STUDENT READING

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WEEK 3

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A READER

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26 Thomas Milton after Thomas Roberts, *View of Beauparc from the River Boyne*, from *Collection of Select Views from the Different Seats of the Nobility and Gentry in the Kingdom of Ireland*, 1785

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Joan Fowler, 'Art and Politics in the Eighties', 1990

Between September 1990 and March 1991 the Douglas Hyde Gallery, an exhibition space for contemporary art attached to Trinity College, Dublin, mounted five exhibitions under the general title of *A New Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties*. Each one had a different focus, 'Nature and Culture', 'Sexuality', 'Politics', etc. Works by more than thirty artists were shown. Joan Fowler, a lecturer at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, wrote two of the seven catalogue essays. The following is an edited section from one of these essays, 'Locating The Context – Art and Politics in the Eighties'. Fowler sets out to discuss what she believes to be 'the more significant themes in visual art in the 1980s'. Taking a cue from W.B. Yeats, she concentrates on two forms which identify Irish expression in opposition to the colonial

presence, a sense of Place and Ireland as Woman; the focus of this extract is in the 'politics of place'.[1]

Source: *A New Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties*, Dublin, The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1990, pp. 117–18, 122–3. Some of the original notes have been kept but are abbreviated or contracted. The original illustrations have been omitted except for Willie Doherty (fig. 28), while Richard Hamilton's *The Citizen* (fig. 27) has been added.

The opening line of a 1985 essay on Northern Irish poetry by Edna Longley reads, 'Poetry and politics, like Church and State, should be separated.'[2] On the face of it, the comparison between Church and State, poetry and politics is a strange one: if in theory, there is a measure of separation between Church and State in Ireland, everyone knows that in practice the edges are very blurred, and yet no-one has even suggested that poetry assume a relationship with politics as Church with State. No, Edna Longley is talking about a principle, a principle she clearly feels she should be forthright about because she detects occasional leanings towards political viewpoints among Northern poets, but perhaps more particularly because she opposes positions assumed in contemporary intellectual organs such as *Field Day* and *The Crane Bag*.[3] She agrees with Conor Cruise O'Brien's forebodings about 'an unhealthy intersection', and is in disagreement with the tone established by Richard Kearney in the first sentence in the first article of *The Crane Bag* journal back in 1977 when he wrote 'Politics is far too grave a matter for the politician. Art is far too potent a medium for artist.'[4] Longley points to examples where political affiliation has restricted the poet's ability to represent different subject positions, thus limiting his or her art. Moreover she believes certain literary critics and theorists encourage a political reading of poetry.

Despite the opposition expressed in these rhetorical flourishes, Longley and Kearney are not so distantly removed from one another in their views about art. Both believe that art is autonomous but that it can also serve in some way as a corrective to politics. Their differences seem more to do with their understanding of what politics is, or should be. Kearney believes that imagination is vital to politics, whereas Longley believes that politics is too fixed and intransigent for imaginative recreation. Kearney, it seems, has greater faith in the possibility of artistic vision being projected to the forefront of the political stage.

While Edna Longley's essay is specifically about poetry and Richard Kearney uses the term 'art' in the broadest sense, it is possible, I think, to find echoes of such arguments throughout the arts in Ireland in the 1980s. If *The*

Crane Bag was the most consistent, intellectual and sometimes portentous forum for debates on art, culture and politics in its life-span from 1977 to 1985, it should take some credit for maintaining an interdisciplinary policy in which politics and the arts rubbed shoulders. In turn *The Crane Bag* was responding to currents in critical theory, to Postmodernism, and of course to events in the north of Ireland, all of which have contributed to a considerable number of visual artists producing work which, in the mid-1980s, was less isolated and more concerted in using certain political themes. This immediately begs the question, what is political art? It may be necessary to address the question if only because it was made into an issue in the only book to be published on Irish visual arts and politics, that is, Brian McAvera's *Art, Politics and Ireland*,[5] in which the definition of 'politics' is the subject of the first chapter. McAvera is correct to the extent that he sees a preponderance of art criticism in Ireland concerning itself with the medium rather than the content of art, but he is wrong to pigeon-hole art into degrees of social-political statement. The question, 'what is political art?', is the same kind of misnomer as the older question, 'what is art?', because it attempts a catch-all definition instead of looking to the practices and production of artists and how these interconnect with social/political/cultural practices and ideologies. The question is 'how?' not 'what?'.

