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COLAISTE NAISIUNTA EALAINE IS DEARTHA
NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
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RE-ESTABLISHING A DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARY ART

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Education

in

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by

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for a diploma or degree in any other college or university.

signed: _____

The title of this dissertation is 'Establishing a dialogue with Contemporary Art'. It is the intention of the researcher to explore and analyze key issues relating to the growing alienation of contemporary art from society. The first chapter of this dissertation will address the exile of contemporary art through examining the artists changing role in society and furthermore establish historical precedent for civilisation's acceptance of art that is nonrepresentational and conceptual. This chapter will draw upon current critical writing on contemporary art and historical reference. The second chapter will examine issues of accessibility to contemporary art through recent studies in the area, an interview with the arts officer in I.M.M.A., and referencing relevant writings .The final chapter of this dissertation will explore the benefit of arts education to the adolescents development and discuss and document the methodology and application of a scheme of work, introducing contemporary art to a senior cycle group with the aim of establishing a dialogue with one aspect of contemporary visual language. The success of this scheme of work is finally tested in a class visit to the Irish Museum of Modern Art. This dissertation will conclude that in addressing the re-establishment of a dialogue between contemporary art and society wider issues of education and accessibility to art must be tackled.

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Introduction

On the eve of the new millenium we are surrounded by a society which has embraced technological developments beyond the wildest imaginings of our forefathers. The twentieth century initially greeted the television with scepticism, but quickly forgot its concerns in the widespread acceptance of the wonder of meeting the world through a box in the living room of every home. The refinement of computer technology at the latter half of the twentieth century has opened endless possibilities of global communication and the breaking down of cultural and language barriers. Schools across Ireland prioritise the integration of the computer as an educational tool. The twentieth century has also seen huge advances in science and our understanding of the planet we inhabit and the possibility of exploration beyond it. Music, also underwent many changes through the advent of jazz and the opening of a diversity of possibilities, it has become the voice of youth culture. This century has seen the introduction of radical and widespread changes in the development of our civilisation and the quality of our lives. As a civilisation our development is in a continual state of flux, characterised by a diversity of slowly dissolving traditions; religious, moral and linguistic. However in this global village many losses have occured, each new technological development brings with it

inevitable social consequences. This dissertation is concerned with the growing loss of one such tradition. This loss is manifested in the general public's disregard for the art of the contemporary. Social and technological developments have liberated the artist from social responsibility, allowing the advent of modernism to progress on an autonomous course unheeded by a society caught in a race for more, newer and better. Suzi Gablik addresses the lack of esteem in which the contemporary artist is held in Has modernism failed?

> To the public at large modern art has always
> implied a loss of craft, a fall from grace, a fraud
> or a hoax...It remains one of the most disturbing
> facts about modernism that fraudulence has,
> from the start, hung round its neck like an albatross. (1)

It is the intention of this dissertation to examine the issues proposed by the dislocation of contemporary art from society. The first chapter will try to establish historical precedent for societies acceptance of art that is non-representational as conceptual and then to examine the artists changing role in society.

In further developing these issues the second chapter will look at societies role in the dislocation of contemporary art, and deal with the critical issue of access to art for the public. The Irish Museum Of Modern Art will be examined as a model for cultural democracy and the provision of accessibility to contemporary art. Finally the third chapter will examine

the importance of the arts in developing a sense of identity in the adolescent and then document the application of a scheme of work which will attempt to open a dialogue between the secondary school student and the visual language of contemporary art. This scheme was further developed through the use of the Irish Museum of Modern Art as a model for access to contemporary art.

Footnotes:

(1) Gablik Suzi, Has Modernism Failed? (United States: Thames and Hudson, 1984) p.13.

CHAPTER 1

THE DISLOCATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY ART AND

SOCIETY

In Marc Mayers 1996 critical essay 'Modernism Is Dead, Long Live

Modernism' he states that,

> Arts long struggle to free itself from answering to either King, priest,
> philosopher, historian, capitalist or mob has prepared it for along cold
> exile. (1)

In analysing this 'cold exile' Mayers goes on to talk about how Modernist

developments in the art world have progressed in the twentieth century

leaving behind one vital component - namely people. In this researchers

experience public opinions of contemporary art tend to range from amused

dismissal to irate frustration -

> A child could do that....What is it supposed to be? Is this a joke? (2).

These are typical comments made by people on confrontation with

contemporary artworks. It is the intention of this chapter to establish and analyse the alienation of contemporary art from the public and furthermore the importance of re-establishing a dialogue between art and society.

In Marc Mayers series of essays on contemporary art he cites the invention of the camera as a critical moment in the development of a disparity between the art world and the rest of society. Here he states began

> "the strenuous battle between the soul and the machine for the possession of man's soul" (3).

