National College of Art and Design

Faculty : Fine Art
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The Douglas Hyde Gallery
A review of Exhibition Policies and Programming

by

Caroline McCarthy

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INTRODUCTION

"Visitors to Avis Newman's Vicious Circle, the latest exhibition at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, encounter a spartan environment ... It is in short, exactly the kind of exhibition we have come to expect in the Hyde : austere, minimally stated ... But we are reassured in a printed handout that the work 'is informed by philosophical ideas' though 'an understanding of this background is not crucial to an appreciation of the exhibition.' Translation : It's intellectually respectable so don't worry your little head about it, just make the right noises." (Dunne, 1993.)

The above is part of the opening paragraph to Aidan Dunne's uncompromising critical review of an exhibition by Avis Newman which came to the Douglas Hyde Gallery in February 1993. This article was not so much an attack on Newman as it was on the Hyde and its present exhibition and curatorial policies. Dunne thus initiated the first public debate of its kind in Ireland involving art critics, gallery directors, artists and members of the public concerning the supposed function/role and exhibition policies of the Douglas Hyde at the turn of the decade. The arrival of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (I.M.M.A.) and the subsequent renewal of the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art have led to a growing fear that the gallery is retreating to become "an altogether quieter, cagier presence on the Irish Art scene becoming more and more insular" ... neglecting the duties a public gallery has to artists and to the wider public ... "reflecting the rarified, refined aesthetic of it's director." (Dunne, 1993.) Dunne's critique was unusual in Ireland, but the content of his writing, and that of other Irish critics, increasingly reflects the content of international critique - "Instead of simply giving the experience of art, a critic today walking into a major international show in addition to being concerned with questions such as Why were so few women artists represented? What social and political attitudes seem prevalent in the work? and Why at this moment are those being selected out in a major international show? (Nairne, 1987, p80.)

One would presume that an international 'survey' show would provide the best perception of contemporary art at a given time and place. Most people who visit these 'art fairs' believe the curator to be expert in his/her subject and many thus feel intimidated by this level of knowledge. Sadly, the art mega show is becoming nothing short of a "an elaborately disguised battle ground" where "selectors, art dealers and critics meet to promote their favourites, air their prejudices, crush reputations, chew up each other's credibilities ... proclaiming themselves sole protagonists of the Avant-Garde." (Kennedy, 1983, p19.)

For the onlooker there is little room for questioning or doubt as one focuses attention on art that is reputed to be of high quality. "By selection, association and interpretation, curators help to reinforce certain clusters of meanings and to ignore others." (Lumley, 1988, p121.) For the unsuspecting viewer, the Biennales and Documentas are a good day out with tours, food and souvenirs, the provision of which is probably "A response to the newly aggressive and competitive leisure market in which museums and galleries have found themselves placed." (Hooper, 1991, p135.) Indeed in America and Europe visiting museums and galleries, with their steadily increasing audience, has become a popular way to spend leisure time. The Pompidou Centre in Paris draws an annual total of 7.3 million visitors, the Tate Gallery in London has jumped from 500,000 visitors per year in the mid-1950's to 1,300,000 in 1985 and visitors to the Whitney Biennal, a survey exhibition of contemporary American art have trebled over the last ten years. One of the problems with these type of art shows is that their success may tempt curators to step into the limelight to join the cult of celebrities and promote their own egos. For instance, one famous international curator, Jan Hoet, admitted the shift in attention away from the artists work or person towards "The latest exhibition of such and such

an exhibition maker" and "There is no denying that he thoroughly enjoys this status" (Quoted from L'Exposition Imaginaire, 1989, p8.)

At his latest exhibition 'Documenta IX' at Kassel, Germany in 1992, Hoet proved this point. Every opportunity, from appearing on television ("an exercise in megalomania" - Vercruysse, 1992, p14.) to the merchandising of souvenirs, where one could purchase everything from T-shirts to cigarette packets - all bearing Jan Hoet's name! - was taken to reinforce the idea of the exhibition curator as the rising star. The counterside of this late twentieth century shift in attention from the artist to the exhibition maker is that it highlights the dilemma faced by artists in that the decision to include an artist in a major show or indeed to offer him/her a one person show lies very much at the discretion of the gallery director.

> "It is still assumed in some quarters that museums are neutral environments and that museum activities - collecting, recording, researching and exhibiting - can be carried out without bias. Some museum professionals see themselves as uniquely qualified to be objective. But museum curators are only human. They have their own political allegiances and religion and lack of faith. They may be blinkered by their class background, their race, or their sex." (Lumley, 1988, p99.)

Unfortunately the art world is dominated by a small number of influential art dealers, critics and curators, and practice often contradicts theory in that the artist is often the last person to be taken into consideration.

Although there are no Jan Hoets in Ireland, the fact is that here as elsewhere, the promotion of artists and the future of art is largely controlled by a few individuals, namely, critics, collectors, gallery owners, curators and directors. It is worth noting, for example, that the nomination of Willie Doherty and Dorothy Cross to Venice Biennale in 1993 was decided by the directors of the four main public galleries of contemporary art in Dublin - John Hutchinson,

Declan McGonagle, Barbara Dawson and Ciaran McGonigal - directors of the Douglas Hyde, I.M.M.A., the Hugh Lane and the R.H.A. Galleries respectively.

It is only recently, since the advent of I.M.M.A., that public art institutions in Dublin have been subjected to critical analysis. With increased competition for leisure time and increasingly unreliable funding for many institutions, it has become necessary for museums and galleries to clarify their aim and their function in society.

The concept of how public art museums should act as public service is, rightly, a changing one. Their most important characteristic is that they facilitate an encounter between visitor and art object. Museums and art galleries originated during the nineteenth century as educational self-help initiatives for the working and middle classes. They were seen as neutral spaces where all classes within society might spend their time in fruitful and educational leisure. (Hooper Greenhill, ,p15.) However, leading into the twentieth century this idea changed as public museums became increasingly elitist. At the National Gallery in London "calls were heard to exclude working people for at least part of the time because on the one hand, the impure mass of ammoniacal vapor that the crowd exuded condensed on the surface of the paintings and damaged them, but also because such uneducated and unrefined people could not appreciate the paintings and were in the way of those who could." (ibid, p19.)

Thankfully the wheel has turned full circle and with the rise in the number of museums comes an awareness of the huge degree of responsibility a gallery and it's director has in serving artists and the public. That museum exhibitions are now appealing to a wider, better informed and more discriminating audience is marvellous.

Of course, there is no set role or function for a public gallery or museum. Each institution is individual and their role is determined by a number of factors

such as funding, geographical situation, it's relation to the role of other museums, the political, social and cultural mood of the locality etc. These factors are important when deciding a specific exhibition policy. "The greatest influence on a museum's exhibition policy should come from it's overall policy, and any detailed exhibition policy must be in accordance with the general philosophy of the museum. Thus, such issues as the nature of the museum's approach to communicating, the image the museum wishes to project, the type and content of the material to be communicated, and the people with whom the museum particularily wishes to make contact should have been determined, and it is for the exhibition policy to relate these overall decisions to the exhibition situation." (Belcher, 1991,p70.)

