

THE STATE OF
ART HISTORY IN IRELAND,
REVISITED



In 2003, when I was hired at the University College Cork, I wrote an essay called *The state of Art History in Ireland*; it is available on the Circa website. Now that I am leaving the position in Cork, I thought it would be appropriate to revisit that essay, and write an envoi. The 2003 essay was largely celebratory, because I saw – and I still see – enormous potential in the art–history and art–criticism scene here in Ireland. In writing this as an envoi, I have the unusual advantage of not needing to mind my p’s and q’s, since I am not beholden to anyone in Irish academia. Sometimes – for politeness’ sake, for expediency’s sake – the kinds of things I want to say here do not get said. I will try to make my points candidly but not polemically. I should note, before I begin, that this is actually a collaborative project; I want to acknowledge the contributions of six Irish art historians and critics, who would rather not be mentioned by name.

As the Celtic Tiger winds down, Ireland’s economy will be leveling out and coming in line with Western European countries of comparable size. At the present, however, much of its Art History, visual theory, and philosophy of art lag behind those of, say, The Netherlands, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, or Switzerland. Art History in Ireland is more comparable to Art History as it is taught in Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, or in some South American countries such as Venezuela and Chile. At the same time – as I noted in my first Circa essay three years ago – the art scene in Ireland is growing exponentially, creating a gap between the creation of art and the critical and historical discourse that describes it.

Five points, then, which strike me as important ones for the current state and future prospects of Art History, theory, and criticism in Ireland.

1. Universities and art colleges could be more strongly connected.

As I write, the Crawford College of Art and Design in Cork is preparing to move to a new campus, and the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, is pondering several alternative sites. Both moves are necessitated in part by the condition of their buildings, but both will entail new connections, or disconnections, with nearby universities. Before I say what those may be, let me describe briefly the situation in America. There it is common for universities to have studio art departments. In smaller universities and liberal arts colleges, the studio art departments are amalgamated with the Art History departments: they share physical facilities and sometimes, though not always, they share courses and have common goals. The common case in larger universities is that art practice is a separate department from history of art. Either way, the studio art department is more or less a continual supplicant for funds and resources. Art historians typically spend their time in their own department, and have minimal contact with the studio art instructors. The alienation takes many forms, but I can sum it up with an anecdote from the University of Chicago. Some years ago, the Chair of the Art Practice Department petitioned the Dean of Humanities to change the name of his department to ‘Art Practice and Theory’. The petition was denied on the grounds that the practice of art has no theory. So although it seems that in America studio art is well integrated with Art History, theory, and criticism, actually they are only juxtaposed by the common configurations of universities.

The usually amicable mutual alienation of studio art and Art History in the US should be a warning. At UCC, we reached an agreement with the Crawford College of Art and Design, permitting their students to take modules at UCC, and requiring UCC students to take at least one class at the art college – preferably a class in life drawing. Those arrangements have not yet been implemented, but ideally they will be, even if the Crawford moves farther away from UCC. Such links need to be actively sought by faculty on both sides. From an art student’s point of view, it is helpful to have a solid grounding in art theory and history; and from an Art History student’s point of view it is a great help to have tried to make art, or at least to have learned some artists’ techniques.

Universities can contribute all sorts of unexpected resources for artists. In particular they can provide systematic, hierarchical, rigorous, dependable instruction on the history of art, art theory, and aesthetics. Experts in subjects such as Foucault, Deleuze, semiotics, and psychoanalysis normally work in universities, not in art schools. The same is true of the more ambitious and professionally active art historians. On the other hand, the most radical practitioners of art, and those most deeply integrated in the art world, work in art schools rather than universities. To move forward, art schools and Art History departments need to work at forming substantial, adventurous links.