But if a priori categorisation blots out possibilities, the issue can be oversimplified in other ways. In 1984 the American art writer Lucy Lippard made a crucial visit to Ireland to select contemporary Irish art for a touring American exhibition. Lippard was particularly interested in finding political and 'activist' art in Ireland and she was asked to submit her views in an article for *Circa*, an extended and slightly different version of which was published in the same year in the United States.[6] In the later essay she writes: 'For present purposes, I'd describe a political artist as someone whose subject and sometimes contexts reflect social issues, usually in the form of ironic criticism . . . political art tends to be socially *concerned* and "activist" art tends to be socially *involved* not a value judgement so much as a personal choice.' While Lippard argues that defining roles and mediums for artists 'is a classic way of keeping everybody in their places', her description that political artists '*reflect* social issues' at worst suggests passive retrospection by the artist. In fairness to Lippard, she is someone who believes in accessing art on as broad a base as possible, and 'reflect' conveys the artist's subject in simple terms. However it does little to explain the complexity of art's production and reception [. . .]

First let us return to the 'unhealthy intersection'. It should be noted when Edna Longley and Richard Kearney talk about art and politics, whatever their differences of opinion, they both assume an important role for art in the

directions of the society – Church and State, art (or poetry) and politics are presented as though in the same order of magnitude. Neither writer is crude enough to say that art's role is pedagogic, neither writer has lowered their sights to a discussion of the formal qualities of artwork which effectively, in the case of the visual arts, consigns art's social role to adornment or enhancement of public or private spaces. Longley's concern is that art and politics ultimately lead to art as propaganda. This indeed has been a source of much consternation in the visual arts. In her 1984 visit to Ireland, Lucy Lippard found little which was, in her terms, political or 'activist': 'The complexity of Irish political life appears to be paralleled by the layered, contradictory images that I often found tantalizingly indirect.' Her comments prompted a reply from John Kindness who, in a letter to *Circa* said, 'To engage in the sort of activism she describes from her American experience the artist needs to be committed, s/he needs to take sides, to make choices; this is the choice that most artists find impossible to make in the Irish situation.'[7]

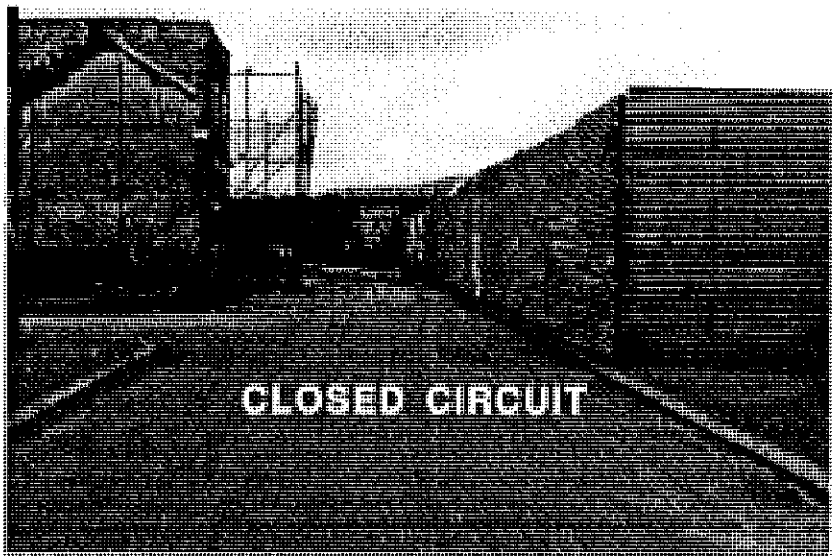
In these statements neither Lippard nor Kindness acknowledges partition and although there was nothing new in the idea that Irish art is indirect (i.e. *The Delighted Eye* exhibition, London, 1980[8]) it did seem to have a particular import coming from Lucy Lippard. Her visit became part of a process in a general shift in thinking towards political content among several young Northern artists. Even so, when this culminated in the *Directions Out* exhibition in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in 1987 as a showcase for 'political art' from the North, the curator, Brian McAvera, decided to make a virtue of indirectness.[9] Here, as in the Irish landscape exhibition, *The Delighted Eye*, the supposed avoidance of direct statement or 'the oblique approach' was made into an Irish personality trait, thereby realigning art with nature instead of art with politics. John Kindness, however, is suggesting that the Irish situation is different to the American and in Ireland one cannot make an absolute choice. An obvious example of Kindness's difficulty is in the North where an individual may feel obliged to be either Nationalist or Unionist because there is no substantive political ground in between. But in no sense does this prevent the artist from broadening the narrow definitions of Nationalism and Unionism, or from creating provisional solutions to a particular set of problematics. Whatever the status quo of the ballot box, the artist can, in artistic terms, deal with the inadequacies of his or her society, or even be pedagogic in suggesting a different society and be at the same time consistent in using electoral politics. There are no more irrevocable choices in politics than in art, even if Unionist and to some extent Nationalist interests have polarised the situation in such a way that the democratic right to choose is very limited.

