Skuc, involved in that philosophical or political ground? Are they involved in this discourse of provelution for instance? Alan, you visited recently. Are the art spaces a generative part of the work that artists do in Slovenia?

Alan Phelan Skuc has become more established as an institution, but it has an art school association, as a place for younger people to show, that is closer to the tenants of an experimental or artist run space.

Sarah Pierce I met Gregor Podner in Helsinki when he was on a NIFCA residency. At the time he was the Artistic Director of Skuc. It was interesting to talk to him about Skuc's history as an organisation and how that might translate to Dublin. At a certain point a new generation of curators and artists really took ownership in deciding what Skuc would be. That level of local involvement and responsibility is so important to understanding an institution's role in a larger context, as part of an international community, no matter how dispersed.

Alan Phelan Skuc is outside of the official institutions— it's official, but is a more independent space where artists have input. When compared to what we have here it's got another, dramatically different concept of an institution. When I was there, the show that was on had interviews with economists and was a very dry intellectual project. It was able to draw down funding from Culture 2000, which is next to impossible. Few places here can manage that level of cross country collaboration. It involves a pan European network that seems logical for Slovenia, slap in the middle of Europe. We are more on the periphery. We have this attitude that we are Europeans, but we just haven't actually been there.

Shane Cullen The concept of being

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