Up until 1991, "The Douglas Hyde's claim to be the foremost gallery of contemporary art south of the border had not been challenged for the best part of a decade." (Hutchinson, 1991, p21.) During the 1980's the Douglas Hyde Gallery had more or less everything its own way. None of the public galleries were able to put up much in the way of competition. Although the gallery was not a 'National Art Institution' as such - neither in name, it's set up, nor it's funding - due to absence of anything else the D.H.G. assumed the role of the city's, and the country's, premier modern art institution. The Hyde became a flagship for contemporary Irish art and "played a vigorous and pivotal role in the development and perceptions of Irish art throughout the decade." (Dunne, 1993.) For an artist working in Ireland during the 1980's, to exhibit at the Douglas Hyde was considered quiet an achievement.

Now with a number of public contemporary art galleries operating in the city, it is natural that they should be compared. It would seem inevitable that comparison, coupled with a knock-on effect from abroad of a general scepticism

for gallery curators, is likely to invite a critical analysis of how these institutes should function.

Although the Douglas Hyde newspaper debate in Spring 1993 may have caused a certain amount of alarm among the Irish Art Community "a public discussion on the Hyde's artistic policy is a measure of sophistication and excitement that now accompanies the visual arts scene in Dublin." (Murphy, 1993.) Debate is healthy and questioning existing policy, structures and functions shows a genuine concern amongst the art community for the future of institutional cultural practice.

It is my intention to examine the policy and role of the Douglas Hyde before and after the advent of I.M.M.A. It is also my intention to examine the ways in which the gallery programming policies have helped to construct perceptions of Irish and International art for it's public.

The first chapter will discuss the growth of interest in the visual arts around the 1970's which gave rise to a need for a suitable venue in which Irish artists could have international mediation and also which would bring national and international art to the Irish public.

The second chapter discusses the period between 1984 and 1990 when the gallery was taken over by a new director, Patrick Murphy. I will discuss the exhibition policy during his time concentrating on the two major survey shows of that period, namely, 'Directions Out' and 'A New Tradition.'

The third chapter will examine the present exhibition policy employed at the Douglas Hyde which is based on the concepts of 'Identity and Transformation'. I will also discuss how the advent of I.M.M.A. has effected the current position and policy of the Douglas Hyde Gallery, and how these concepts of 'Identity and Transformation' compare to those of I.M.M.A's 'Inheritance and Transformation.'

Chapter 1 : The Emergence and Development of the D.H.G.

"Now it is common place to say that the Irish are a literary and imaginative people but they are visually blind. While this is not strictly true it is not remote from the truth." (O'Doherty, 1971.)

It is true to say that before the 1970's, Ireland paid great attention to its writers, such as Joyce, Beckett, Yeats and Swift whilst the visual arts went virtually unnoticed. Nevertheless, a number of promising events proved to stir the art scene during the 1970's.

Ireland's first national and international survey show, ROSC, began in 1967. The birth of ROSC, as stated in it's first catalogue, showed the existence of a "great renewal and fertilization of modern Irish Art." (ROSC, 1967.) ROSC had an enormous impact, "A series of impressive exhibitions have consistently ensured that Irish people have had the opportunity to see at first hand a representative cross-section of international arts activity." (Dunne, 1990, p24.) From the beginning of the 1970's it was evident that many of the younger Irish artists were becoming frustrated with the status quo which was determined by the cool modernist style of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. However, Living Art underwent a dramatic transformation when the veteran committee was succeeded by a smaller, younger and outward-looking committee, whose annual show became renowned for its energy and conviction.

At the National College of Art and Design ensuing tensions regarding teaching methods boiled over into real conflict in the early 1970's. The dispute was finally settled "but from the mid 1970's, the notion of a career in fine art was firmly established in the minds of a whole new generation of art students." (Dunne, 1990, p22.)

Due to an arousal of interest in contemporary art and an increase in artistic activity, and due partly to the marginal role played by the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin was considered chronically short of substantial exhibition space.

The Arts Council, decisively restructured in 1973, was given a wider brief and increased funding. Thus the council was actively involved in providing venues. The first of these institutions was the present Project Arts Center (1975) which was an 'alternative', multi-purpose space with emphasis on younger, more experimental artists. Soon after the Project, the Douglas Hyde Gallery, a significant co-operative venture between the Arts Council and Trinity College, was launched.

The Hyde was an extension of the original 'College Gallery' located within the grounds of Trinity whose aim was to promote interest in the visual arts in the college, particularily amongst students. The College Gallery was also interested in acquiring a permanent collection. The Douglas Hyde - an illustrious name - essentially held the same aim but, unlike the College Gallery which functioned more as a private internal body, the Hyde extended it's aim to servicing the public. Both the college and the Arts Council contributed to the running expenses. "By this decision the Arts Council has recognised that there is here a facility of major public importance, to this city and to the country as a whole." (Dawson, 1978, p2.) The gallery set itself the task of making up for the backlog of 'modern masters' whose work had not previously been seen in the country. The Douglas Hyde was to be a temporary exhibitions space which, as well as bringing major exhibitions of international standing, intended also to stage several shows by Irish artists.

As outlined in his exhibitions policy, Sean McCrum, Exhibitions Officer, hoped that the selection of types of exhibitions would appeal to a very wide

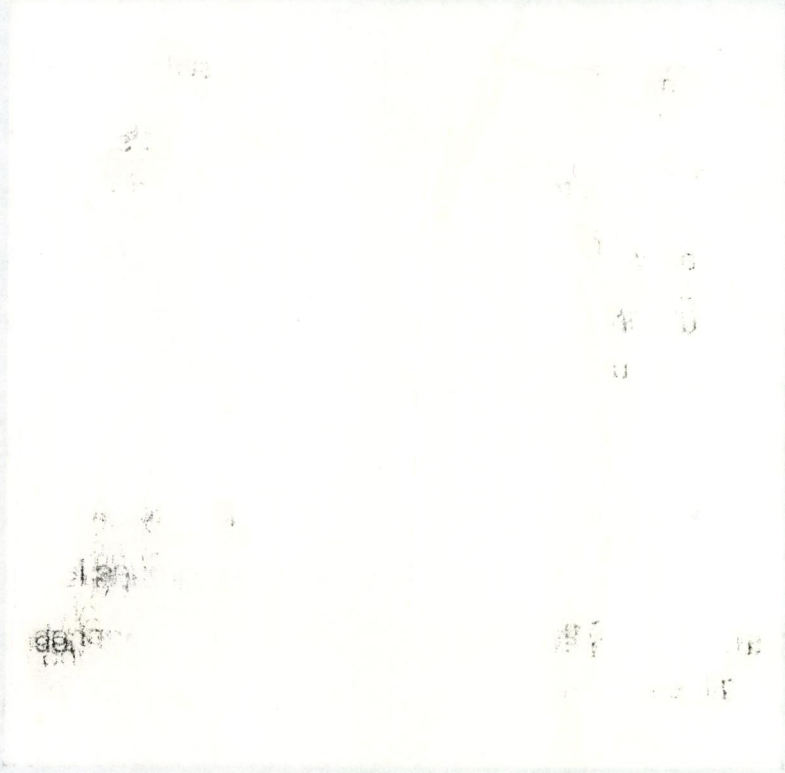
variety of tastes and interests. "The gallery does not want to become stereotyped as showing only one type of work which would appeal only to a small group." (McCrum, 1978, p4.)

The Douglas Hyde opened on the 28th of March 1978 with an exhibition of trade union banners entitled "Marching Workers" and widespread criticism of Paul Koraleks design for the exhibition space.

