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The Visual into the
Verbal; Aspects of
Contemporary Irish Art
Criticism.

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Fine
Arts. 1995

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their help and advice.

Niamh O'Sullivan, Tanya Kiang, Gemma Tipton and Mark Robinson

CONTENTS:

Introduction.	page 4
Chapter 1.	page 7
CIRCA MAGAZINE AND THE GUINNESS PEAT AVIATION IRISH ARTS REVIEW.	
1. <u>Circa Art Magazine.</u>	page 7
2. <u>The G.P.A. Irish Arts Review.</u>	page 12
Chapter 2.	page 14
COMPARISON OF ARTICLES	
1: Coverage of the opening of the Irish Museum of Modern Art.	page 14
2. Coverage of The Arts Council.	page 19
Chapter 3.	page 23
<u>FOCUS ON CIRCA</u>	
1: The Contributing Editors Board.	page 23
2: The Politics of locations and 'Work In Process'.	page 24
3: <u>Circa</u> and other forms of Irish Art Criticism.	page 27
4: <u>Circa</u> today and its international role.	page 33
Conclusion	page 37
Bibliography.	page 38

INTRODUCTION

"Criticism opens itself to debate, it attempts to convince, it invites contra-diction. It becomes a part of the public exchange of opinions".¹

The above quote is taken from Terry Eagleton's book 'The Function of Criticism'. Here, Eagleton is referring to literary criticism, however this quote could equally be applied to art criticism. It is telling that before 1980 there was a significant lack of art criticism in Ireland. On the other hand, Ireland has never been short of cultural or literary Journals. Between 1800 and 1848, for example, over 150 periodicals were launched in Ireland.²

More recently, 'The Crane Bag' (1978 - 1985) served as a serious journal of literary criticism.

The reason for the paucity of art criticism compared with literary criticism is because until recently Irish visual art has been a poor second cousin to Irish literature.³ However; this situation has dramatically changed in the last two decades. The rise and development of Irish visual art has been unprecedented. In turn this has brought huge developments and progress in the area of art criticism.

In this thesis, I will examine aspects of the new Irish art criticism. This is a broader and more complex subject than one may think and therefore, I will concentrate first on Circa Art Magazine and secondly on the Irish Arts Review. Other forms of art criticism will be discussed in relation to these

¹ EAGLETON, Terry, The Function of Criticism p. 10

² KEARNEY, Richard, Transitions p. 251

³ SMITH, Kirk, "The Rise of Irish Art", Circa Issue No. 54 1990. p 29.

two publications. The reason I chose to primarily concentrate on Circa Magazine is because it has a wide contemporary content, which is of particular interest to me. It has also been continuously operating since 1981 and this longevity has given Circa a recognisable status.

The G.P.A. Irish Arts Review has been published since 1984. As I will show in this thesis, it is different in character and content to Circa.

Chapter one is an analysis of the development, function and content of each publication. This will provide a background to Chapter two which focuses on certain issues covered in each publication. This is in order to distinguish the individual agendas of each magazine.

In Chapter three, I will focus on Circa Art Magazine. Here, I will concentrate on some aspects of Circa's editorial format. This will lead me to discuss other forms of Irish art criticism using Circa as a point of reference. Having done so I will return to Circa; in order to look at the form it has arrived at in 1994/5 and its editorial hopes and plans for the future. At this stage I will look at ways Circa can promote contemporary Irish Art and Culture in an International sense.

My research has included interviews and extensive reading of contemporary art criticism. My approach has been along practical lines however, a wide reading of literary and critical theory has provided a background to the arguments of this thesis, and has facilitated my analysis

of Irish art criticism in an Irish context, and its application to the practicalities of artists' and readers' lives.

Chapter 1.

CIRCA MAGAZINE AND THE GUINNESS PEAT AVIATION ⁴ IRISH ARTS REVIEW.

1: CIRCA ARTS MAGAZINE

“The emergence of Circa was no accident. It was in fact a natural extension of ARE’s ⁵ ideological base, and its desire to promote discerning intellectual discussion. Above all it insisted that cultural production is informed by social, political and economic circumstances”. ⁶

The setting up of Circa has been well documented over the years; the quote above is taken from Issue fifty which efficiently covers some of the main themes and issues discussed and debated in Circa since its inception.

In May 1980 the Artist’s Collective of Northern Ireland was formed; this led to the setting up of a publications committee whose function was to produce an art journal – entitled Circa. The publications committee editorial panel consisted of eleven people and the first issue was published in Nov/Dec 1981.

This “consisted of 28 pages, set in 10.pt. Helvetica, it contained an editorial written by ..[Anne Carlisle and Chris Coppock], 4 pages of advertising, an interview with Felim Egan, an artwork by Alistair McLennan, three articles by

⁴ Henceforth G.P.A. - Corporate sponsors of the *Irish Arts Review*

⁵ Art and Research Exchange

⁶ Carlisle and Coppock , Anne and Chris , “Shifting the goalposts”, Circa, Issue 50 1990 pp.28-30

*Tom Paulin, Belinda Loftus and Louis Muinee, news and reviews".*⁷

In a retrospective sense, one could perceive the first issue as Carlisle and Coppock saw it themselves as being "*wholly naive, both from a visual and editorial point of view*".⁸ However, the first issue did set the structure and tone which the magazine would stick to over the next ten years.

