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The State of Irish Art History

James Elkins

Despite its many self-doubts (articulated in these pages over the last few years), it can be argued that Irish art criticism is thriving. It is well supported by a vigorous art scene and a growing number of internationalist art galleries. The Lewis Glucksman Gallery at the University College Cork is just the latest in a number of initiatives that give Irish art a global presence. The ailments of art criticism are, I think, universal. As a field it suffers from lack of direction, an absence of exemplary writers, a narrow historical scope, low prestige, and most recently an aversion to judgment itself. A sociological survey conducted at Columbia University has quantified the ills of American newspaper art criticism, demonstrating that it is low on the priorities of editors and readers, and showing that its practitioners make relatively little money (less than \$25,000 on average). The survey also demonstrates that newspaper and magazine art critics draw on one another as much as on philosophic or historical sources - not a good sign for the health of the field. [1] Partly because it is perceived to be without foundation or system, art criticism is excluded from university curricula except as an historical subject. None of these ills are specifically Irish: they are true of art criticism in many countries. It's also the case that the limited number of art critics in Ireland ensures that criticism is likely to be read: it is less apt to fall into the vacuum in which even the best-known American newspaper critics are compelled to write. To an outsider observer - I count myself as one, although I will soon be a participant - Irish art history presents a very different face. It can be argued that unlike art criticism, art history is not yet a global enterprise. Both art history and art criticism have their international events, although art history has nothing like the 'biennale culture' that animates art criticism. (Art history's international organization, the CIHA, is less influential and far from global.) With a few

exceptions art-history journals are read only in the countries that produce them; there is nothing quite like *Artforum* or *Flash Art* which are read throughout the world. As a result art history has developed regional and national strains that are measurably different from one another. For example, the subjects and interpretive methods of art history vary widely between different countries. There is a qualitative difference between art history as practiced in a few major institutions - most of them in the United States, Canada, the U.K., France, Germany, Denmark, and Japan - and art history as it is known elsewhere. The central concerns in the field, including theories of multiculturalism, representations of gender, forays outside the canon, and explorations of new interpretive methods, tend to be confined to the larger universities in the United States, England, France, and Scandinavia. In such institutions art history is a rapidly changing field: it is beleaguered by the rise of separate departments of Film and Media Studies, besieged by the outlandish proliferation of new media (from CD games to video phones), and harried by exotic varieties of visual theory (from reception theory to machine vision). Even in countries such as Italy, Germany, and Ireland, discussions of those subjects are often lacking, relegated to special seminars, or left to neighboring departments such as Women's Studies.

The differences I am describing pertain to North America and Western Europe; outside those regions art history can be even less attuned to innovation and experiment. It's as if physicists in some countries were working with old textbooks that do not include the last few decades' worth of scientific discoveries. In Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Bolivia, for example, what takes place under the rubric of 'art history' is what a North American or Western European scholar would recognize as curatorial studies or art criticism. The most influential art historians in India and China tend to be artists, critics, and curators, who are unfamiliar with or uninterested in the constitution of art history as an academic discipline. These regional and national differences in what counts as art history are not theorized or even widely discussed in North America or Western Europe, where 'art history' continues to be the name of an enterprise that is taken to be effectively or potentially global. In Ireland and in Eastern European countries (including for example the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary) art history is taught at a professional level - it is distinct from art criticism and curatorial work - but in the natural course of things the historians concentrate principally on their country's own heritage. Budget problems and traditional patterns of teaching conspire to narrow the focus of art-historical research to the

country itself, along with the essential European centers, typically Italy, France, Spain, Germany and England. The historical span is typically the middle ages to high modernism, and the media that are studied are normally painting, sculpture, and architecture. The nearly inevitable settling and retrenchment of art history in smaller countries such as Ireland makes it unlikely that art historians engage new interpretive methods or multicultural concerns; and it means that each country's art historical scholarship is poorly known outside its borders. (How many Romanian art historians read Irish art history, even when both are writing about the Italian Renaissance?) In my experience, most smaller first-world countries such as Ireland practice a kind of art history that is in general - and these can only be general comments, with many brilliant exceptions - methodologically, chronologically, and geographically unadventurous. Art history naturally settles into a small arc of concerns, and there is nothing like art criticism's strong internationalism to bring it out and help make contact with other practices. These conditions are hard truths only if it seems necessary to claim that Irish art history is continuous with art history in, say, UCLA or Norwich. The quiescent and regionally specific practices of art history in smaller first-world countries is natural and largely appropriate - and it is a potential strength, as I will argue. Given the disparity between an essentially conservative and regionally focused art history and an energetic but often incoherent art world, what can university-based art history contribute to Irish education? Many developments in contemporary visual art are better handled in art schools where the art world is so close and its influence so irresistible and unpredictable. I think that the very conditions of art history in Ireland - the relative purity of its practices, the relatively small size of its offerings - harbor tremendous opportunities for rapid and radical change. In particular Irish art history can do at least these six things:

1. Its lecturers can introduce students to the most recent writing in the field. In Renaissance studies, for example, new paradigms and standards are being developed by scholars such as Alexander Nagel, Christopher Wood, Lyle Massey, and William MacGregor. In modern studies, the highest-level discourse is found in scholars such as Thomas Crow, Michael Fried, T.J. Clark, Rosalind Krauss, and Georges Didi-Huberman. Concerted study of writers like these will ensure that the students' quiver of methodologies will be well stocked. The norm for modernist art history in much of the world (including smaller universities and colleges in the United States) remains a kind of social art history bent on tracing the effects of political events and ideas on

artworks. Crow's trenchant and pessimistic critique, T.J. Clark's troubled ideas about straightforward social art history, and Karl Werckmeister's aggressive attack on political passivity, can readily be brought into the taught M.A. where they would quickly transform postgraduate art history.