The sub-text here, as with McAvera and Longley, is that politics leads art down the road to being used for propaganda purposes. In this respect, Brian

27 Richard Hamilton, *The Citizen*, detail, 1982–3

McAvera is partly right when he criticises *The Citizen*, 1982–3, the painting by English artist Richard Hamilton [fig. 27], when he says, 'The blanket-draped figure exposing (the hunger-striker's) chest and thus his crucifix, presents a neat propaganda image of the equation: Hunger-Striker = Christ = catholic church support for the Provisional IRA, an image perfectly attuned to the republican wall murals.' While Hamilton claimed that his painting was a response to media representation of the prison protest for political status by Republican prisoners during 1980 and 1981, McAvera along with a number of artists and critics in the North, saw it as a naive replication of the symbolism of martyrdom which had appeared in Nationalist areas at the time. In other words, *The Citizen* fell short as 'art' because, for the more sophisticated art audience who also knew something of the background to the North's crisis, the painting's explicitness was unpalatable as it echoed the 'religious pictures' of a Catholic tradition rather than a modern or modernist art and society. In this sense Hamilton's painting raises historical and ideological questions about art, firstly because *The Citizen* was directly 'readable' in such a way that it was down-graded alongside Nationalist street images, and secondly, because form and content were in crucial respects non-modernist, the painting did not construct the kinds of meanings that might allow it to be read as 'art' about a contemporary issue in Irish society and politics.

The Citizen, then, is an object lesson in how 'art' is predicated on structures of representation which are not reducible to a purely propagandistic message. The art context is involved, and it is through this that particular artworks are interpreted. This is not to say that art is necessarily difficult, obtuse



28 Willie Doherty, *Closed Circuit, Sinn Féin Advice Centre – Short Strand, Belfast*, 1989

and for the art-initiated only, it is only to say that *The Citizen* offended sensibilities in the North because it was a crude reminder of religious devotionalism as much as anything else. If we compare *The Citizen* with Willie Doherty's *Closed Circuit* (1989) [fig. 28], we may note that the sub-title of the latter gives vital information which helps to identify the location: 'Sinn Fein Advice Centre, Short Strand, Belfast 1989'. The photograph shows a scene in which partitions dominate, and below, across a road, the artist has printed, 'Closed Circuits'. It is useful to know that Sinn Fein is a target, and more, that the recent censorship legislation leaves the Party without direct access to the media. *Closed Circuit* is, I think, accessible while at the same time it avoids the standard and sensationalist media images of Northern Ireland. Moreover, in terms of art, it uses an interplay of image and text to create meaning, whereas *The Citizen* reproduces a redundant iconic image in which there is no apparent self-conscious comment on its own redundancy. [. . .]