Although the magazine originated in Northern Ireland, it quickly began to cover art activity all over Ireland. The first Circa editorial sets out clearly what the magazine intended to do – it wanted to look at and discuss art production in a broad sense. To do this the magazine had to "*strike a balance between articles on particular art and artists and a more searching analysis of art production in a socio political context*".⁹ This in turn became the 'manifesto' that is printed on the contents page of every issue; it states: "*CIRCA is concerned with visual culture in, of and around Ireland. Within visual culture nothing in principle is excluded. CIRCA addresses itself to the politics of location, and to investigation of the specific conditions affecting the making and reception of art*".¹⁰ This I feel is an important statement as in a sense it gets to the crux of what Circa is 'all about'; in chapter 3. this statement will be analysed in detail.

From Issue No. 2, Circa was partly funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and also received assistance from the Art and Research

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Carlisle and Coppock, Anne and Chris, *Editorial, Circa* Issue 1, 1981

¹⁰ Contained in every issue of Circa

Exchange. By Issue No. 10 it began to receive funding from An Chomhairle Ealaíon (Republic of Ireland Arts Council); although the majority of funding continued to come from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The opening of the Dublin office and relaunch of the magazine in 1992 went some way towards redressing this balance.

Circa was conceived as a bi-monthly magazine and continued to be published six times a year (without missing one issue) until 1992; when the format was changed to a quarterly journal. In 1992 Circa was not published for six months while it re-designed and re-organised its editorial structure, appearance and location. It returned in Autumn '92 with Issue 62 - the relaunch issue. With this issue Circa became a bilocated organisation with offices in both Dublin and Belfast. The Dublin office was originally based in the newly opened Irish Museum of Modern Art in Kilmainham. The new Circa was different in many ways to the old version. Its appearance was different; it was glossier, bigger and contained more articles. However, as David Brett (founding member, regular contributor, then Chairman and present member of the editorial board) wrote

"it was essential, if we sought a wider readership, to match international standards of reproduction, but we were determined to do so while maintaining a direct and purposive format. Gloss for its own sake is worthless".¹¹

In other words the higher quality appearance only served to match the

¹¹ Brett David, p17 Circa, Issue 62, 1992

higher quality art production and content of the magazine. Tanya Kiang, the present Editor reiterated this statement, saying

“the standard and quality of art production and activity in Ireland was going up and up - this demanded a higher level of reproduction in something like a magazine”.¹²

Issue 62 set out definite aims for the magazine; subjects covered were Art and Politics, Art and Society, Policy (as in Arts Council) and a new ‘Work in Process’ section. This issue also introduced a new board of Contributing Editors; there were six people from varying visual and literary backgrounds who were intended to further extend the boundaries of subjects and debates reviewed and discussed by Circa. (‘Work in Process’ and the function of the Contributing Editors board will be discussed further in Chapter 3.)

Circa is divided into sections. One is news and information, including: Editorial; Visual Arts: North and South; Letters; Bulletins; Film and Television. Following this there is a discursive, analytical section which covers Criticism, Media, General Overview, Social/Political discussion, Work in Process and further articles, depending on the focus and thrust of that particular issue. Finally Circa contains an extensive review section, covering major retrospective shows, solo and group exhibitions, and reviews of conceptual/time based work. The Update section is designed to cover established artists whose work has been already discussed at length in Circa; for example Sean Scully or Dorothy Cross have been reviewed in

¹² Tanya Kiang in interview

the Update Review, while 'newer' less established artists or group shows are written about in the Review Section.

2: THE G.P.A. IRISH ARTS REVIEW YEARBOOK

In 1983 Brian de Breffni edited Ireland, A Cultural Encyclopaedia, while working on this he realised the need for a magazine to act as a platform for the arts in Ireland. This led to the publication of the Irish Arts Review.

The I.A.R. set out to be a publication which specialised in and provided an account of the visual arts in Ireland - both ancient and modern. The I.A.R. says of itself that it has a 'high quality of production, providing a lasting account of the visual arts in Ireland over the years'.¹³ In this sense they produce an enduring point of reference to Irish art, craft and architecture.

In Spring 1984 the first issue of the I.A.R. was published. In structure it was a quarterly publication, specialising in the visual arts (in Ireland).

Initially the I.A.R. did not follow a theme through the magazine; it contained a wide range of articles covering specific speciality topics. It also contained an impressive amount of advertising; suggesting it was aimed at an informed and probably monied audience. In this sense it had a commercial yet intellectual aura. It did not include an editorial or any kind of manifesto, although it states on the front cover that it is an;

"International quarterly magazine for connoisseurs". The I.A.R. continued in quarterly format until 1988 when it switched to a yearbook format.