At the University of Ulster, the art college was absorbed into the university, and postgraduates were encouraged to use the facilities across all four campuses. The bone of contention was the concept of research. In a meeting of the Higher Degree Research Committee, a science representative 'corrected' the representative from Art and Design, saying "you would not know: do proper research" – overlooking the fact that the representative in question had PhD and CSc degrees. In general, the entire question of 'practice-based PhDs' continues to be a vexed one, with several international publications in the offing. In that rapidly growing literature, 'research' is perhaps the crucial and most contested term.¹ The ongoing experiments with practice-based PhDs in UU, NCAD, and the Burren College of Art are exemplary, but also labile.²

Art theory in art schools is undependable. (Like most things I'm saying in this essay, I can't quantify that. But as a rule, art instructors learn their theory piecemeal, as they need it for their work. That makes for a sometimes inspiring and energetic sense of the *uses* of a text, but it doesn't always make for systematic understanding.) Some art schools in Ireland don't teach much art theory or interpretive methods such as feminisms, psychoanalysis, or institutional critique. Art schools need to engage seriously and systematically with those subjects, because for better or worse they are the lingua franca of the art world. With some brilliant exceptions, the Crawford, for example, teaches relatively little art theory, and its students are not always prepared for the discourse of the art world: many would not be viable candidates for history of art PhDs or for internationally attractive art programmes such as UCLA, CalArts, or the Whitney.

The moral I am aiming at here is that it does not matter too much whether the Crawford moves farther away from UCC, or whether or not NCAD goes to the green-field site near UCD. What is needed is concerted, ongoing effort at *merging curricula* in Art History and studio art. Art History, as a discipline, can't afford to neglect the making of art.

2. *Art History needs to continue feeling threatened by Visual Studies.*

My initial essay in 2004 was a celebration of the possibility of visual studies. Throughout the world, Visual Studies is growing and attracting students, and Art History – meaning, in this context, the study of painting, sculpture, and architecture – is under threat. Visual studies – generally speaking, the study of all visual objects, without regard to their status as 'high art' or even as art – may replace Art History in the next half-century; or Art History may remain in place and Visual Studies may disintegrate into a myriad new fields (film studies, media studies, advertising studies...). It is impossible to predict what will happen, and in a sense the long-term possibilities do not matter. In twenty years the fledgling *Journal of Visual Culture* may be a leading academic journal, or it may have long since folded. What counts is that Art History departments are currently at a crossroads. Either they accept the study of advertising, television, film, and other popular media, and expand their offerings to include such subjects, or they continue to marginalize or reject whatever is not 'Fine Art'. In the latter case film and other new media end up being taught in other departments in universities and art schools. Art history loses students, and new departments, centres, and programmes spring up to fill the student demand. This is a quandary being faced by Art History departments from Buenos Aires to Taipei: retrench, and play to one's strengths; or explore and expand, even if it means losing some traditional subjects. Of the two options, the latter is by far the more interesting and challenging choice.

At UCC, the First Arts History of Art module begins in Egypt and Greece and ends with postmodernism. Most of the year is dedicated to art from the Renaissance through the early twentieth century. Almost nothing is said about media such as photography and film, and popular imagery is only mentioned briefly. The First Arts 'world art survey' is a problem for institutions throughout the world, and I do not mean that Visual Studies is some panacea. But First Arts in UCC is significantly more restricted to the European canon than first-year courses in comparable universities in the US. Ideally, the First Arts introductory modules should be the most general and capacious of all modules, and specialization should begin afterward. An ideal form of the First Arts course would include such things as film, animation, advertising, graphics, industrial design, craft, and images in science, engineering, archaeology, and other fields.

I do not mean to point a finger at UCC exclusively. Its curriculum has remained largely unchanged during the years I have been here because History of Art at UCC is a small department, and had only been running for two years when I arrived. The First Arts module has been immensely popular, and when I arrived it had just been put in place by dint of tremendous collaborative effort. But such courses need to be changed radically and quickly, or else their solidity and popularity will be mistaken for adequacy. The most radical first-year courses are in the largest and most innovative universities – the Humboldt Universität in Berlin, Harvard, Sussex, UCLA – but there is no reason even younger, smaller departments cannot expand their offerings.

Following a First Arts course that introduces material outside the usual canon, what counts as 'Art History' can develop without bounds. At the small European Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania, it is possible to take a module on contemporary Czech street culture, including sessions on 'reading the streets' in the Czech equivalent of council estates; material on the imagery of raves; and lectures on the symbolism of syncretic New Age religions. If a country of three million can offer courses like that, then surely Irish institutions can expand their offerings. Art History in universities can move beyond the sequence Ancient-Medieval-Renaissance-Modern, and art criticism in art schools can move beyond its conventional focus on the international biennale circuit.³

3. *Non-Western art should be a priority.*

In any country, the Art History curriculum focuses on national traditions; but Ireland lacks Art History courses, streams, and specialists in Asian Art, African art, Precolumbian and native American art, and Oceanic art. UU was fortunate in having among the permanent staff an American art historian devoted to what she termed 'other cultures'; moreover, there was a specialist in Chinese and Japanese art who had obtained a professorship in China.