> "This criticism centered on the gratuitously intrusive architecture (practically every wall is broken up by some architectural feature or other) the pokey side areas, wholly inadequate administrative space, bad lighting and difficulty of access." (Walsh, 1991, p2.)

Although access to the gallery requires a walk of only about twenty yards from the city centre location of Nassau Street it is likely that a first time viewer would be repelled by the sight of the grey, concrete tunnel which serves as a passage to the gallery entrance. Artists and critics alike expressed dissatisfaction with this exhibition space. Edward Kienhalz, at the time of his exhibition in 1981 described the architecture of the gallery as "really hostile to art; it is really hostile to the environment too. I mean anybody who really loves art will not design a gallery that is really bland." (Walsh, 1991, p22.) Bruce Arnold on a number of occasions, explicitly expressed his dislike of the gallery's physical space describing it as "relentlessly bleak with it's grey and rough concrete floor ... power points here and there." (Arnold, 1990.) Incidentally the gallery used to be covered with brown carpeting which was removed for the Anselm Kiefer exhibition in June 1990 revealing the grey concrete beneath which became part of Kiefer's work. Curiously, the floor covering was never replaced, the crudity of the concrete now featuring in the work of all artists to follow Kiefer.

ill.1 : D.H.G. Entrance, Nassau Street.



In a more recent article Arnold asserts that the gallery is "one of the gloomiest that Dublin or the country offers to art lovers ... Indeed, so dire the atmosphere, so grey the welcome, so cave-like the interior, that the idea of conveying visitors as 'lovers' of art is an absurd one. 'Sufferers' would be more appropriate ... One leaves the gallery as though released from a prison term, punished, abused, bewildered, ill-prepared for a life of freedom, involving choice and freedom." (Arnold, 1992.) Although one can sympathise for his lack of affection for the gallery space, his statement is still somewhat extreme. The space does have advantages. With a ceiling height of approximately seventeen feet in the main area, the gallery does have the ability to house very tall pieces of work such as Michael Warren's wooden standing sculptures (1989) or facilitate a sculpture like Dorothy Cross's *'Bed'* (1993) which was attached onto the wall a few inches from the ceiling.

Despite the advantage of height, the gallery's running length is surprisingly short. One major advantage that the D.H.G. has over other galleries is the option of viewing a piece of work from either the ground level or the balcony. Leaving the balcony, there is often a feeling of claustrophobia as one descends the stairs into a space almost devoid of natural light, into a cave-like subterranean. "Lighting, in addition to facilitating vision, can also provide an aesthetic experience which can effect the visitor in a variety of ways, including the creation of different moods." (Belcher, p126.) With four window - remote central shutters - running the full height of the main area of the exhibition hall and with various types of spotlight, it is possible to achieve great flexibility with lighting. Nonetheless, a formula of closed windows and subdued spotlighting has become the norm for the gallery which, compared to the bright, airiness of I.M.M.A., creates an austere and heavy atmosphere. One feels the same inhibitions when visiting a cathedral or going round a public library. Every piece

ill.2 : Demonstrating effective use of the gallery space.
(Dorothy Cross's " EBB " installation, 1988

is approached with the same excessive reverence and unduly respect. On one particular visit to the Douglas Hyde Gallery I realised the extent to which this mystifying atmosphere affects a piece of art work. Having paced mournfully around a huge bell sculpture by Vivienne Roche, I proceeded slowly to the next piece. From the corner of my eye I noticed a young man approach the bell which I had just been studying. He looked at it for a few minutes. Suddenly, without hesitation, he reached under, and grabbing the clanger he lashed it against the inside of the bell. The bell rang furiously loud (and joyfully) throughout the gallery. Pandemonium followed - a raging attendant and a panic stricken desk girl. I hurriedly sped from the scene, laughing and enlightened by the experience!

While Trinity was responsible for incorporating the gallery into it's new building and would cover costs such as the general running of the gallery, it was decided that the Arts Council would provide funding for exhibitions. The annual budget fixed by the government for the arts was hopelessly inadequate, the amount of per capita expenditure through the Arts Council in the early 1980's being £1.50 as compared to £5.80 in the U.K. Furthermore, only 6.2% of this budget was allocated to the visual arts to support galleries, exhibitions and promotions. The lack of funding and support from the government - in terms of policy or long term aims for the arts - meant that the Council was in an unstable position, simply having to make the best use of available resources.

In 1977, two representatives from the Arts Council along with seven Trinity academics and six students made up an Exhibitions Committee for the Douglas Hyde. Despite the Arts Council's direct involvement they did not take a particularly proactive role in the gallery at this time. A degree of tension developed between the Arts council and Trinity members regarding the differences in the perceived role of the gallery. There was concern about the

lack of attention being paid to contemporary Irish Art; the approach by the Trinity members was one of focusing on mainstream international trends with a secondary role for contemporary Irish Art. The lack of funding needed for major international shows meant that the Hyde had to resort to exhibitions of lesser work resulting in an "absurd texture" and incoherency in it's exhibitions programmes. Indeed, "there was a widely held view that the management of the gallery and it's artistic policy rested in the hands of amateurs lacking in arts administration expertise and out of step with current developments in the Art World." (Walsh, 1991, pp22/23.)

The situation came to a head in 1982, following the Kienholz exhibition which incurred a massive deficit. The Arts Council took this opportunity to argue that the gallery was now in receipt of significant amounts of public funding and that it's programme structure was no longer suitable for a major, publicly supported arts facility. With this, Arts Council funding was withdrawn and Sean McCrum resigned. Thus, the first significant attempt to provide a stable venue in which to bring contemporary art to Ireland appeared to be failing.

Simultaneously other developments occurred elsewhere in the city. In 1979 the first co-operative studio was founded by four female artists. In 1981 'Circa' magazine was issued in Belfast as a direct response to the need for discussion among artists. CAFE - Creative Activity For Everyone - was set up in 1983. By the mid 1980's Neo-Expressionism was widely perceived as the most exciting phenomenon in Irish Art. With the acceleration of interest in the visual arts, it reinforced the obvious need for a gallery space whose staff could ensure efficiency in serving both artists and the public.

As a result of Trinity College and the Arts Councils failure to pursue a set of clearly defined terms of reference for the role of the gallery and it's exhibition

policy, it's role as a contemporary arts venue did not develop until six years after it opened.

During the years 1982 to 1984, Trinity and the Arts Council negotiated the restructuring of the gallery's management. Relationships between Board and Director were significantly adjusted; previously the Board retained overall control of the policy but now the Director was given greater control over the selection of the exhibitions. An external advisor - Nick Serota - was brought in to oversee the appointment of the new Director, and Patrick J. Murphy, the Arts Council's Visual Arts Officer, was nominated for the post, taking up the position in 1984.

Chapter 2 - The Douglas Hyde , 1984 → 1991 .

Murphy's appointment to the post suggested "a pointer to a new professionalism." (Fallon, 1984.) The immediate effects of Murphy's directorship was tighter financial control and administration. By abandoning the policy of catching up on the backlog of twentieth century art, which in any event the D.H.G. did not have the cash to deliver, Murphy chose instead to construct a policy contemporary in outlook, thus accommodating artists who were becoming established in Ireland during the 1980's such as Maguire, Cross, Mulcahy - artists who lacked an arena for international mediation.