¹³ Frontispiece G.P.A. Irish Arts Review Yearbook 1994

The I.A.R. in both yearbook and quarterly format is a fairly dense publication with a wide range of content material - Its main subject matter includes:

1. Irish art history
2. Contemporary art review/overview
3. Music/Literature
4. Architecture
5. Antique and fine/contemporary art sales reports.
6. Book reviews

In the first issue the I.A.R. did not cover contemporary art issues or exhibitions. It is, as it states, a Review in a retrospective sense, but it is not solely concerned with the Fine Arts - it has run articles dealing with Antiques, early Irish Chalice and costumes in the Ulster Museum. The second issue had a more 'up to date' feel; the leading article discussed Contemporary Irish Tapestry and was written by Dorothy Walker the review section covered current modern exhibitions. From this issue on, the contemporary content is extended. This is particularly so from 1986, the date the G.P.A. Group began sponsorship of the Review.

It does however, continue to cover the ancient as well as the modern; its tenth issue "*encompasses both the Book of Kells and the paintings of Sean Scully*".

¹⁴

By 1989 a retrospective calendar was introduced; covering the principal visual events of the previous year.

¹⁴ ibid

Chapter 2

COMPARISON OF ARTICLES

This chapter will focus on articles with a similar subject base published in both the G.P.A. Irish Arts Review and Circa. This is an investigation of each magazine's definition of itself and an examination of the function each one performs.

Coverage of the opening of the Irish Museum of Modern Art:

First, I will look at coverage of the opening of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (I.M.M.A.) in May 1991. As well as heralding a host of questions and debates centring on the role of the Irish Art Museum the opening of I.M.M.A. also attracted significant international coverage, some of which will be surveyed.

Circa addressed this subject in issue No. 59 (September, October 1991).

This issue was entitled "Art in the Museum" and guest edited by Fiona Barber. In her editorial she states:

*"In this issue of Circa we present a series of articles and reviews which suggest an agenda for present and future discussion of the collections and display of art in Ireland"*¹⁵

In his article "Displays of Power with Foucault in the Museums" Brandon Taylor reviews the history and philosophy of museums and uses the French philosopher Michael Foucault as a reference point. Luke Dodd's article discusses the heritage industry and how this connects with images and

¹⁵ BARBER, Fiona, Editorial, Circa Issue No. 59. 1991. p 21.

representations of Irishness. He finishes his article with a statement which reflects his concern with the status of museums and their importance;

*"Museums are our society's most tangible link with the past and an understanding of the past has always been fundamental to any understanding of our own societies"*¹⁶

In *'Inheritance and transformation, old grounds, new contacts?'* Joan Fowler analyses the opening Exhibition in I.M.M.A. Fowler notes the initial unease about the Government decision to use the Royal Hospital Kilmainham as an exhibition space. She essentially approves of the original installation of exhibitions, however she detects a lack of direction in the exhibition which should be used as a lesson for the future. She also deplores the highly artificial presentation of The Great Book of Ireland.¹⁷ Fowler is sensitive to the question of placing Irish Art alongside International Contemporary art. For example, she describes how a Richard Long floor sculpture is placed beside a small landscape painting by Paul Henry. This she says

*"is just the start of many juxtapositions of international with Irish work which, single handedly, sweeps away decades of argument over how Irish art can be established alongside its peers. Where history and chronology are of no great importance in the curatorial arrangement Irish Art can be included anywhere".*¹⁸

Fowler also asks important questions about the over-emphasis of interest in I.M.M.A. and the fact that this may lead to exhibitions being misplaced, for example, she asks why the Mainie Jellet retrospective is being held in I.M.M.A. rather than the Hugh Lane, which might be the more natural

¹⁶ DODD, Luke, "Sleeping with the Past", *Circa* Issue No. 59. 1991. p 27.

¹⁷ FOWLER, Joan, "Inheritance and Transformation", *Circa* Issue No. 59. 1991. p 34.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p 35

home for a retrospective of this ilk? These are pertinent questions which should be discussed.

Issue 59 also carried an interview with Paul O'Reilly, Curator of Limerick City Gallery, in which he talks about his six year tenure and plans for the future. Lastly, the Review section consists of reports on individual National Collections in Ireland; the Arts Council Collection, The Hugh Lane, Ulster Museum, Crawford Municipal Gallery, Glebe House and the Irish Film Archive. This section, according to Fiona Barber, is intended to be a base for future research in this area.

The Irish Arts Review Yearbook for 1991/92 takes a different approach. In 'The Necessary Museum', Declan McGonagle, Director of I.M.M.A.; writes about his plans and ambitions for the New Museum. In this article he discusses the siting of an Irish Museum of Modern Art in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham and says that

'the R.H.K. is the perfect building in which to bring the broad spectrum of the public into contact with artists' ideas, contemporary or modern'.¹⁹

He also discusses loans of works to the Gallery and other specific plans for future exhibitions. McGonagle's article was accompanied by a two piece colour spread showing pieces which featured in I.M.M.A.'s opening exhibition. Following on from McGonagle's piece was an article by John Olley (lecturer in Architecture, U.C.D.). This is an extensive analysis of the building's architecture, its uses since the 1680's and an examination of the most recent refurbishment. Olley's article is written from a very positive point of view; he highly commends the decision to house the

¹⁹ MCGONAGLE, Declan, "The Necessary Museum", Irish Arts Review, 1991 - 92 p 61.

Museum of Modern Art in Kilmainham; and compliments every stage of the architectural development.

In order to lend balance to this discussion I would like to look at reviews in English Art Magazines, which comment on the opening of I.M.M.A.

