

## Introduction

Anne Goarzin, Valérie Morisson and Mathew Staunton

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/8751>  
DOI: [10.4000/etudesirlandaises.8751](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.8751)  
ISSN: 2259-8863

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

### Printed version

Date of publication: 24 September 2020  
Number of pages: 7-11  
ISSN: 0183-973X

### Electronic reference

Anne Goarzin, Valérie Morisson and Mathew Staunton, « Introduction », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 45-1 | 2020, Online since 24 September 2020, connection on 30 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/8751> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.8751>

---



*Études irlandaises* est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Partage dans les Mêmes Conditions 4.0 International.

## Introduction

This special issue of *Études irlandaises* is dedicated to the arts. It deliberately privileges conversations with artists and practitioners, and aims at giving readers an insight into current artistic practices in Ireland with an emphasis on new technological, conceptual or political contexts. Before delving into the questions raised in the volume, we would like to extend our warmest thanks to the contributors and to the artists for generously accepting to answer our questions: their unwavering engagement and critical alertness to rapidly changing times are an incentive for us as scholars.

The volume spans a wide range of fields, from the applied arts to lens-based works and theatre and offers an insight into artistic practices and their contexts. One underlying question here, raised by Irish art critic Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, is that of the possible subordination of content to form. The relationship between content and form, politics and aesthetics looms large throughout the collection and it is hoped that these contributions will fuel this ongoing dialectic. Another central theme is the impact of technology on artistic practices and creation, possibly leading to hybridization. Finding a balance between continuity and change, artists experiment with multiple techniques, chart their course across traditional skills and state-of-the-art technology thereby forging their own creative path. The featured interviews foreground specific artists and practitioners, and map out a changing artistic scene in which tradition and innovation intersect while drawing our attention to their capacity for renewal and adaptation.

All the contributions gathered here bear witness to the sweeping changes which have affected artistic creation in Ireland since the 1970s: Helena Walsh explains how performance in the 1970s was a means for artists to respond to specific socio-political realities, oppression, violence or gender-inequalities; Brian Hand evokes the “culture wars” of the 1980s, at a time when artistic activism could thrive only in the margins of mainstream cultural spheres and conservatism stifled artistic initiatives, while indirectly stimulating radical or alternative forms and organizations; Karen Daye-Hutchinson remembers there were too few galleries and studios in Belfast back in the 1990s. Many artists in the Republic have equally pointed out that the dearth of exhibition spaces at that time led many students to leave for brighter horizons. Undeniably, the oppressive policies of the 1980s and the lack of opportunities offered to young artists have faded but their staunch commitment most certainly has not. There is unabated willingness on the part of artists to engage and respond, as evidenced by the involvement of collectives in the recent campaign to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment or by the response to the so-called migration “crisis”, notably addressed in Ailbhe Ní Bhriain’s most recent works.

Also discussed in the volume is the impact of the changing economic climate, including the opening to international markets or clients and the 2008 recession, on artistic strategies and opportunities as well as on teaching at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD). Much has been written on how the collapse of the Celtic Tiger is reflected in Irish arts and how it has both affected opportunities for artists and spurred some to find work abroad. The crisis and the ensuing cuts in public spending show that, as Brian Hand says, “nothing stays static or fixed”. Contributors Hand and McGarry alike explain the impact of government-led development programs on artistic engagement, albeit in slightly diverging ways. In her article on abject femininity in Willie Doherty’s videos, Kate Antosik-Parsons outlines the specific context of the Troubles but she also emphasizes the constant political instability, especially as Brexit makes border issues and the spectres of misrepresentation resurface. Karen Daye-Hutchinson, who grew up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, assesses the impact of the 2016 flag and emblem protests in Belfast upon her artistic activities. Eva Urban, in her piece on the recent co-production of J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (directed by Oonagh Murphy for the Dublin Theatre Festival), also notes that Murphy was doubly influenced by the socio-political history of the Derry/ Donegal border in the 1980s and Brexit: here the new political contexts shaped the staging of a play that makes for “an artful parody of shifting notions of power, social position, leadership, and heroism”. The spectres which haunt Synge’s play are akin to the ghosts of colonization in Ailbhe Ní Bhriain’s works. As Ian Joyce and Mathew Staunton claim in their critical essay, art is ceaselessly recontextualized.

The works discussed in this issue, some of them reproduced with the kind permission of the artists, illustrate how today’s political and social challenges echo other episodes of Irish history. Through their evocation of the past – Irish mythology, the Magdalene Laundries, the 1916 Rising, the physical traces of the past in the landscape – artists raise issues that are acutely relevant to contemporary identity politics, the issues related to biopolitics and biopower but also, more optimistically, the emergence of new ways of living together.

The various crises briefly alluded to above have provided opportunities to reassess or challenge traditions and conceive new forms. As the promises of progress became more obviously fraught and with the teleological promises of modernism behind us, experimentation – the potential for improvisation, instability and uncertainty – may also bring new promises, says Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, noting that the reality of living in an image-saturated epoch has intensified so tremendously that artists have grown distrustful of images/imagery and have increasingly been drawn to process-based art. This applies forcefully to Willie Doherty’s and Ian Joyce’s works. The pitfalls of modernism are spelled out in Ian Joyce and Mathew Staunton’s essay equally addressing the joint issues of historicity and contemporaneity. Tapping into T. S. Eliot’s “historical sense” they reconcile the circularity of time and the impermanence of things both encapsulated in the Irish landscape, more precisely the bog. For Ní Bhriain, the prospect – and sudden reality – of collapse, catastrophe and disaster has brought art closer to a “boundary state” and forged new critical tools that artists may endorse.