By giving these artists major one person shows and a good quality catalogue and by sandwiching these artists between carefully selected international artists, the Director sought to give their exhibition a wider context enabling us to compare our own artists with those practicing on the international circuit and, to establish that developments in Irish art are as valid as elsewhere. The promotional effects of these policies can be seen today. As mentioned earlier, Ireland for the first time in thirteen years became a participant in the Venice Biennale in 1993, represented by Cross and Doherty - two artists pioneered by the Douglas Hyde Gallery throughout the 1980's.

By the end of the 1980's, the Douglas Hyde had earned the reputation of "the foremost gallery of contemporary art in the country." (Hutchinson, 1991, p21.) This success was largely due to increased funding by the Arts Council - ranging between £110,000 in 1985 to £125,000 in 1990, the continued financial support of Trinity College, improved management and Murphy's increased independence as Director of the gallery. Murphy had, in practice, sufficient

independence to develop the gallery as he saw fit. No exhibition recommended by him to the Board was rejected.

During the 1980's a revolution was taking place in Irish politics especially with regard to women's rights. Joan Fowler states that during the Abortion and Divorce referenda, mooted in 1983 and 1986 respectively, women's issues were at the "cutting edge" of Southern politics and "while equality for women is more elusive and complex than it at first appeared, the concept has enabled women artists to work for changes in women's representations in art exhibitions and art institutes." (Fowler, 1990, p56.)

By the late 1980's the question of 'equality' had clearly emerged within the exhibition policy of the Douglas Hyde. In 1988, Leon Golub and Nancy Spero - who happen to be actual partners - held a joint exhibition where the hanging of the show was of equal significance to the work itself. Spero's work, which was a number of long and narrow printed friezes depicting female figures, was hung so that it surmounted the paintings by Golub beneath. From an aesthetic point of view it may have been better to hang smaller prints above Golub's larger ones but stretching one's head back in order to view Speros small figures some ten to fifteen feet above eyelevel was absurd. Apparently this particular hanging arrangement was preconceived by Spero. It was her intention for it to be read as a metaphor for women's position in the visual arts as well as that in society - one of speaking from the margins. The Golub-Spero exhibition was a turning point with respect to the representation of women artists within the Douglas Hyde's exhibition policy. Despite the major innovative role played by women artists such as Mainie Jellet, Evie Hone, etc., these women and their successors would have been hard pressed to see their work represented in the Douglas Hyde; between the period 1978 to 1987 there were thirty eight solo exhibitions

only four of which were by women. Hence female artists leaving college in the 1970's would have, in a sense, entered a world of isolation, a cultural vacuum.

The exhibition 'Directions Out' held at the Hyde during April 1987 demonstrated the degree of discrimination within the institute. This show dealt with a range of responses to the politics of the North of Ireland. The work of twelve Northern artists featured, all of who were male. Patrick Murphy although not entirely responsible for this show nevertheless chose it's curator Brian McAvera. McAvera "concentrated upon the thematic angle, looking at those artists whose work at been formed by the post 1969 situation and who reflect or refract the political, religious and social tenor of life in the province," the intended result being an exhibition in which to "contextualise and elucidate the artists intentions." (McAvera, 1987, pp 1 & 8.)

The exclusion of women from the show was as McAvera said himself, "a glaring omission." His excuse of resisting "tokenism just to satisfy some numerical notion of representation" because "women do not seem to be working in the areas considered by the show" is unjustifiable, (ibid, 1987,) The "blunt fact" that Northern Irish women artists do not confront political issues in their work is untrue. One need only look at the work of Catherine McWilliams, Deirdre O'Connell, Mhairi Sutherland, Pauline Cummins, Una Walker or Rita Duffy. His reason for excluding these artists was because he felt that their work was preoccupied with the counter reaction to male domination - which is, the assertion of feminine individuality. I would question McAvera's decision in relation to these exclusions. For example, Rita Duffy uses the image of Mother Ireland as part of an on-going examination of the roles played by women in Northern Ireland. But as Belinda Loftus states in her analysis of Irish national symbols "Mother Ireland still lives, still shapes the political perception of those in the Northern Ireland conflict." (Loftus, 1990, p77.)

Apart from the obvious exclusion of women from the show, male artists such as Alistair McLennan and David Crone were also excluded, despite their long standing dedication to political issues within their art work. Their omission was presumably due to their inability to fulfill the criteria of what McAvera deemed 'political art' to be.

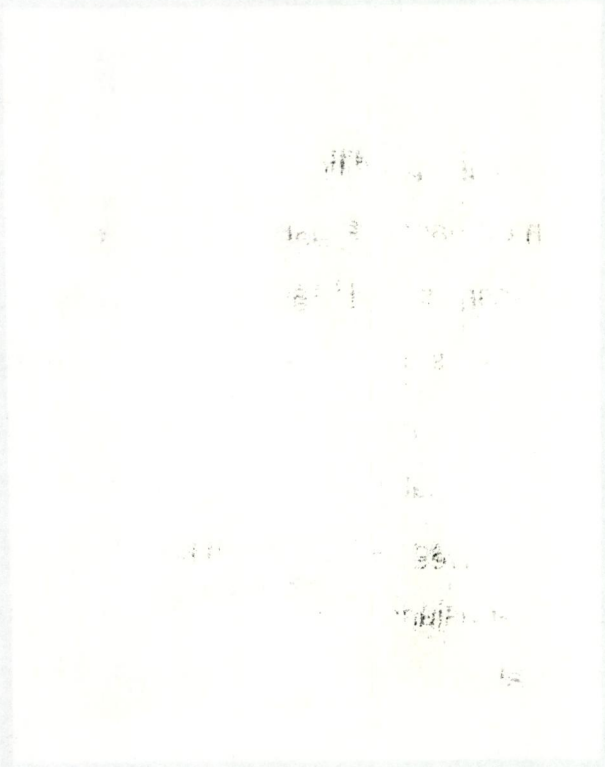
The question 'What is political art?' is problematic. Can such a term be defined? In his book 'Art, Politics and Ireland' McAvera states that there is no school of political art in Ireland. Yet throughout the exhibition and indeed in the catalogue, the opposite would appear to be true. In his catalogue analysis of Northern Irish political art McAvera deeply stresses the "oblique" or "indirect" approach of Northern artists, the ambiguity and layered meanings found in their work, a result of a distrust for the media and rhetoric used by politicians and paramilitary forces. Such art he describes with terms such as "iconoclastic", "non-propagandist" and "encompassing divisions" i.e. work which is anti-thetical to Republican/Loyalist wall murals. The complexity of meaning is indeed a common characteristic found in Northern Irish art. Lucy Lippard in her search for 'Irish Political Art' described what she found as "tantalizingly indirect." as opposed to the explicitness of the American 'activist art' tradition. (Lippard, 1984, p11.)

McAvera however, has made a virtue out of the notion of 'indirectness.' The title of the show came from 'Hamlet'. When Polonius is discussing ways of getting at the truth, he suggests, "By indirections find directions out."

I think the reduction of exhibition guidelines to such a narrow definition of what political art can and cannot be, can have long-range consequences for a) the audience, b) the artists. It is important to remember that 'Directions Out' was a show which endeavored to bring an impression of Northern Irish art practice to the South where "people are so ignorant of real conditions" in the Six Counties.

ill.3 : Dermot Seymour (exhibiting artist at 'Directions Out') , 'Ming Ming dumped on the road to Glasslough by the south Battilion of the PAF.' 1986.

ill.4 : Rita Duffy, 'Mother Ulster'(1989) - part of the 'Mother Ireland' series.