In Arts Review David Lee asks the question; '*How do you establish a National Museum without a national collection to fill it?*'²⁰ Lee insinuates that

McGonagle has personalised the contents of the opening exhibition; turning the new gallery "*into a turbo charged version of Derry's Orchard*

Gallery during his tenure as its Director from 1978 - 84"²¹. Lee is also rather

vitriolic in his description of the format and content of the opening

exhibition; phrases used include; "*ad hoc look, ... job lot of 'masterpieces';*

curiously old hat, a fizzless cocktail of conceptualism".²² However, John

Kindness and Kathy Prendergast are mentioned positively. Finally, Lee feels

that McGonagle has "*played old familiar cards*"²³, with this first display and

this he feels bodes ill for the future.

Frederick Ted Castle, writing for Arts magazine adopts an altogether more

congratulatory tone in his article. As an introduction, he looks at the

historical context and function of the new Museum. When talking about

'Inheritance and Transformations' (opening exhibition) he mentions how

"*spacious, open, well lighted and well-hung the exhibition was*".²⁴ Taken as a

whole, Castle's article portrays I.M.M.A. as a vibrantly successful new

²⁰ LEE, David, "The Irish Museum of Modern Art", Arts Review, Vol. 43. June 1991. pp 324-325

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ TED CASTLE, Frederick, "The New Irish Museum of Modern Art", Arts Magazine, Vol 66. Oct 1991. pg 109

addition to the Irish art scene.

Lastly, Luke Gibbons, in a piece for the American magazine, Art Forum, discusses the Museum in relation to Modernism; asking the question: why a Museum of Modern Art at this point in Irish culture? Gibbons' article is philosophical rather than discursive of particular pieces. He is interested in the hanging of specific pieces of art (e.g. A Nigel Rolfe photograph placed in the same room as a James Coleman's video installation 'Strongbow') in relation to others, and the subsequent effects that these juxtaposition produce.

To sum up, the question that must be asked is what informative and critical affect do each of these articles have on their readers?

Joan Fowler's article is both informed and informative. She is writing with a view to putting questions into the public arena for discussion; her piece is placed alongside other articles which discuss the role and function of other Irish art museums, and art museums in general. In order to understand Fowler's article and also place it in context, it is useful to read the whole Museum issue.

The Irish Arts Review presents the subject of I.M.M.A. in a different way. Instead of a discussion piece, Declan McGonagle is given a platform to present his plans to the public. This is a useful exercise, however this article does not lend itself to discussion or debate, it is rather a presentation of facts and future plans.

John Olley's piece is both appropriate and useful to architecture enthusiasts; it is very informative, with technical detail abounding. Both of

these articles function in a relevant way; they serve to inform and enlighten their audience. They do not criticise, but they do not set out to criticise.

This cannot be said in relation to David Lee's article in Arts Review.

To quote Terry Eagleton "*Criticism opens itself to debate, it attempts to convince, it invites contradiction. It becomes a part of the public exchange of opinion*".²⁵

David Lee is inviting contradictions in his piece about I.M.M.A.

Sometimes it is easier to vehemently criticise from a distance (i.e. from a different country). Lee is openly derisive about his subject. While his view could be said to carry as much validity as any other, at this stage it is true to say that sometimes it is easier to debate something in a negative way rather than discuss and analyse it in a positive way. Even so, it is in the gap between positivity and negativity that real criticism and cultural debate takes place.

Coverage of the Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

An Chomhairle Ealaíon (Republic of Ireland Arts Council, hereafter referred to as the Arts Council) is a major funding body of the arts in Ireland. Circa is substantially funded by both Arts Councils, however this does not mean that, as a journal of contemporary culture, Circa cannot comment on the role of the Arts Council. The same can be said of The Irish Arts Review which also receives funding from the Arts Councils.

In 1990/91 Dr. Brian P. Kennedy (Assistant Director of the National

²⁵ EAGLETON, Terry, The Function of Criticism, 1994. p 10

Gallery of Ireland and author of Dreams and Responsibilities: a history of the Arts Council)wrote an article entitled 'The Arts Council 'which was published in the The Irish Arts Review Yearbook 1990/91. This article set out the historical background of the Arts Council from its formation in 1951 up to its present form in 1990. This article serves a useful purpose first as a historical review and also as a background to an article in the following yearbook (1991/92). In 'New Council, New times', Paddy Woodworth examined the present policy of the Arts Council. This was a more, investigative critical piece. Woodworth is concerned with the funding of the Arts Council by the Government. Essentially he follows the Arts Council funding from 1988 to 1991, while doing this he analyses the Council's relationship with An Taoiseach, Charles J. Haughey. In summing up, Woodworth stresses the need for a comprehensive Arts plan; in order that the Council carry out their long term policies. In March/April 1986 Circa published 'Winter in the Arts Council's Garden' by Joan Fowler. This was a report on the Arts Council's decision, in February 1986, to withdraw funding to Arts Festivals, and from the Theatre Touring Scheme. Fowler talks of the loss of credibility that both the Minister of Arts and the Arts Council have suffered due to this cut in funding. She also discusses the 'individual versus the collective'²⁶ i.e.; funding of the individual artist (e.g. through Aosdana) versus funding for arts centres. Each of these opposites received an increase in funding in 1986. However, it is the situation of the individuals and groups caught between these opposing extremes that concern Fowler. She warns against the possibility