Even though Irish artists have long responded to local realities, they have never ceased to look beyond the pale and across borders. Many of these contributions summon central critical figures – Claude Levi-Strauss, Edward Said, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva or Gregory Sholette – whose writings were crucial in broadening the creative horizon of Irish artists. Back in the 1980s, Field Day and *CIRCA* also played a key role in disseminating new paradigms. Brian Hand remembers the days when he was an art student in Dublin, at a time of heated debates on postmodernism, feminism, Marxism and emerging art forms. The spectre of Adorno's philosophy hovers over Ian Joyce and Mathew Staunton's essay, which pays tribute to Edvard Munch's *The Scream* and relates the German uncanny with the Irish *Uaigneas*. Helena Walsh recalls the visit of Joseph Beuys in 1975 and the influence of Marina Abramović on Irish performance artists. In her article on Willie Doherty's videos, Kate Antosik-Parsons hints at the influence of James Coleman. Eva Urban interprets Oonagh Murphy's recent direction of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in an international context, proposing a decidedly intercultural reading of the play, while showing that the themes of deception, violence, or oppression which infuse Synge's text also permeate international politics, populism and social media. Far from underrating their attachment to the Irish culture and identity, these artists insightfully conflate context-related thoughts and tradition to think anew.

On the upside, this is also a time when artists are studying, exhibiting and curating shows in Ireland and abroad. Creative borders are dissolving: "We want and need to engage with the world on our doorstep and far beyond" Derek McGarry says, for these are "fluid landscapes" – a fit phrase to describe the dynamics of the works of the artists mentioned or interviewed in this volume. This is also reflected through the current hybridization of processes and techniques in artistic creation in Ireland, which may be seen as an encouraging symptom of the reconciliation of tradition and modernity, or of national culture and international trends. There is no dearth of collaborations either, some of which can be traced to specific contexts – with art collectives such as Random Access in the field of sculpture, the Women Artists' Action Group, the Belfast Print Workshop, the Craft and Design Collective or Catalyst Arts in Belfast acting as a driving force and generating much creative energy. Brian Hand sketches out the history of Blue Funk and Random Access, which testifies to the vitality of alternative art entities in the 1980s, at a time when provincialism muffled creation and contemporary art was hardly supported by national institutions. Fabrice Mourlon's interview with Karen Daye-Hutchinson provides a sense of the momentum given to crafts by collaborative endeavours such as Space Craft (created in Belfast in 1997), which facilitated creation as much as commercialization.

Within the NCAD, groups of young artists invigorated by the literary and critical experiments of Field Day (the importance of which cannot be overstated) started working together, blending techniques and mixing media. As Derek McGarry, the Head of Innovation at NCAD explains, the school has always encouraged cross-fertilization and studio work; collaborative workshops and residencies

broadened prospects for today's art students. The combination of collaborative creation and independently curated shows has also allowed artists to transform fragmented or ephemeral creative currents into a sweeping groundswell. Even though departments in art schools are still structured according to media, artists often choose to implement hybrid practices, to experiment with diverse techniques and blend traditional processes with innovative technology.

"I'm interested in hybrid forms as a response to the increasingly unsettling times we are in" Ní Bhriain explains, and so are many of the artists featured in this volume, who work across a wide range of media. Ní Bhriain's own practice combines images and sound and she regularly collaborates with musicians. Willie Doherty's works hinge on image-sound relation and rely upon the skills of actors. Ian Joyce, Ailbhe Ní Bhriain and Karen Daye-Hutchinson have considerably renewed printmaking by blending techniques, revisiting traditional know-how and transferring skills across media while also incorporating new technologies. Ní Bhriain mixes printmaking, tapestry and virtual imagery; Daye-Hutchinson combines jewelry and etching thanks to very modern processes; Joyce, who also experiments with a wide array of forms and techniques, makes the visual and the textual coalesce into experimental forms, thereby flouting media-specificity. The three artists draw much of their inspiration from literary texts, poems or essays and weave narrative fragments into their works.

The articulation between continuity and renewal is also central to the field of Irish design, which has a long and rich history and an expertise that is internationally acknowledged, as Derek McGarry notes. Students in design at NCAD are encouraged to "look beyond the perceived boundaries" and to respond to the needs of innovative public and private companies by combining traditional skills and innovative thinking, and balancing studio-practice and on-line learning. The permanence of embodied practices, the unaltered pleasure derived from materiality, the constant renewal in the making process are highlighted in several interviews and essays. Experimentation is key here. Many of the artists interviewed indulge the fascination and excitement prompted by what Ailbhe Ní Bhriain calls "material uncertainty". Stuart Cairns, whose work stands at the crossroads between fine arts and applied arts, celebrates materiality as "the initial point of excitement". Wedded to embodied practices, site-specificity is central to the works and projects of the artists scrutinized in this issue. Both Stuart Cairns and Ian Joyce relish direct physical contact with the land, immersing themselves in their natural environment and reclaiming a connection of the senses as primary material for creation. Joyce and Staunton's joint reflection on the concepts carried by the Irish-language words *Uaigneas* ("loneliness", "sadness") and *Duibheagán* ("depths") unlocks creative meanderings and affords an insight into Joyce's artistic journey into the material landscapes of the bog.

Although nothing can be said to be stable or certain and as past history keeps colliding with present events or criss-crossing in sometimes disturbing ways, this collection nevertheless retains a sense of optimism. It owes it to the confidence and adaptiveness of artists, which has continuously fuelled creativity, innovation,

and critical awareness. In the present context, we view this set of texts as a joyful acknowledgement of connectedness – to place, to materiality, to people, to history, and to a future which, now more than ever, calls for response-ability in the face of the current social, political crises and environmental challenges.

Anne GOARZIN

*Université Rennes 2*

Valérie MORISSON

*Université de Bourgogne Franche-Comté*

Mathew STAUNTON

*École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs – ENSAD*