Since the claim is made that what is emerging in the visual arts in the mid-eighties is somehow related to a general body of theory, more demonstration is required. Art, theory and The National Question winds inexorably back to the figure of W.B. Yeats, regarded as one of the major poets in modern English literature, and a member of the Senate in the early years of the Irish Free State. Yeats's vision of an Ireland free of British oppression assumes two forms which have since been pursued by artists and intellectuals. One is the metaphoric use of the land as the Nation, the other is the metaphoric use of Ireland as Woman. [. . .]

In an analysis of Yeats, Edward Said[10] argues that there are two phases of a nationalist liberation movement. The first is a period of nationalist anti-imperialism in which 'there is a pressing need for the recovery of land which, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination. Now if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical in it.' The second phase, according to Said, is when liberation becomes more realizable: 'With the new territorality there comes a whole set of further assertions, recoveries and identifications, all of them quite literally grounded on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions, these too are enabled by the land.' A crude interpretation of Said would be that the first and second phases of the Nationalist movement correspond with Yeats's career, in the latter stages of which the vision becomes increasingly pedagogic and idealized.

If the land issue was fundamentally important in the agrarian struggles of the nineteenth century and in the subsequent development of Nationalism, is it of any contemporary consequence when, in the South, scarcely lip-service,

usually symbolic, is paid to the territorial claims on the North? The answer is surely that the legacies of the land issue survive in a real sense where, in the North, Catholics still hold the poorer land, lower paid jobs and higher unemployment, and in the South, where the advent of the Free State and later the Republic brought little by way of radical land reform. The tenaciousness of land issues [were] such during the 1986 Divorce Campaign [that] there was a successful deflection from divorce to land inheritance rights by the anti-divorce lobby. Such issues have certainly emerged in theoretical studies. In Art History, for example, there has been a move from seeing landscape as scenery, to seeing landscape as property and territory. Following John Berger's widely disseminated *Ways of Seeing*, of the early seventies, there are now several substantial texts examining the historical relationships between landscape painting and land ownership, and these have been to some extent applied to colonialism in Ireland by John Hutchinson and Mary Cosgrove.[11]

In 1982, Deirdre O'Connell made an installation in the Art and Research Exchange Gallery in Belfast entitled, *The Palatine's Daughter*. The exhibition space was defined by two lines of fragile white plaster forms, each of which was propped (almost) upright by cords attached to the gallery floor. The installation was accompanied by an artist's statement which was a series of words: Territory, Barrier, Obstacle, Zone, Enclosure, etc. In Belfast, Catholic and Protestant communities had mentally defined their own areas but the British army intervention of 1969 had set up physical barriers between the communities and in the process had got it wrong. O'Connell's installation takes into account the 'no-man's land' created by the partitioning of sections of a city and the disturbance or removal of community identity. It is as much about a psychological condition as a physical deprivation. In about 1985 Willie Doherty began his photo-text work and, in the same year, he produced *Fog/Ice* and *Last Hours of Daylight*. The ostensible subject of both is the Bogside in Derry. In *Fog/Ice* the mist, descending from the hills around, is 'Shrouding/Pervading' and, in *Last Hours of Daylight*, the Bogside is 'Stifling' and 'Surveillance' is hidden but present. The security forces watch over the Bogside but beyond the security forces lie the unknown, shrouded hills of Ireland.

If these works by O'Connell and Doherty are about a psychological state of play, land and territory also have important material consequences. In the South, Mick O'Kelly combines urban and rural locations. As part of a series of photographs with text entitled *Allegories of Geography* (1987), he shows two photographs, one of a worked bog, the other of an open hillside. Centred under the photograph of the bog is the word 'Soil', beside which are words such as 'Territory, Displacement, and Domain'. Centred under the other photograph is 'Property', and beside it are words such as, 'Divide, Boundary and Map'. These are the politics of economics versus ecology.