²⁶ FOWLER, Joan, "Winter in the Arts Council Garden", Circa, Issue 27. 1986. p 10

of visual artists being “*required to enter even more competitive competitions for funding*”.²⁷ In summing up Fowler calls for “*proper investment to provide an infrastructure in Ireland which has never existed*”.²⁸

In 1990, Circa celebrated their fiftieth issue. In this issue two of Circa’s founders Anne Carlisle and Chris Coppock “*question the commitment of the Arts Council to the promotions of visual culture*”.²⁹ In their article Carlisle and Coppock trace the development of Circa since 1981; and compare the funding of equivalent English magazines by the Arts Council of Great Britain. This comparison is instructive as it shows that Circa receives approximately half the funding of its British counterparts.

When discussing coverage of I.M.M.A. I established that the Irish Arts Review articles contained more informative content than critique; the same could be said of Brian P. Kennedy’s article on the Arts Council. However; this is not true of Paddy Woodworth’s article ‘New Council, New Times?’ Woodworth, as an Irish Times Arts journalist presents serious problems that the Arts Council must resolve. In discussing actual facts and figures of the Arts Council’s policies; Woodworth sees that long term funding commitment from the Government, would get rid of “*crises management and political second guessing*”³⁰ on the part of the Arts Council. Woodworth also calls into question the particular allocation of Lotto monies and stresses the urgent need for long term planning in the area of Arts funding. Likewise Joan Fowler in her article, calls for serious

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ CARLISLE and COPPOCK, Ann and Chris, “Shifting the Goalposts”, Circa Issue 50 1990. p 28

³⁰ WOODWORTH, Paddy, “New Council, New Times”, Irish Arts Review 1991-2. pp 99 - 105

commitment.

It is important for independent publications in Ireland to constantly analyse and question the function of the Arts Councils. Without this kind of independent forum, people involved in cultural activity in Ireland, who depend on Arts funding may become isolated and feel unable to enter the public debates on these questions.

Chapter 3.

FOCUS ON CIRCA

In this section the focus will be on Circa Art Magazine. I will examine some aspects of the editorial structures and content of Circa Magazine. This will lead me to discuss other forms of art criticism in Ireland and to investigate some philosophical questions relating to art criticism. Finally, I would like to examine Circa to-day; the plans for the future; what a magazine like Circa can hope to achieve at an international level and how it can do this.

1. The Contributing Editors Board.

In Chapter One, I touched upon the establishment in 1992 of a Contributing Editors board whose function was;

*“to seek out new writing talents, to indicate emerging issues in both geographic and cultural space, and to deepen our roots in the artistic and intellectual life of this island”.*³¹

In other words the Contributing Editors were intended to extend the parameters of the Editorial Board in a cognitive and knowledgeable way. Issue 62 contained a statement from each of the six Contributing Editors who were: Ciaran Benson, Luke Gibbons, Neil Read, Vivienne Roche, Anne Tallentire and Samuel Walsh. These statements specified their regional

³¹ BRETT, David, “A Letter from the Chairman”, Circa, Issue 62. 1992. p 17.

and cultural areas of expertise. The establishment of the Contributing Editors board significantly ties in with Circa's wish to extend the character and subject matter of the magazine. In Mark Robinson's words

*"there's a limit to how much you can cover subjects like regionalism if you're not going to put it into practice in your own organisation".*³²

This change had been occurring for a number of years – witness the 1990 change of title from being a journal of 'Contemporary Visual Art' to a journal of 'Contemporary Visual Culture' and in this way becoming much more multi-media based; including and involving coverage of the moving image, architecture and time-based art. Robinson, then managing editor was concerned with setting up structures which could be built on in future years. According to him, the reason that the Contributing Editor's Board did not work as well as might have been hoped at the time was because *"some of them didn't last very long"*.³³ Vivienne Roche and Ciaran Benson both moved onto the Arts Council and could not ethically continue to work for both organisations.

However, the Contributing Editors have remained part of Circa's editorial framework; but are now more strictly geographical rather than subject based. They function as *"mini offices or points of contact"*³⁴. For example Sam Walsh, one of the original Contributing Editors, keeps the Dublin office informed of what is happening in Limerick, while Anna O'Sullivan (a recent addition) is based in New York and can do the same job from there.

³² ROBINSON, Mark, In Interview

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ KIANG, Tanya, In Interview

2. The Politics of Location and Work in Process

"Circa addresses itself to the politics of location".³⁵

This is a phrase which initially puzzled me and also seemed to perplex quite a number of my art college peers; so what does it mean? Does this declaration concern itself with Border, North/South issues? apparently not

According to Tanya Kiang this phrase has a layered meaning. It is connected with the politics of cultural location and cultural origin. It is to do with the diaspora; what it means to live and work in Ireland, and why this is different from working (as an Irish person) anywhere else. She cites, as an example that Ireland has many heritage and interpretative centres and these speak to her of the politics of location. *"What sort of inflection does a piece of work get by being in Ireland, why is it something different here than when it's elsewhere".³⁶*

These are fundamental questions that Circa, in its treatment of regional and cultural issues has gone some way towards answering. Whole issues have been given over to territorial themes but these questions and answers themselves change with time and are therefore still the subject of discussion.