(McAvera, 1987, p15.) By narrowing down exhibitors depending on their ability to 'fit in' to one particular theme denies access by the audience to other artists who may not openly deal with the Troubles in their work but who are nevertheless influenced by the conditions where they live. As a student from Dublin on a three month exchange to Belfast College of Art, I was somewhat surprised that the work wasn't so politically specific, but in fact embodied a wide variety of concerns and modes of expression. Although some artists did not fit into the parameters of 'Directions Out,' their alternative viewpoint should have been equally recognized and catered for. Categorising the show also creates problems for the artists involved as it develops a limit within which the artist must work and also reinforces divisions between art work which is considered to be valid and that which is not.

"A New Tradition - Irish Art in the 80's," a major series of six exhibitions devised under the headings; 'Nature and Culture,' 'Sexuality and Gender,' and 'Myth and Mystification,' signalled that "the Douglas Hyde was the major player on the Irish art scene," the only gallery capable of undertaking this project. (Walsh, 1991, p25.) The Hyde sought to provide both a documentative and a critical introduction to Irish Art during those years. The outcome of such an exhibition is obvious; prior to the 1980's, with a prevailing lack of interest in Irish Art, much of the work and concerns of artists remained unrecorded, hence, this exhibition, given the assumed authority of it's title ("*Tradition* survives in english as a description of a general process of handing down, but there is a strong and often prominent sense of this entailing respect and duty" - Williams, 1983, p44.) and the presence of an accompanying catalogue, it was inevitable that 'A New Tradition' was to become, in many ways, the definitive statement of Irish Art. Such survey shows are intended to reflect the contemporary art practice of the country. However, like 'Directions Out,' the approach of this overall survey show

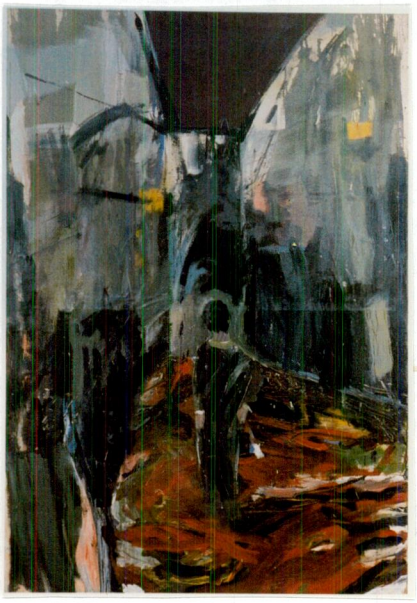
was thematic which immediately raised similar questions as to the danger of making the artist and the work fit the theory and the context of the show.

Amongst Irish artists and exhibition critics, 'A New Tradition' was a critical flop. As expressed by Mary Fitzgerald, an exhibiting artist, "the dissatisfaction felt by so many artists whose works are the subject of the Douglas Hyde project indicates that at best it misrepresented their experiences of working in Ireland in the 1980's and at worst fails to represent them at all. To the authors, 'A New Tradition' may have been a genuine account of their critical conclusions on the events of the period, but to many of those who produced the art, it manifestly ignored the conditions and practices which formed the work." (Fitzgerald, 1991, p38.)

My concern here is this : Given the above statement to be true and given that there is a lack of published material on Irish artists, the accompanying catalogue which commemorated this particular exhibition will serve as an 'Irish Art of the 80's' reference book and will eventually be regarded as historical fact. So, what are the implications of such a survey show?

Firstly, I have a strong suspicion that 'A New Tradition' is not the only survey exhibition to have misrepresented Irish art-practice. There has, during the past few years, been at least five major survey shows of Irish art, such as 'Strongholds : New Art from Ireland' (Tate Gallery, Liverpool, 1991), 'In a State : Kilmainham Gaol on National Identity' (Project Gallery, Dublin, 1991), 'Parable Island' (Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1991), 'Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind : Some New Irish Art' (1984), 'Ireland - Deutschland Exchange' (199 .)

What all of these exhibitions have in common is that they each have an underlying theme of 'Identity.' The text in the exhibition catalogues can be particularly revealing as to how a spectator may read the show. In 'Parable Island' Brian McQuire compares an Irish artists working conditions to that of an



ill.5 : Brian Maguire, 'Divis Flats' ,1985 . "...an exacerbated consciousness of their own identity..." (see page 24.)

Eastern European artist ; "They suffer from an exacerbated consciousness of their own identity and that of their society." (McAvera, 1991, p14.) In the 'Ireland - Deutschland Exchange' exhibition catalogue Ireland reads as an island having to deal with all the problems of post-colonialism and a confused sense of identity." (Arts Council of Ireland, p10.) To get to the point, I am tired of hearing about 'Irish Identity.' It has, I feel, become some sort of marketable Irish trait. It is true that Ireland is a post-colonial state and that post-colonial theory is " .... a language of migration and displacement, of split locations and of fractured identities." (Eagleton, 1994.) But it is also true to say that not everybody feels 'confused' and not every artist deals with issues of identity in their work. The potential for many modes of creativity does exist! The proof of this can be seen by taking a look around the studios of fellow art students. The fact that 'A New Tradition,' as well as other similar survey shows, cumulatively emphasise the supposed importance of Identity, can imply an influential and manipulative force on a students work or can inhibit those artists who work in an alternative manner.

Despite these personal reservations, it is undeniable that these shows do provide a much needed forum for Irish art.

CHAPTER THREE - THE DOUGLAS HYDE : ONE OF A NUMBER

The foundation in 1991 of the Irish Museum of Modern Art - I.M.M.A. - at Kilmainham is the great success story of Ireland's recent cultural development. Clearly I.M.M.A. is getting all the attention as being the National Institution, receiving ten times what the Douglas Hyde gets in terms of funding.

In addition to the introduction of I.M.M.A. comes the recent revitalisation of the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art - H.L.M.G. - and also an increased level of commitment from the Royal Hibernian Academy Gallagher Gallery - R.H.A. - in showing contemporary works of art. There are now a number of public contemporary art galleries operating within the city. The Douglas Hyde need no longer function as a 'flagship' for contemporary art in the country. The reigns of responsibility now reside at I.M.M.A. In many respects, therefore, the gallery now has more freedom to manoeuvre and develop its policies in other directions.

The success of I.M.M.A. drew not only it's Director, Declan McGonagle, but the directors of all the public galleries into the limelight, as they were obliged to define specifically the policies of their galleries.

The direction, as set out by Declan McGonagle, is mainly one of hosting temporary national and international exhibitions as well as integrating with the life of the community, both at a national and local level. Despite a total of one million punts funding from the government, £900,000 of this is used on running costs, leaving only £100,000 for acquisition. As the museum cannot go shopping for a collection with this kind of money it has therefore, a small and relatively insignificant collection.

Barbara Dawson, director of the H.L.M.G., intends to continue to develop the gallery, concentrating foremost on the collection - the gallery has a very fine

collection of art works, over 2,000 in total, with a strong French contingent, a representative collection from the English school, and of course, a large collection of early twentieth century Irish art. "The Municipal qualifies as a National Collection." (Smith, 1994, p72.) Dawson has also provide a much needed scholarly catalogue of the collection. Apart from also running lunchtime entertainment concerts Dawson also hopes to build on it's "fledgling educational policy which lays special interest on community based projects." (Smith, 1994, p73.)