Over the last century and a half since the invention of photography " the struggle for man's soul" has continued in the realm of the art world largely unheeded by man. Artists initially reacted defensively to the camera, a machine that not only threatened its livelihood, but also its moral superiority and social standing, a position hard fought for over four centuries. It was not until the advent of the Renaissance that the job of the artist left the realms of apprenticeship and manual labour. The camera has traditionally been viewed amongst art historians as a catalyst for the liberation of painting from the duty of representation. This liberation saw the development of a race in the art world which catapulted it through a series of visual acrobatics intent on proving its validity and technical superiority over any machine. The consequences of these developments were not immediately, but rather unfolded gradually. In Hugh Honour and

John Flemings introduction to 'A World History Of Art', they defined the role of art as

> the activity that most clearly distinguishes human beings from other animals. History of art is an essential part of the history of the human species. (4)

A worrying consequence of modernist artistic developments is that art, an intrinsic part of the culture and identity, our visual history of the human species has become dislocated from the society from which it sprung.

Precedent For Societies Acceptance Of Non Representational Form

Ironically pre-christian art from many civilisations displayed the very characteristics which have currently alienated contemporary art from the twentieth century populace. These characteristics are simplicity of form and the use of abstract of symbolism to convey meaning. This very simplicity of image can be seen in the cornerstones of New Grange (see fig. 1) which once must have referred to very relevant aspects of Irish neo-lithic society. Looking at the visual artefacts left to us by many early human societies we can see many similarities between the contemporary

language of modernism and the visual language implied by our forefathers to tell their stories.

In referring to a series of marble figurines of Greek origin produced between 2,300 B.C. and 2,800 B.C., the classical historian Nigel Spivey writes in 'Greek Art' how these figurines have become,

> keenly collected partly because they satisfy a modern taste for simplicity or abstraction of form. (5)

Throughout many early civilisations both eastern and western we can trace evidence of societies that utilised the skills of craftsmen and artists to express beliefs - magical, religious, sacred, dictatorial and political, often using non-representation visual devices. Islamic art was essentially an art of calligraphic inscription avoiding symbols or images, instead translating the Koran into intricate abstract embellishments, thus manipulating language the medium of many twentieth century artists.

In Phadians series of publications on the history of art the art historian Vidya Dehejja writes in 'Indian Art',

> Some fifteen hundred years ago thinkers formulated a theory of art and aesthetic that centered around the viewer's role in the artwork.

They postulated that the aesthetic experience rests not with the work of art nor with the artist who created it but with the viewer.(6)

This ideology is also to be found at the core of twentieth century art. Contemporary art critic Tony Godfrey in discussing conceptual art in Phadians 'Conceptual Art', argues that

> Because the work does not take a traditional form it demands active response from the viewer. Indeed it could be argued that conceptual works of art only tin the viewers mental participation.(7)

The very foundations of modernism are built upon a rediscovery of 'primitive art' - the art and crafts of indigenous peoples of Africa and Oceania. At the beginning of the nineteenth century ethnographical museums were opened in Paris, London, Berlin and many major European cities. They were at first viewed as evolutionary curiosities containing artefacts from outside the accepted cultural world. Objects from many indigenous cultures were displays alongside pre-historic artefacts. Primitive art is a term that was blankedly applied to artefacts from a wide range of cultures often bearing little in common except a divergence from the western duty of naturalistic representation. Picasso's revelation that African art was more

"conceptually structured than the art of the west, more dependent on knowing than on seeing" (8),

steered him towards abandonment of the western preoccupation

with illusionistic realism. Les Damoiselles d'Avignon (see fig.2) unmistakably intends an assault on western pictorial tradition and adapts primitive characteristics such as the geometrical arrangement of human features to achieve a harmony between line, surface and mass. Kandinsky the Russian painter (1866-1944), cited his involvement with primitive African art as a point of breakthrough which was to radically change his approach to painting. Of their influence he said,

> Like ourselves these artists sought to express in their work only
> internal truth, renouncing in consequence all considerations of
> external forms.(9)

Many early civilisations developed and integrated art into their lives, often using abstracted and highly sophisticated visual language. Testament to the relevance and acceptance of this early abstraction of form is defined by where these artefacts were located and their purpose, often at the epicentre of these societies in burial chambers such as Newgrange, the mono-lithic heads of Easter Island (see fig.3) are

examples of art found at the core of early civilisations. Their purposes

and existence testament to complex beliefs - magical, epic, ritual and

social. There is therefore precedent in human history for acceptance of

the non-representational, conceptual and abstract. The question must be

poised that if twentieth century artists also engage in a similar language

then why has contemporary art become located on the preface of society

catering to an elite informed minority? To understand the reason for this

dislocation we must examine the traditional role the artist played in

society and why this role now operates outside of the society it once

served.