I think that the politics of location means the investigation of the actual

³⁵ Frontispiece, Circa

³⁶ KIANG, Tanya, In Interview

real situation here, whatever that is perceived as being, and how that informs a) the making of art and b) the reception of art. This brings one back to Issue 62. and the concept of 'Work in Process'.

*"We are trying to create a genre of writing by which the real practice of art is investigated through image and text"*³⁷

The first 'Work in Process' was about Belfast painter David Crone and written by David Brett. In a sense each 'Work in Process' is a work of art in itself, eventually they will be collected together as a book. According to Mark Robinson

*"it is an attempt to find some means in the print media to give an understanding to our readership of how art is made ..."*³⁸

Art in this case includes performance/conceptual art and music; issue 69's 'Work in Process' was the Babel Bitmap project; a collaboration between writer Michael Cunningham, designer Jerome Doran and musician Roger Doyle. This included a compact disc; which came free with the magazine. Issue 64's 'Work In Process' featured Nigel Rolfe. Rolfe is a conceptual performance artist; This 'Work In Process' consisted of a series of photographs of him accompanied by text written by Aidan Dunne. This particular piece is interesting in that it contextualises the work - it is a way in which people who cannot actually attend a Rolfe performance can avail of documentation in which the artist was actually involved in the production and this makes for documentation of a different character to

³⁷ BRETT, David, "Work In Process", Circa Issue 62. 1992. p 82.

³⁸ ROBINSON, Mark, In Interview

review; which is analysis and criticism. So the concept and reality of the 'Work In Process' projects links a few different factors; firstly the fact that each one is a collaborative process between two/three or more people and also provides an opportunity for the Circa audience to view and approach work in a different context.

Circa and other forms of Irish art Criticism.

Circa, although the only journal dealing exclusively with contemporary artistic culture is not the only intellectual organ reviewing and discussing Irish art. Most of the major national newspapers have an arts section, covering theatrical, artistic and other cultural events. Some of these can be taken more seriously than others. The Irish Times, as a quality broadsheet, has the most extensive arts Section; edited by Paddy Woodworth. It covers most of the major countrywide exhibitions. These reviews are published concurrently with exhibitions, thereby giving the reader opportunity to view the exhibition and compare his or her opinion with that of the reviewer. In this sense, newspaper reviews have a different complexion to those of a journal.

Exhibition reviews in Circa, for example, are generally read retrospectively to the exhibition it is reviewing. These reviews could also be considered to contain more discursive and personal comment; maybe because the writer assumes that Circa has a more knowledgeable readership.

I have noticed in my research that discussion about the context in which a

piece of art criticism is published is a neglected field of study. However, I think it is an important issue; Valerie Holman; in her essay, '*Framing Critics - the Publishing Context*' discusses

*"How the works of a writer on art is framed has far reaching consequences for the way in which the subject is approached, how the text is read, and who comprises the readership"*³⁹.

In an Irish situation, it is relevant to take the context in which a piece is published into account. Newspaper reviews are important for both the artist and the reader; but for an informed overview of the work of a particular artist or group of artists, a viewer should look at all the criticism and information that accompanies an exhibition.

This brings me to exhibition catalogues. Exhibition catalogues vary enormously in form, content and character. Obviously, their format depends largely on the type of exhibition they are covering (i.e. group, solo or commercial) and on the type of financial backing an exhibition might have. An exhibition which has commercial or industrial sponsorship will have a glossier and more expensive catalogue than that of an independently funded show. A good example of a large format thematic exhibition with an accompanying catalogue/book is A new Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties. This was actually a six month programme with a series of five exhibitions sited in the Douglas Hyde Gallery. It opened in September 1980 and was intended to be a comprehensive review of Irish art activity in the 1980's. The book was intended from the beginning to be an integral part of the exhibition; in fact

"consideration of the physical exhibiting of work was deferred until the structure of

³⁹ HOLMAN, Valerie, "Framing Critics - The Publishing Context". Art Criticism Since 1900. p 80.

the book had been worked through and agreed”⁴⁰

The whole exhibition had “*a critical or historical point of view*”.⁴¹ The then Director of the Douglas Hyde (1988) Patrick T. Murphy saw the project as involving itself with, or being the combination of, developments in art criticism during the eighties. Eventually the book contained an introduction (by Fintan O’Toole) and six chapters. One chapter being a background chapter by Aidan Dunne; and five chapters each relating specifically to an exhibition, by Joan Fowler, John Hutchinson and Aidan Dunne; established art critics and theorists.

According to Mark Robinson, writing about ‘A New Tradition’ for Circa there were overall flaws in both the conception and execution of a ‘A New Tradition’ which led to the overall project being perceived as a failure.⁴² The article by Robinson is a good example of how a magazine like Circa can criticise and comment on a project in a way that a newspaper cannot. Circa can talk retrospectively to the key participants of a project and put forward an informed opinion for discussion. None the less, the catalogue ‘A New Tradition, Irish Art of the Eighties’ will endure as a lasting point of reference for students and others interested in this area, as well as providing valuable documentation for the artists involved.