When it comes to subjects outside of the history of Irish art, Irish courses are still strongly centred on western Europe. There is special emphasis on such subjects as England, Neoclassicism, Palladianism, and the Grand Tour. I find the ongoing emphasis on all things English to be mainly an unfortunate leftover of colonial times – almost a kind of nostalgia. (Witness the recent boutique show at the National Gallery of Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Omal*: for whom, outside of those with a concern with Ireland's colonial past, is Reynolds of compelling interest? He is part of Art History, but a very small part. His appearance in Dublin should have been greeted with the same surprise as a totem from New Caledonia.) The stress on English art and English interests crowds out many other possible subjects. English periods and styles are part of a past that should not be looked on nostalgically, or identified with European art. The world – even the European world – is much larger. Why not study the Renaissance in Moscow, in Budapest, in Prague (all centres of Renaissance architecture)? Why not try to give equal time to the reception of the Baroque in East Asia? There is a mismatch between the wildly internationalist Irish art scene and Irish Art History's steady diet of western European post-Renaissance painting, sculpture, and architecture.

It might be objected that a smaller country, and especially one closely aligned with England and America, should naturally offer a curriculum geared to the painting, sculpture, and architecture of the past five centuries in western Europe. It is appropriate, so I have been told, that college students in Ireland learn about the Grand Tour, Palladianism, Georgian architecture, Neoclassicism, silver and stucco, Reynolds and Ruskin, Holbein and Rubens. It's as if just one part of the timeline of art, the part from Caravaggio to Canova, was enlarged, and the rest shrunken. I agree those subjects are part of Art History: but they are all, in the end, leftovers of a specifically English past. It is not necessary to continue to emphasise them. They should be allowed to drift away into the much larger ocean of world art, seen from a much more internationalist perspective – a perspective as global as the Irish economy's.

Expansion of study beyond what is called in the US the canon of 'dead White males' poses a special challenge for Irish institutions, because of the lack of qualified lecturers in those fields. But institutions could make an active effort to locate such people, and hire them as hourly lecturers to vary the existing offerings. Irish institutions have made enormous changes in the last decade; at UU, for example, the lecturers have augmented their offerings with a wide range of invited speakers, and they have rethought the Anglophone lineage by tracing it to the classics and to their revival in 15th century humanism. Film studies and media studies are increasingly on the menu. But for all that, world art is still virtually absent, and the narratives are still Western.

4. Art History and theory should seek wider methodologies.

In terms of methodology, most Irish Art History still depends on a toolbox inherited from mid-century Art History and connoisseurship: iconography, narrative analysis, style analysis, and discussions of patronage and provenance. There is relatively little evidence of the methods of the last fifty years: Foucauldian institutional critique, Marxism à la Althusser, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Peircean semiotics, deconstruction and literary theory, feminisms, queer theory. This is a large subject, but to say it in the briefest possible way: it is best to train students in the full range of techniques, and let them decide what they want to use. The equivalent would be training medical students in the stethoscope but not ultrasound, MRIs, CAT scans, or X-Rays. Unusual interpretive methods may not be apposite in every case, but they need to be at the student's disposal. Again it is difficult to find specialists in some interpretive methods, but finding them should be a priority.

(It's a sensitive subject – but really, what in this essay isn't? – but Art History in the UK is measurably different. That difference is due in no small measure to the courage and wisdom of the former Chair of the Association of Art Historians, Sir John White, who opened research to a full range of subjects, from Duccio to stiletto heels. In part because the UK is larger, and in part because it was the birthplace of Cultural Studies, its palette of methodologies is larger: that is perhaps something for the Irish Association of Art Historians to consider promoting.)

5. *The Arts Council needs to be improved.*

This last point has to do with the public engagements with art history, art theory, and visual culture; the Arts Council is important to the public awareness of art, its history, and its criticism. Despite repeated attempts, at UCC in 2003 – 2006 we made virtually no contact with the Arts Council. They are widely perceived to be out of touch, and that may be true: but it is definitely the case that they do not theorise their activities, and they are consistently inclined away from academia.