Said's arguments on Nationalism have a particular resonance today for the North where there has been a growing body of opinion in favour of what has been called the 'politics of place'. This is a move to assert the identity or identities of the North, subsumed as these were by British culture. It is a presentation of the vernacular and the locality of the North in art, and to that extent, the features of the 'politics of place' are very similar to the Nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the Celtic Revival, Synge and Yeats. The development of Place in the visual arts is signposted by the establishment of the Orchard Gallery in Derry and the appointment of Declan McGonagle as its Director in 1978, and the Art and Research Exchange in Belfast in the late '70s with its offshoot, *Circa Art Magazine*, in 1981. In the first issue of *Circa*, the poet Tom Paulin suggested that while many Irish writers have established Ireland on the international literary map, this was not the case with the visual arts. He goes on to describe several images, specific to the North, which he believed the artists could well utilize.[12] In fact one of Paulin's examples, the black taxi, appeared in the Artpages of *Circa* in 1989, (no. 45), in a piece by Anthony Davies, but in the intervening years the amount of visual work from the North that could be described under the politics of place would incorporate many of the younger artists established in the North, including Willie Doherty and, in some aspects, Deirdre O'Connell and Micky Donnelly.

Much of this work records the actualities of sectarian life in the North, for example, the Orange parades (Anthony Davies), the Protestant community in Belfast (Rita Duffy), but while the specificities were important in establishing identity and confidence for Northern artists, there is a sense in which the very particularity of representation was a closure rather than an opening for political art. However, the work of these artists, and those included in the *Directions Out* exhibition, is informed and informing in ways in which *The Citizen* is not and is a considerable achievement in representing the locality in ways it had not been represented before. But it is notable that most of these artists have not continued to restrict their subjects to Northern Irish material. Dermot Seymour has moved from the 'realism' of *All the Queen's Horses* (*c.* 1983), to the enigmatic *Do you ever think of Daniel Ortega?* (1986), to a position in the late 1980s in which humans are replaced by animals and the meaning for human life is veiled. This is to say that Seymour has latterly begun to make more demands of his viewer in finding context and meaning which is a cut 'above' the raw realities of repression and sectarianism. In Seymour's paintings there is, therefore, an intimation of ideological existence beyond the barricades, and if Seymour is approaching a more universal language, then Willie Doherty has sustained the broader issues in his photo-texts on Derry between 1985 and 1988. His two-part *Stone upon*

Stone (1986) is eloquent testimony to the internalised aspirations of Nationalism (west bank of the Foyle), and Unionism (right bank of the Foyle), as well as a telling juxtaposition of the territorial reality.

NOTES

1 For an assessment of *A New Tradition*, see Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, 'Strategic Representations: Notes on Irish Art since the 1980s', in *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland*, ed. James Christen Steward, London, Merrell Holberton, 1998, pp. 112–17.

2 Edna Longley, 'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland', *The Crane Bag*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1985, p. 26. [Orig. note.]

3 See Field Day Co., *Ireland's Field Day*, London, Hutchinson, 1985, and Seamus Deane, gen. ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 3 vols., Derry, Field Day, 1991; *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, eds. Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney, Dublin, Blackwater Press, 1982.

4 Richard Kearney, 'Beyond Art and Politics', *The Crane Bag*, vol. 1 (1977–81), p. 13. [Orig. note; see also entry 22].

5 Brian McAvera, *Art, Politcs and Ireland*, Dublin, Open Air, 1989 [Orig. note.]

6 Lucy Lippard, *Circa*, no. 17, July/August 1984, pp. 11–17, and 'Trojan Horse: Activist Art and Power', in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. B. Wallis, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. [Orig. note.]

7 John Kindness, *Circa*, no. 18, September/October 1984, p. 25. [Orig. note.]

8 For comments on the exhibition *The Delighted Eye: Irish Painting and Sculpture of the Seventies*, London, 1980, see Tom Duddy in entry 13.

9 Brian McAvera, *Directions Out: An Investigation into a Selection of Artists whose Work has been Formed by the Post-1969 Situation in Northern Ireland*, Dublin, The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1987.

10 Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature: Yeats and Decolonisation*, Derry, Field Day Pamphlet, no. 15, 1988. [Orig. note.]

11 John Hutchinson, *James Arthur O'Connor*, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, 1985, and Mary Cosgrove, 'Paul Henry and Achill Island', in *Landscape, Heritage and Identity: Case Studies in Irish Ethnography*, ed. Ullrich Kockel, Liverpool University Press, 1995, pp. 93–116.

12 Tom Paulin, 'Where are the Images?', *Circa*, no. 1, November/December 1981, pp. 16–17. [Orig. note.]