‘In A State’ was a group exhibition, curated by Jobst Graeve and held in Kilmainham Jail in 1991. Its theme was an investigation of national identity. This catalogue is very different in character to A New Tradition;

⁴⁰ ROBINSON, Mark, “The Making of a New Tradition”, Circa, Issue 58. 1991. p 26.

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² *ibid*

in that although it also contains an introductory essay by Fintan O'Toole; it is largely taken up with artist's statements. There are large black and white photographs of each artist accompanied by sketches, poems and excerpts or statements that the artists felt were relevant to their work. This catalogue is not so much informative as personal; in that the personalities of the artists are revealed in the catalogue. This can also be important for a viewer of the work, in that it provides a frame of reference for the public to approach the work on show.

The other publications which should be mentioned at this stage are Art Bulletin and The Sculptors Society Newsletter. Art Bulletin is produced by the Association of Artists in Ireland and The Sculptors Society Newsletter is produced by the Sculptors Society of Ireland. Both journals produce six issues per year and are funded by the Arts Council. Neither of the publications operate as serious organs of art criticism; although both contain a certain amount of review and discussion; their main thrust is an informative one. Both give comprehensive listings of practical opportunities, funding, artists scholarships and exhibition submission dates. This is essentially their function.

In relation to Circa I asked Tanya Kiang whether it was advantageous to be Ireland's only contemporary art periodical; in fact it appears to be a disadvantage:

"In marketing or business terms, you would think it would be an advantage but because the commercial or business aspects have always been secondary to a more

*cultural goal - in fact it isn't, it's a disadvantage; we have to open up a distribution network on our own"*⁴³.

There have been other publications similar in character to Circa, for example Mitrepress was a Cork based magazine which was concerned with visual culture around Cork. It was produced by the Cork Artists' Collective and ran from summer 1992 until winter 1994. It was produced by Cork artists and recent graduates of the Crawford College of Art. The editorial board were Irene Murphy, Rosemary Canavan, Mona Casey and Brian Carton. Unfortunately Mitrepress stopped operating in 1994 due to *"financial pressures and lack of interest"*⁴⁴

The Cork Review 94, Cork Art and Artists was in many ways a replacement for Mitrepress. It was published by the Triskel Arts Centre and edited by Hilary Pyle (independent critic and art historian). It contained reviews of the major art events in Cork and West Cork, informative discussion pieces (e.g. about the National Sculpture factory in Cork and the 1% scheme) and artists' pages. The inclusion of the artists' pages was made possible by a special Visual Arts Grant from the Arts Council (An Chomhairle Ealaíon).

Portfolio was another publication which was devoted to contemporary visual arts in Ireland. Its first volume was published in 1991 by Gandon Press and edited by John O'Regan. It was intended to be an annual review of Irish Art covering Architecture, Painting, Sculpture and Time Based Media. Gandon Press produces around 24 art catalogues and books per year and receive specific grants from the Arts Council for individual

⁴³ KIANG, Tanya, In Interview

⁴⁴ CASEY, Mona, Telephone interview Jan. 1995

publications. Portfolio originally received £7,000 from An Chomhairle Ealaíon and £3,000 from the Northern Ireland Arts Council. Portfolio's second volume will be published in April 1995 (with its third scheduled for February 1996). John O'Regan (Gandon Press) cited lack of finance and labour as the reason for the gap in publication. However Volume 2 will go ahead with an increase in Arts Council funding (from £7,000 in 1991 to £10,000 in 1995, and £3,000 from Northern Ireland Arts Council). Portfolio is a high gloss publication and is somewhat similar in form to the G.P.A. Irish Arts Review. However it has a much more contemporary content; it is also aimed more at an international, rather than an Irish audience ⁴⁵.

Portfolio's introduction contained phrases which sound strikingly familiar to the editorial statement of Circa Magazine:

"Portfolio is concerned with the ideas rather than the styles that shape art. We are committed to the development of the visual arts in Ireland and intend to play an active role in this process" ⁴⁶.

However Portfolio does not consider itself 'in competition' (for advertising or audience) with Circa⁴⁷. At any rate it does not have the enduring continuity that Circa has maintained. The reason for this continuity seems to be Circa's belief in professionalism and good management in magazine production as well as its content. In answer to the question: "How has Circa kept going? Mark Robinson replied;

"Magazine production is a form, an art and a skill in its own right, it has dynamics

⁴⁵ O'REGAN, John, Telephone Interview Jan 1995

⁴⁶ O'REGAN, John, 'Introduction', Portfolio, 1991, p5

⁴⁷ ibid footnote 45

of its own, there are automatic tensions between a professional business approach and a more collective, democratic open access approach which some people would take".⁴⁸

It is this professional approach that ensures Circa's constituents (artists, advertisers, arts administrators, academics as well as the general public) can depend on its publication. The fact that it has had a continuous run for fourteen years is important. This longevity and consistency means that a magazine like Circa can attain a certain status and become an ongoing record to which people can refer. As such it has been able to establish a position as an institution in the Irish arts world.