John Hutchinson, director of the Douglas Hyde gallery, agrees that the Hyde, in continuing to show temporary exhibitions, needs to adopt a new role for itself. Although he is optimistic that the Hyde, like other galleries around the country, will benefit from the knock on effects of the increased awareness and appreciation of the visual arts in Ireland, he does not favour the idea of it becoming a "pale, city centre satellite of I.M.M.A." (Hutchinson, 1991, p21.) To prevent this the gallery needs "to adopt a more focused exhibition policy, take more risks .... well defined objectives, a set of parameters that will distinguish the gallery from its peers. The Hyde's profile needs to be sharpened and honed."

Having defined their policies, inevitably the efficiency, the visionary qualities and the managing abilities of these directors were compared by critics, artists and the public. Indeed, these directors began making comparisons amongst themselves. An increase in the number of such art institutes, for instance, means greater competition between directors for a limited number of grants and bursaries provided by the Arts Council and other funding bodies. Furthermore, during a climate of economic distress it is essential for a gallery to justify it's role, it's running costs and it's relevance to the public - who are after all paying for this service.

John Hutchinsons newly defined plans for the Douglas Hyde sounds promising and exciting - "Taking risks", "Poles of energy", "Interesting dynamics" and so on. (Hutchinson, 1991, p21.) In spite of this the D.H.G. shows have, over the last couple of years, generated a prevailing suspicion that it's director has been diverging from his set brief. These suspicions culminated in February 1993 when Aidan Dunne openly criticised the pursuits of John Hutchinson through the medium of a national newspaper, the Sunday Tribune. Dunne used the exhibition of Avis Newman as a prime example of "the kind of exhibition we have come to expect in the Hyde : austere, minimally stated .... Without a doubt many, if not the majority, of the Hyde's recent shows reflect the rarefied, refined aesthetic of it's director .... Do it's shows, as has been suggested, embody the debates on cultural issues that dominate the close of the twentieth century?" (Dunne, 1993, p.)

It could be argued that the most significant issue at the close of the twentieth century is the question of Identity. Indeed, National Identity has dominated all sections of the media in recent decades - The Falklands War, The Gulf War, struggle in South Africa, Ethiopia, Lebanon and Eastern Europe, and of course the more recent atrocities in the former Yugoslavia - have all had the issue of national identity at their core. Internationally reputed philosophers of the twentieth century, such as, Barthes and Boudillard, are responsible for deconstructing the mechanisms of representational structures that inform our thinking, of which Identity is a significant aspect. Edward Said, in particular, has contributed significantly to the debate and theory of post colonial identity. Closer to home, Ireland has of late been involved in the European Community Maastricht Treaty and of course has suffered many years of sectarian conflict in the North not to mention the country's predominant post colonial syndrome. Even today, news of the 'Adams/Hume Peace Talks' cover the front pages of

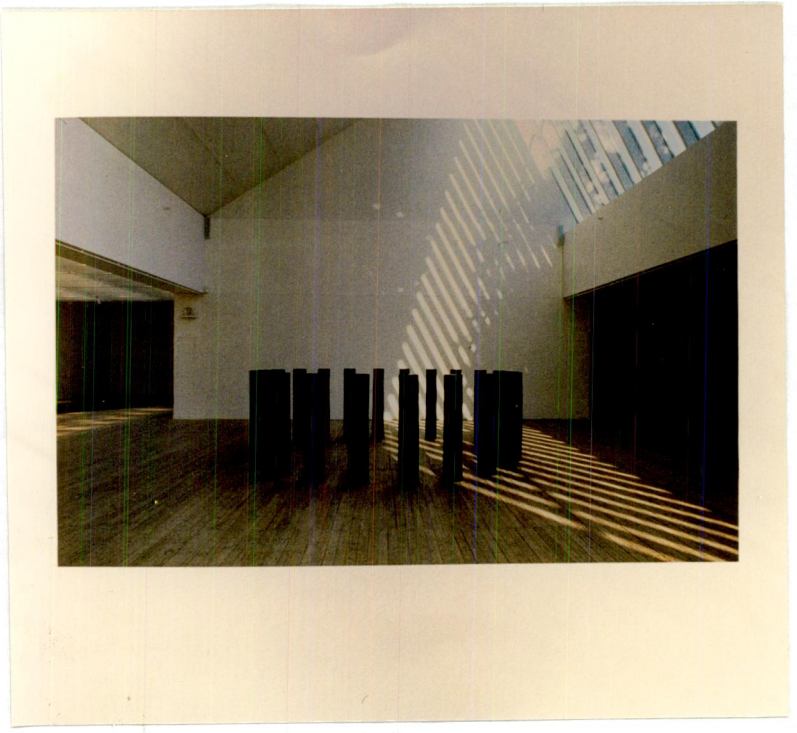
newspapers both in Ireland and abroad. In addition to questions of national identity, the feminist movements since the 1970's have questioned male/female roles, hence, social and sexual identity have also come into play.

'Identity' is one of two concepts which John Hutchinson has chosen to explore, concepts which he believes are "profoundly relevant to the culture in which we live." (Hutchinson, 1991, p21.)

'Transformation' is the second concept which he has chosen for the gallery. 'Transformation' as opposed to 'Identity' is clarified as "anti-historical ... dealing with ideas of alchemy, transcendence and spirituality." (ibid, 1991, p21.)

Notions such as alchemy, transcendence and spirituality are perhaps less obvious than 'Identity' in terms of their significance to twentieth century life. Nonetheless, I believe Hutchinson to be somewhat justified in his claim that 'Transformation' is relevant to the culture in which we live. We are living under the cultural conditions of post-modernism. Following the realisation of failure of modern projects and Western capitalism, one characteristic of post-modern thinking in the West is the disillusionment with enlightenment. There is a general lack of direction, a decline of interest in organised religions, thus the given interest in spirituality or in some kind of personal religion. In theory, I believe that the themes of 'Identity and Transformation' outlined by John Hutchinson do hold significance for life in the late twentieth century. What is in question however, is the effect and success of the practical execution of these policies. Although Hutchinson plans "a very specific exhibition policy," the terms 'Identity and Transformation' are, as he admits, are very flexible and broad. Between them they cover a lot of ground. Hutchinson does not mean the policy to be exclusive, "it is intended, rather, to focus perception on certain areas of contemporary art practice in a way that encourages interrogation and contrast." (Hutchinson, 1991, p21.)