The Arts Councils in the UK were established in 1946, and while many of them already show on their websites a number of changes they wish to implement, there is a marked absence of any such move on the website of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Their online link to Governance is 'under development'; their database is not updated; and their strategic plan has nine objectives, none of which spell out a clear and measurable commitment to change.

This is not a question of money. The people in charge of ACNI seem not to be theorists or researchers. Consequently, there is no detectable shift towards redefining ACNI's purpose, responsibility, transparency or customer care. What can the Arts Councils show as their own contribution beyond quantities of ephemeral events? Queen Street Studios, *Circa*, the Ormeau Baths Galleries' *Perspective*, and the bronzes of Louise Walsh and Brian Connolly (now hidden somewhere), were all initiated by dedicated individuals.

The Arts Council of Ireland initiative on art criticism, *Critical voices*, is being carried on with virtually no historical understanding of the subject. There have been no reading groups, no seminars, no invited lectures on the history or relevant philosophies of art criticism. The Arts Council initiative is leaving almost no paper trail: no published scholarly essays, no books, no position papers – only the kinds of ephemeral art publications that are ubiquitous (and often largely unread) in the contemporary international art market. At UCC, we held a public event and are producing a book called *States of art criticism*, which involves critics from over forty countries; it has been ignored by the Arts Council.⁴ In 2005 there was an opportunity to begin writing a public history of Arts Council acquisitions, in the show *Four now* (an exhibition of Arts Council works from Northern Ireland and the Republic), but the curator decided to relinquish the normal brief of a curator; instead she let four artists choose works from the collections. They picked according to their own often idiosyncratic proclivities which were not always explained. The purpose of *Four now* was to avoid the 'master narratives' of the history of Arts Council collections: but there was nothing to avoid because no such histories exist. There is a tremendous

need to have a history of the reasons behind the collections and the actions of the Arts Council.

Let me propose two changes.

First, the Arts Councils could bring interested academics into all of their conversations. In relation to art criticism, for example, they need to know there has never been art criticism that is entirely independent of academia; and they need to know art criticism has a specific and relevant history – a history that is known to academic scholars. Initiating projects without involving experts is like trying to build a skyscraper without asking an architect how to do it. ACNI or its successor should listen to those who have expertise and strong creative drive. The principle of 'connectedness' was proposed, after all, by the fledgling Arts Councils in 1946.

Second, the Arts Councils could start producing self-reflective documents, justifying their projects and exploring the history of similar projects in the past, and in other countries. If the last twenty years of the Arts Councils' work had been documented in a series of books that explained and analysed their activities, the level of discourse on art across the island would be raised. The bar would be higher, and it would not seem appropriate to begin from a tabula rasa for each new initiative.

The points I have been making may sound hard to some, and in part they are unfair because many of these elements are in place in Irish institutions. But there is no genuinely global First Arts Art History course which gives, say, a third of the year to Asia, Africa, South America, and Oceania, and a third to images that are not Fine Art; and there is no curriculum that teaches newer methodologies and histories of contemporary art in a consistent manner, across the board, in a sequence of several years, to all students who read history of art. (I put it that way because there are a number of excellent lecturers; what is needed is more systematic and collaborative curricula.)

Ireland can compete and even excel in the current international climate, but it is necessary to do what only a few universities and art schools have done: specialise. Trinity's TRIARC initiative is a perfect example, because it means that students who want to study Irish art will gravitate to TCD. What we tried to do at UCC in 2003–2006 – to specialise in contemporary international art – would be another example. In particular, departments of Art History should stop trying to 'cover the world', and play to selected strengths. (The usual way Art History departments grow is by adding faculty to cover perceived gaps, until – if the department is large enough – it seems to more or less cover all world art.)

By restricting new lecturers to a specialised field, even a small department in a smaller institution can become nationally and even internationally prominent. On the other hand, Irish departments are not large enough to 'cover the world', even if 'the world' is defined mainly as Europe and North America. As against the qualms many rightly feel about the headlong 'progress' of visual studies, and its tendency to dilute or discard traditional art historical knowledge, it always needs to be asked: for whom is the Western canon an adequate education? It was developed for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century connoisseurs and collectors in Ireland, the US, Germany, and England – not for the twenty-first-century students of an increasingly global country.