So it seems to be a combination of an organised/professional approach and a more collective and artistic impulse which has made Circa successful. The commitment which Editors, the Editorial Board, contributors and advertisers have given and continue to give is an important factor.

Circa Today and its International Role.

Circa has gone through many changes and developments since its inception. In its present state it could be said to have gone full circle since its first issue in 1981.

"It is becoming more of an arts organisation as opposed to simply a magazine, it is now finding its place again in a range of activities - the core one remaining the magazine with complementary and supplementary events; for example 'Work In Process', launches, seminars etc..."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ ROBINSON, Mark, In Interview

⁴⁹ KIANG, Tanya, In Interview

These kind of events provide Circa with an opportunity to receive feedback from its audience and other arts bodies.

In September 1994, Circa began to sponsor a Fás Scheme. This is managed by Gemma Tipton who is also the Editorial Coordinator. This Fás Scheme was set up in order to develop and pilot Eye-Level. Eye-Level is an educational magazine aimed at students in the 16 - 18 age bracket (Leaving Cert/A Level in the North) who have an interest in pursuing an art career. Eye-level is intended to supplement the existing school curriculum which at present is sadly lacking in contemporary content.

The Fás Scheme has sixteen participants. Seven of these are practising full time artists. The remainder are involved with writing, research and administration of this project. Both Tanya Kiang and Gemma Tipton hope that Eye-Level will become an established part of Circa publications.⁵⁰ The Eye-Level project is extremely valuable in that it is addressing at the roots, two problems that Circa (and Irish art criticism in general) has faced in the past and is still facing: the lack of high quality Irish writers and would be contributors interested in writing about Irish art and cultural issues, and the lack of up-to-date contemporary arts education texts in Irish schools. There are a number of post-graduate courses in Ireland which provide professional cultural training in areas such as arts administration, arts management, heritage management and film studies. However, there are no courses which are aimed at providing specific training in art criticism or art critical thinking. There are acknowledged high quality writers in Ireland

⁵⁰ TIPTON, Gemma, In Interview

and it is important that these people be given an opportunity or platform to pass their skills and knowledge to students who are interested in pursuing this route.

The National College of Art and Design provides a valuable introduction to students through their complementary studies programme; but a post-graduate training course in this area is essential. I think that Circa in association with the Art Colleges would be in a good position to run art writing workshops and courses. Funding from the Arts Councils should be made available for the development of such courses. Another way of addressing this problem could be the establishment of an art magazine aimed at third level art, design, craft and history of art students. This would be a way of involving and interesting students in art critical discourse.

In appearance Circa is a highly professional, glossy, well produced magazine. It is commercial in appearance though not necessarily in content. For example the Irish Arts Review produces more or less the same number of pages per annum and equally has the same ratio between advertising pages and editorial as Circa, however the Irish Arts Review does have a commercial content in that it includes a price index of Modern Irish Art. Circa, on the other hand, deals with "*a more cutting edge, less obviously commercial type or art*"⁵¹ and does not therefore have to mark a distinction between art that is 'saleable' and art (for example time-based, performances works) that is not. In this way Circa is prioritising coverage for artists; rather than buyers.

⁵¹ KIANG, Tanya, In Interview

One of Circa's important roles is to provide independent literature and publicity for artists. An artist needs to establish a credibility that is recognised and provided by an independent institution. There is a limit to how much an artist can self-publicise; this is something that Circa can do. For example in Issue 69; Circa produced a feature on Ian Joyce, a young contemporary Irish Artist. This proved to provide invaluable documentation for him when he was contacting galleries in Spain with a view to exhibiting. In this way Circa is not only bringing news about what is happening in Irish art to a wider audience, but also paves the way for younger less established artists who are trying to make contacts with international galleries.

Finally, I will close this section with a quote from Tanya Kiang (editor of Circa), summing up the role which Circa fulfils in Ireland today; "*Circa wishes to raise the profile of Visual Art in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and at an International level*"⁵²

⁵² ibid

Conclusion

In my introduction I stated my intention to examine aspects of Irish art criticism in a practical manner.

I did this by looking directly at periodicals such as Circa Magazine and The Irish Arts Review. Chapter one provides an analysis of the format and editorial structure of each magazine. Chapter two, looks at specific articles published by each magazine. I chose articles dealing with the opening of I.M.M.A. and coverage of the Arts Council as these are crucial subjects for discussion in an Irish forum. Chapter three is more generalised in that while the focus is on Circa, I have also discussed, in relation to Circa, other forms of Irish art criticism; such as that found in catalogues and newspapers.

The publications I have examined have carved out for themselves different territories. Each fulfils an essential function in bringing information, as well as different levels of critical debate, about arts and culture to the public, both domestic and international. It is not necessarily useful to enter into a discussion of the comparative merits of each publication. Rather, the purpose of this thesis has been to examine them on a more structural, analytical plane.

I feel that knowledge of the different forms of art criticism is invaluable to an Irish artist. Newspapers, and journals like Circa not only present

reviews of an artist's work, they also offer a discursive forum, to enable relevant and important debates to be discussed publicly.

As a student soon to become a practising artist, I have found that researching and writing this thesis has been, and I feel will be, enormously helpful and informative, in understanding my audience, critics and buyers alike.

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