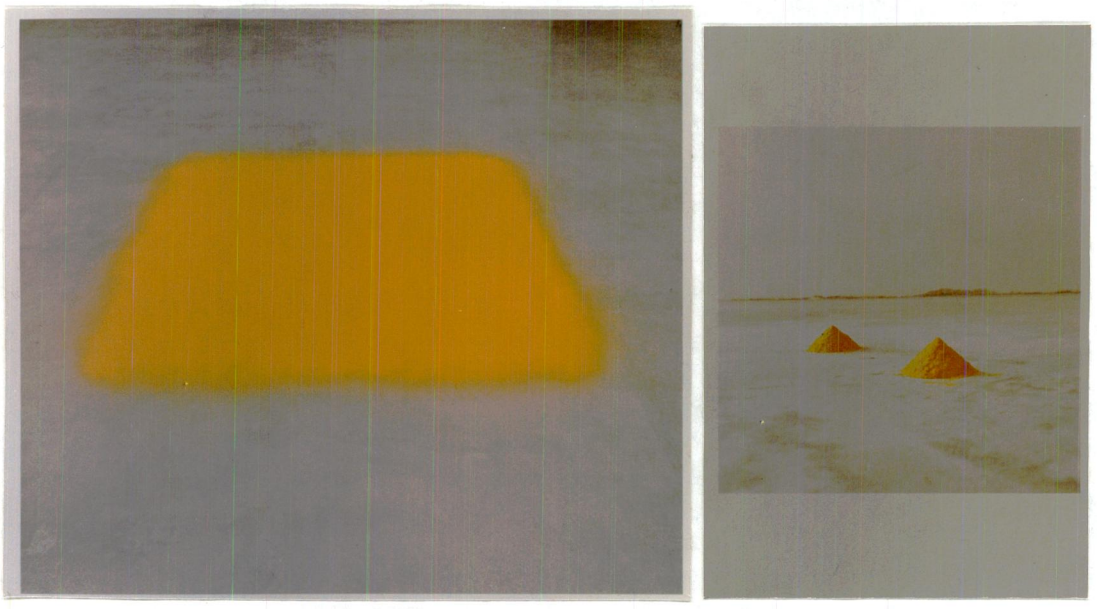
ill. 10



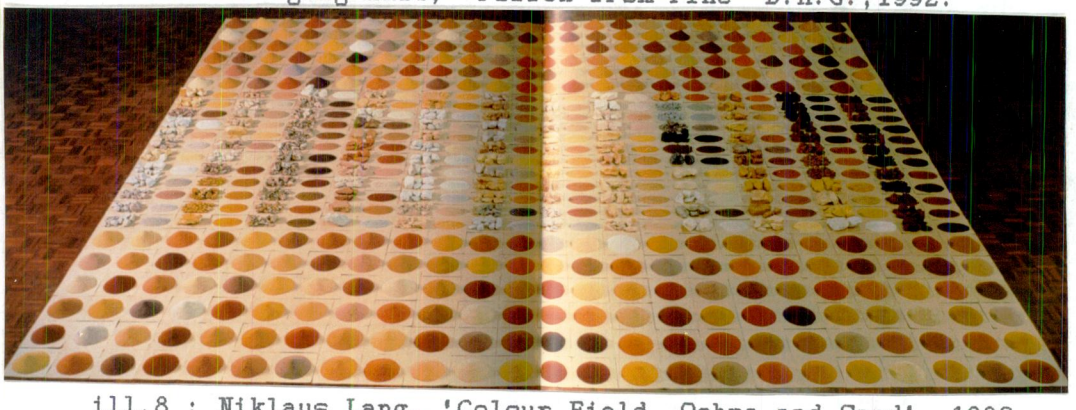
ill. 11

ill. 12

ill. 10, ill. 11, ill. 12 - Lennon, Endo and Forg respectively
- all recent exhibitors at the D.H.G.



ill.7 : Wolfgang Laib, 'Pollen from Pine' D.H.G.,1992.



ill.8 : Niklaus Lang, 'Colour Field, Ochre and Sand', 1993.

ill.9 : Tibetan Monks,'Kalachakra Sand Mandala', 1994.

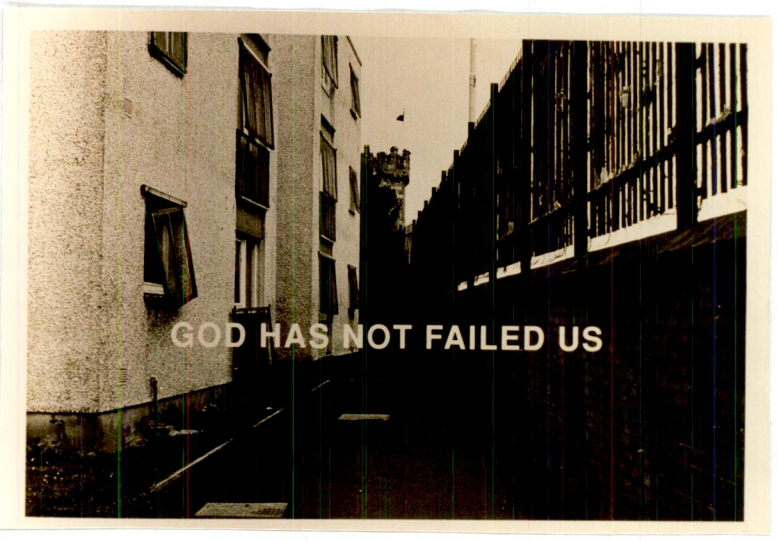
The shows over the past two and a half years at the Douglas Hyde to invite interrogation, not through contrast but through comparison. If 'Identity and Transformation' are such broad terms then why do I get such a distinct feeling of deja vu? For example, in the current exhibition at the Hyde, the coloured grains of loose sand used by Tibetan monks is similar to the small coloured piles of ground-down rock used by Niklaus Lang which is again similar to the rectangular plane of yellow pollen grains seen in Wolfgang Laib's exhibition. The looming rectangular forms of Gunther Forg's standing sculptures are extremely reminiscent of those by Ciaran Lennon and Endo. Installation pieces by Doherty Cross, Willie Doherty and Katase - all of who showed within the same year - involved building a room-like structure in the centre of the gallery.

Not only is there a strong physical similarity between the shows, but also similar attitudes within the concept of the work, being especially obvious in the area of transformation. The work of David Godbold which John Hutchinson chose to show under the theme of 'Transformation', I feel, highlights the limitations which are imposed upon this area. Godbold's work represents Christian icons with a cynical approach. He questions the autonomy of the art object and the identity of the artist as purveyor of original creations. In this sense his work is very post-modern. However, in contrast with Godbold's work, the majority of other 'Transformation' shows are more abstract, more philosophical, more meta-physically orientated - that of a 'zen'-like spirituality. Although 'zen' is a type of personal religion - which I have already outlined as having growing significance in these post-modern times - I feel that there is, at the Douglas Hyde, a slight overdose of this particular idea of spirituality. 'Transformation' is becoming 'exclusive' to the art practice of Eastern artists or artists influenced by oriental philosophy. The danger of this is that instead of reflecting a contrasting variety of art dealing with 'transformation' John

Hutchinson is, in fact, promoting one area of this concept which could serve to mislead some of the audience into believing that only one type of spirituality exists!

'Identity,' in contrast to 'Transformation,' would seem to have a more varied, hence, more effective approach. However, there are many weaknesses in this area. Willie Doherty's most recent exhibition at the Hyde dealt with issues concerning Northern Irish identity using a video installation format. This exhibition, appearing under the title 'Bloody Sunday,' was not the type of show expected of Doherty. Bloody Sunday remains prominent in the collective memory of the people of Derry but "there are some problems though, namely the obliqueness of the street image; the rather heavy-handed use of red (blood?) paint on the walls of the enclosure which seems at odds with the understated approach." (McCabe, 1993, p59.) Is 'Bloody Sunday,' and 'red (blood?) paint' a bit out-dated perhaps? A little cliched for the Irish public? Actually this exhibition was not intended for an Irish audience. It was built for a previous showing at the 'Grey Gallery' in New York for an American audience. There is no harm in receiving exhibitions from others, but the exhibition should fit appropriately into the overall scheme of the gallery. Jimmy Durham, a South American artist, who expresses his identity through bits of string, stick and broken mirror is due to come to the Douglas Hyde in the near future. Durham's anti-exoticism will certainly add a degree of rebelliousness against the preciousness usually associated with Hyde shows. On seeing Durham's work, Hutchinson thought ; "Hmmm, this will show them, everybody thinks of us as being minimal and conceptual. Let's do a show that shakes that a little." (Hutchinson, 1994, I/V.) A touch of tokenism?