2. Irish art history departments can also provide systematic, step-by-step instruction in the principal visual theories, including psychoanalysis, structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction. Iconography still has its place (it is arguably the default method for the discipline as a whole, worldwide), but the strength of university-based art history is that it can teach a subject such as poststructuralism very thoroughly, moving slowly and carefully from its primary sources in philosophy to its problematic applications in visual art. (Art schools tend to be less able to provide such graduated support, and as a result their students normally have to be content with more scattered encounters with visual theory.) The methods of art history are subjects in their own right, with ascending levels of competence and difficulty. The university's formal structure is the ideal scaffold for that kind of knowledge.

3. The university is also the optimal place to augment the traditional sense of art history as a subject that can be inculcated, in the way that science or engineering can, with the conviction that art history is a discipline where ideas must be *argued*. As elsewhere in the humanities, some of the best work is methodologically driven, and it requires that positions be taken and defended. Such work can turn art history away from its traditional brief (documenting and preserving knowledge of cultural monuments) and toward the active reinterpretation and contestation of visual culture. In that way the art history department can become a place where both art and its history are rethought, as they must be in any living tradition.

4. Irish art history is strong on architecture, painting, and sculpture, and it has a wholly necessary emphasis on the various traditions of Irish art and Irish modernism. But one of the traits of a vigorous art-historical practice is its engagement with world art. Some of the most important and difficult questions facing art history today arise precisely where the boundaries of the provincial and regional are broken. There is challenging scholarship being written on the subjects of multiculturalism and postcolonial theory, and on art from Precolumbian bas-reliefs to Chinese

Taoist sculpture. Any university can participate in such conversations, and in so doing it will create links with other arts departments from anthropology to sociology. It is not necessary to have a large faculty in order to have the 'luxury' of hiring an Asianist, nor is it necessary to have students from that part of the world: in fact the sudden appearance of such a specialist can have a much more powerful and unsettling effect than it would in a large university where the Asianist is one among many specialists.

5. By the same reasoning, a department that admits the study of all visual practices, and not just fine art, can forge links beyond the arts to the sciences, medicine, geography, and engineering, all of which have their own image-making practices. In that way a university-based art history department can become the place where visual practices throughout the university are studied and discussed. Irish universities are well placed for that kind of expansion because their departments are not weighed down by the many 'programs', 'sequences', and other ad hoc initiatives that tend to guide interdisciplinary conversations in large universities in America and England. In a stroke the art history department - reimagined as a department of visual studies in general - could become the focus of visual research across the arts, science, and medicine. Even conversations on painting would be transformed from talk about patronage, symbolism, and quality, to talk about literature, semiotics, and science.

6. One of the best opportunities that Irish universities have is the proximity of a healthy art community. By letting art criticism and the art market into art history, departments of art history can effectively leap over the various hybrid configurations that have been adopted in comparable countries. (In Denmark, for example, some universities offer mixed programs of cultural studies, film, aesthetics, art history, and art practice, which can muffle the potentially explosive encounter between art history and art criticism.) In my experience systematic instruction in art criticism is virtually nonexistent throughout the world, even in art colleges. Irish universities are in the position to take art criticism on board all at once and as a whole, including its history, its theories, its ailments, and its problematic relation to the art market. An art history department that offered progressively graded modules in art criticism could have an immediate impact on the level of discourse in criticism - and it might well attract new kinds of students to art history. In the common course of events, art history departments respond to the growth of media studies,

world art, and women's studies either by retrenching and concentrating on the Western canon, or else by hiring feminist scholars, non-Western specialists, and lecturers interested in new media. In that way art history departments move incrementally toward the heterogeneous globalism that obtains in large universities such as Berkeley, the University of East Anglia, or Princeton. For universities in smaller first-world countries such as Ireland, that process will have to stop at some point, if only because the expansion of the art history departments will be stalled by fiscal limitations.

That does not mean Irish art history departments need to reconcile themselves to peripheral or regional roles in the discipline as a whole; nor does it mean the best course is to retrench and play to existing strengths in post-classical Western sculpture, painting, and architecture. The answer, I think, is to radically remake the art history curriculum from the bottom up, starting with the assumption that the department's proper purview is nothing less than visual practices across the entire university and out into the art market. Irish universities are ideally situated for that move because their departments of art history aren't encumbered by the entrenched multiculturalism and obligatory diversity that can stifle genuinely radical growth in larger universities. The opportunity is enormous, and there for the taking.

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1 *The Visual Arts Critic*, edited by András Szántó (New York: Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program, 2002), available in its entirety online at: <http://www.najp.org/publications/research/visualart/images/tvac.pdf>. Szántó's text is discussed at length in my *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press [distributed by University of Chicago Press], 2003). James Elkins will be Chair of the Department of Art History, University of Cork, beginning January 2004; see www.imagehistory.org.