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My first recommendation, then, is specialise: play to your strengths, and do not try to compete with the Harvards and Princetons of the world. The second, just as important, is collaborate. A nationwide conversation could easily be arranged. (The OECD has suggested such a conversation on tertiary education.) Art schools and universities could pool resources, and Ireland would very conceivably become a world leader in art studies. (It is not impossible; it just hasn't been tried on a national scale.)

Without the aggressive, energetic pursuit of goals such as these, history of art in Ireland will not be internationally prominent. A typical history of art department in a country the size of Ireland, if it does not especially concern itself with non-Western art, new methodologies, or visual studies, will probably not be internationally visible. Let me close with a somewhat gloomy portrait of such a department.

The instructors teach the nation's art, and the art of contiguous regions. Their methodology is mainly traditional. Their faculty are not particularly active as scholars. Their time is swallowed by teaching and administrative work, and they are not often visible on campus outside their department. Few change jobs, and their university can safely assume they are hired for life. Many faculty in such Art History departments could not be hired abroad even if they applied. Most of their students do not go on to postgraduate study, and those that do study in the country or in the nearest neighboring country. They tend to hire recent PhDs and MAs from their own institution or neighboring institutions. External advisors are taken from the country or from its nearest neighbor. Such departments rarely attract international postgraduate students.

With some brilliant exceptions, this gloomy picture is a fair representation of Art History in Ireland, and in a number of comparable countries. It's not an 'Irish problem': it is a problem shared by many countries in

Central and South America, central and eastern Europe, southeast Asia, the Middle East, and in those few other places in the world that teach Art History – Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Benin, Ghana, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia, and a dozen more.⁵ What I have just described, and much of what I have said in this essay, is really just a description of Art History outside the major centres.

It does not have to be that way. Ireland is the most globalized of EU countries, with a voracious economy and an increasingly diverse population. Its artists are vigorously active on the international scene. Its academic institutions are changing at an alarming rate. It has new art institutions opening every year; its art classes are often over-subscribed; it has a critical mass of wonderful teachers and theorists. It's got everything going for it. There is no reason history of art should not join in.

1 *The Printed Project on The new PhD in studio art* (Sculptor's Society of Ireland, now Visual Artists Ireland, 2004) is being expanded, with essays by Henk Slager, Victor Burgin, and Mick Wilson, for US publication; and see also *Lier en Bloag* (Dutch Society for Aesthetics), vol. 18, called *Artistic research*, edited by Annette Balkema and Henk Slager (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004); and *Thinking through art*, edited by Lin Holdridge and Katy Macleod (London: Routledge, 2005).

2 The Burren College of Art has formed a tentative partnership with UCC, in order to supervise PhDs in a university setting. At UU these developments have led to so-called 'integrated studies', launched at the end of the 1980s for the undergraduate courses in visual art and design. The postgraduate degrees also moved from the classical Art History research to a PhD degree study that included both practical and written work. The Master of Fine Art postgraduate course selected the principle of responsiveness to the art practice for electing the salient passages from the scholarship of art historians and theoreticians as available in Anglophonic culture. Some specific other sources were translated from German, Russian, and other languages to suit the students' specific needs.

3 This is not to say that eclecticism is a solution. There is no flawless Art/ Design History survey course, as I argue in *Stories of art* (2003), a response to Gombrich's *Story of art*. UU was assisted in its endeavour by the existence of the survey as a part of the prescribed A levels the candidates took before coming to their Foundation (diagnostic) year. Some academics argued for 'a bite-of-every-cherry survey course', while others preferred blocks of issue-based material delivered with some depth.

4 *States of art criticism*, edited by Michael Newman and James Elkins, vol. 4 of the series *The Art seminar* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming). The entire *Art seminar* series originated at UCC.

5 These issues are discussed in the book *Is art history global?*, with contributors from over thirty countries. The book is vol. 3 in the *Art seminar* series; it was based on a roundtable discussion held at UCC in 2005 (New York: Routledge, forthcoming). See also *World art studies*, edited by Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (Leiden, forthcoming).

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