John Hutchinson believes that his programme will be remembered for it's 'Transformation' theme and that the 'Identity' theme will be seen as secondary to



ill. 13

ill. 14

ill. 13 & ill. 14 - two examples from Willie Doherty's 'Bloody Sunday' installation, D.H.G.,1993.

the other. (ibid, 1994, I/V.) In his policy, he stated that the two themes were intended to be "two poles of energy" which, between them, should "set up some interesting dynamics." If one pole is weaker or 'secondary' to the other then I fail to see how Hutchinson can successfully fulfill his intention.

Referring back to the debate which took place in the Spring of 1993, it was curious, that people were particularly unquestioning of I.M.M.A. "Gone are the days when museums were stuffy places - the word 'museum' is no longer synonymous in the public's mind with dust, must and boredom." (Cumming, 1985, p71.) This is very much a public attitude which Declan McGonagle is trying to build in regard to the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In many ways I.M.M.A. caters for a serious deficiency in arts provision for the city, which is, the absence of high quality programmes of art-based community development and of a community-based arts development. McGonagle emphasises temporary exhibitions rather than the permanent collection. Indeed, impermanence and fluidity have become very much characteristic traits of I.M.M.A. McGonagle describes it as a "porous museum." (Brett, 1991, p29.) Although I regard the museum as a great success, achieving approximately 200,000 visitors a year, and I acknowledge that today the deconstruction of the meaning and definition of the word 'museum' is quiet acceptable, I still don't think that one can abandon the idea of 'permanence' as much as McGonagle has done in this instance. With the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery concentrating on a permanent collection of modern art, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art concentrating on temporary exhibitions and community work, considering their title there is a contradiction between the theoretical and practical roles of both these institutions. One seems to be playing the role of the other. Perhaps these two institutes should swap names; it would save confusion for the tourist! On a more serious level, I

feel that there is a risk of overlap in exhibition policy which could detract from the distinct identity a gallery wishes to achieve.

Overlapping of exhibition policies between I.M.M.A. and the Douglas Hyde concerns me. The difference between the two is that I.M.M.A. is called a national institution, it's a much bigger building and is seriously funded compared to the Hyde. I don't think anything other than the scale of one or two of the exhibitions has been radically different to anything the Douglas Hyde has done or might still do, given the fact that the concepts outlined by both directors for their exhibition programme sound similar, if not almost identical to each other - I.M.M.A.'s being 'Inheritance & Transformation' and the D.H.G.'s being 'Identity & Transformation.'

I.M.M.A. is a strong presence there. "The policy adopted by Declan McGonagle is pretty threatening since he is not working in the museum conventional manner but more as a large Douglas Hyde Gallery." (Hutchinson, 1994, I/V.)

On questioning John Hutchinson about the similar sounding concepts for both the Hyde and for I.M.M.A. he says that his policy of 'Identity & Transformation' was established before McGonagle's 'Iheritance & Transformation' but that nevertheless, the overlap is more perceived than actual. Hutchinson's definition of the word 'transformation' is 'more internal' than McGonagle's, whose definition is to do more with 'historical transformation.' There is however an overlap on 'Identity' which John Hutchinson considers to be more Declan McGonagle's ground than his own.

Perhaps this is the reason for 'Identity' playing a secondary role to 'Transformation' at the Douglas Hyde. Seeing as 'Identity' is very much a patchwork McGonagle has worked on before and being a subject that he is very much interested in, this comes out as a strong theme in much of the work shown

at I.M.M.A. The Hyde, in order to prevent itself from becoming the "pale, city centre satellite of I.M.M.A." - a term which it is desperately trying to avoid - feels no option but to retreat from this area and to build up a focus on an area not already covered by I.M.M.A.

In an interview of public gallery owners in the recent 'Irish Arts Review' Declan McGonagle says that with the number of public museums now in Dublin, that they should compliment each other and that they should be talking about how value can be added to each institute. On asking John Hutchinson if, in fact, museum directors did actually keep in contact with each other the answer was "not really, they tried and it did not work."

I would regard good communication between galleries of fundamental importance or at least for each to identify specific niches for their galleries and ensure that their policies do not overlap, otherwise they will be vying against each other to nobody's benefit.

The Douglas Hyde should have established it's 'niche' after I.M.M.A. In order to prevent being overshadowed by the latter the D.H.G. has resulted in work exclusive to that of other art practices despite contrarily stated intentions.

CONCLUSION

The Douglas Hyde Gallery is now effectively Dublin's number two contemporary art gallery space, it's significance being somewhat devalued by the number of other such institutes operating in the city.

Nevertheless, with regard to the substantiation and appreciation of Irish art, the D.H.G. has, throughout the 1980's, played a very important and necessary role. Despite innumerable criticisms of the gallery it is indeed extremely commendable that, considering the condition of the gallery less than ten years ago when it had "been limping along for almost twenty months without ay clear hope or direction," (Dunne, 1984,) not forgetting the financial constraints imposed upon the gallery through inadequate funding from the government, the D.H.G. has, in such a relatively short time, achieved so much; The Anselm Kiefer exhibition in 1990 being a declaration of it's success.

Throughout it's history, the growth and development of the gallery has reflected a simultaneous increase of art activity within Dublin; the advent of I.M.M.A. is a further testament to the maturing of the city's art institutional infrastructure.

Today the D.H.G. isn't quiet as crucial to a practicing Irish artist or indeed to an Irish audience as it was a few years ago. This of course offers a greater amount of freedom to develop it's exhibition policies in other directions. Although individually the exhibitions are interesting and of high international standard, it is obvious that the whole project of 'Identity and Transformation' speaks of an overall D.H.G. minimal, conceptual and oriental flavour, which undoubtedly reflects the aesthetic of it's director, John Hutchinson. This I feel is an understandable attempt to achieve an identity which distinguishes the gallery from the overpowering presence of I.M.M.A. Ultimately, however, it seems

inevitable that a director - in this case, John Hutchinson, - may lose his credibility if he does not fulfill the 'specific exhibition policy' he has intentionally set out to do. This is the basis for the current controversy over the Douglas Hyde Gallery.

I would like to see the D.H.G. renew it's policy which would be specifically alternative to that of I.M.M.A.'s, hence, being able to operate effectively and successfully, thus retaining it's high profile.

Other issues have been raised concerning the D.H.G. such as, it's accessibility to a wider audience. (It's shows have been accused of becoming increasingly difficult to understand. An examination of the audience who attend these exhibitions reveals that they comprise primarily of members of the art world, and young educated people. The gallery has become elitist. Considering it's enormous audience potential does the D.H.G. make good use of it's city centre location? - this asset being clearly recognised in the written policy of it's director. It would seem a shame to become more insular or, as Aidan Dunne describes it, taking a 'back-burner' approach, given that this is the one clear advantage the D.H.G. has over it's number one peer. People don't just 'drop-in' to I.M.M.A.

Apart from the issue of accessibility, questions over their policy in relation to terms of contract for their employees have also arisen. However, these are minor issues in relation to the current debate and space does not allow them to be covered in this thesis. Such matters may be more appropriately argued at a later date.

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