The Traditional Role Of The Artist In Society

From the earliest times art and civilisations have evolved together over

thousands of years. Little is known about either the purpose or the

motivational force behind early pictorial representation. The earliest

known paintings were cave paintings, produced from about 20,000 B.C.,

the most famous of these are the cave paintings at Laucaux (see fig.4),

France c.15,000 B.C. They have inspired much speculation about their

purpose; ceremonial, sites of initiation temples or sanctuaries. Whatever

the purpose of these early human images, their occurrence throughout

southern Europe over thousands of years indicate that in what must of

been a harsh and relentless existence there was a drive or instinct amongst those societies to forge a visual representation of their stories. As civilisation developed, the jigsaw puzzle of our past becomes less cryptic. Much of our knowledge of our great civilisations of the past is obtained from the visual culture of those societies. The inherent human artistic

instinct and its visual outcome, throughout the history of civilisation served to translate stories of religion, gods and peoples long past. In western society the artistic instinct found a strict reins in the Christian church. The artist's role as the visual translator of biblical epics began a tradition which dominated the role and purpose of the artist for almost two millennia. Theological Christian dogma dictated rules prohibiting the direct representation of God or Christ as idolatry.

The artist's role in early Christianity was to serve to utilise the visual mediums of painting and sculpture according to the higher spiritual dictates of church academics and philosophers. The early Christian writer and polemicist Tertulliam (160 - 225 B.C.) claimed that the devil created sculptors, painters and producers of all kinds of portraits.(10)

The Middle Ages saw the artists' skills directed by the church as teaching and instilling fear in the illiterate. The development of stained glass and

gothic architecture served to thrust an earthly community skywards. The artist and architect created cathedrals and places of worship far removed from that of the everyday world outside. It is often said that windows such as those at Chartres constituted the Bible of the poor and illiterate.

The Renaissance was seen as an era of enlightenment when the enquiring nature of the human mind threw off the shackles of ignorance and obedience. It was an astounding era in European civilisation, a period of ingenuity and productivity in the arts. It was during this era that a distortion developed between the artist and craftsman, the architect and builder. The emergence of humanist thought and a re-discovery of the art of the classical word inspired a change in perception of the servile role of the artist. Renaissance artists asserted autonomy in the direction and inspiration of their artworks and this permeated throughout society The Renaissance had altered the role played by artists in society. Once considered mere craftsmen, painters and sculptors, now were perceived as cultured, creative individuals who mingled with political, religious and intellectual leaders. (11)

This 'mingling' in effect created new reins to which the artist would be bound. Wealthy patrons and monarchs sought out the service and prestige of the now socially acceptable artist. However the role and freedom of the

artist was forever altered by the Renaissance. In Suzi Gabliks essay 'Pluralism - The Tyranny Of Freedom', she discusses the Renaissance artist's role as twofold: a direct one imposed by the requirements of city, church or patron and an indirect one arising from the need to express individuality and to find originality within an established order (12). This statement is applicable to the role of the artist throughout the

seventieth and eighteenth centuries. The artist survived through commissioned patronage while forging invaluable visual records of fashions, tastes, politics and wars. During the past four centuries the artist cast off the shackles of the tradesman to rise to an elite almost celebrity position in society. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries through technological and social developments saw the release of the artist from the bounds of representation.

Kasmir Malevich the Russian artist manifested a philosophy that represented the death knell of the artist's relationship with society.

> Art no longer cares to serve state and religion...It no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing to do with the object as such and believes it can exist in and for itself, without things (13)

The twentieth century saw the development of a chasm between art and people, thus entering Marc Mayers `cold exile`. The removal of the duty of representation, the re-discovery of primitive art and means of expression coupled with changes in social values allowed the age old tradition of art to steer a course clear of responsibility to any society.

Self-reflection and conceptualism have become the mainstays of contemporary art evolution, but unlike the conceptualism and abstraction of pre-Christian societies, contemporary art in losing its social shackles it also lost its social relationship. Society is a word that has come, in the west, to have restrictive and capitalist connotations. However in embarking on an autonomous course in the twentieth century artists have forgotten that society is made up of people. From society we are all born. To continue into the next millennium without re-establishing a social dialogue between the artist and people, will inevitably have a two fold consequence: people will be left with only an understanding of the visual stories of the past, with no means of recording their own. Artists and contemporary art will continue its meandering course , realising too late obscurity.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER 1

1. Mayers Marc, Time and Being (United States of America: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1996) p.24.

2. The researchers experience of working as a mediator in the Irish Museum of Modern Art 1995/98.

3. Mayers, Time and Being p.21.

4. Honour Hugh and Fleming John, A World History Of Art (Great Britain: Laurence King, 1995) p.xxxii.

5. Spivey Nigel, Greek Art (Great Britain: Phaidon, 1997) p.33.

6. Dehejia Vidya, Indian Art (Great Britain: Phaidon, 1997) p.11.

7. Godfrey Tony, Conceptual Art (Great Britain: Phaidon, 1998) p.4.

8. Honour and Fleming, The Visual Arts, p.718

9. ibid, p.722.

10. ibid, p.276.

11. Heller Nancy, Women Artists (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997) p.13.

12. Gablik Suzi, Has Modernism Failed? (UnitedStates of America: Thames Hudson, 1984) p.79.
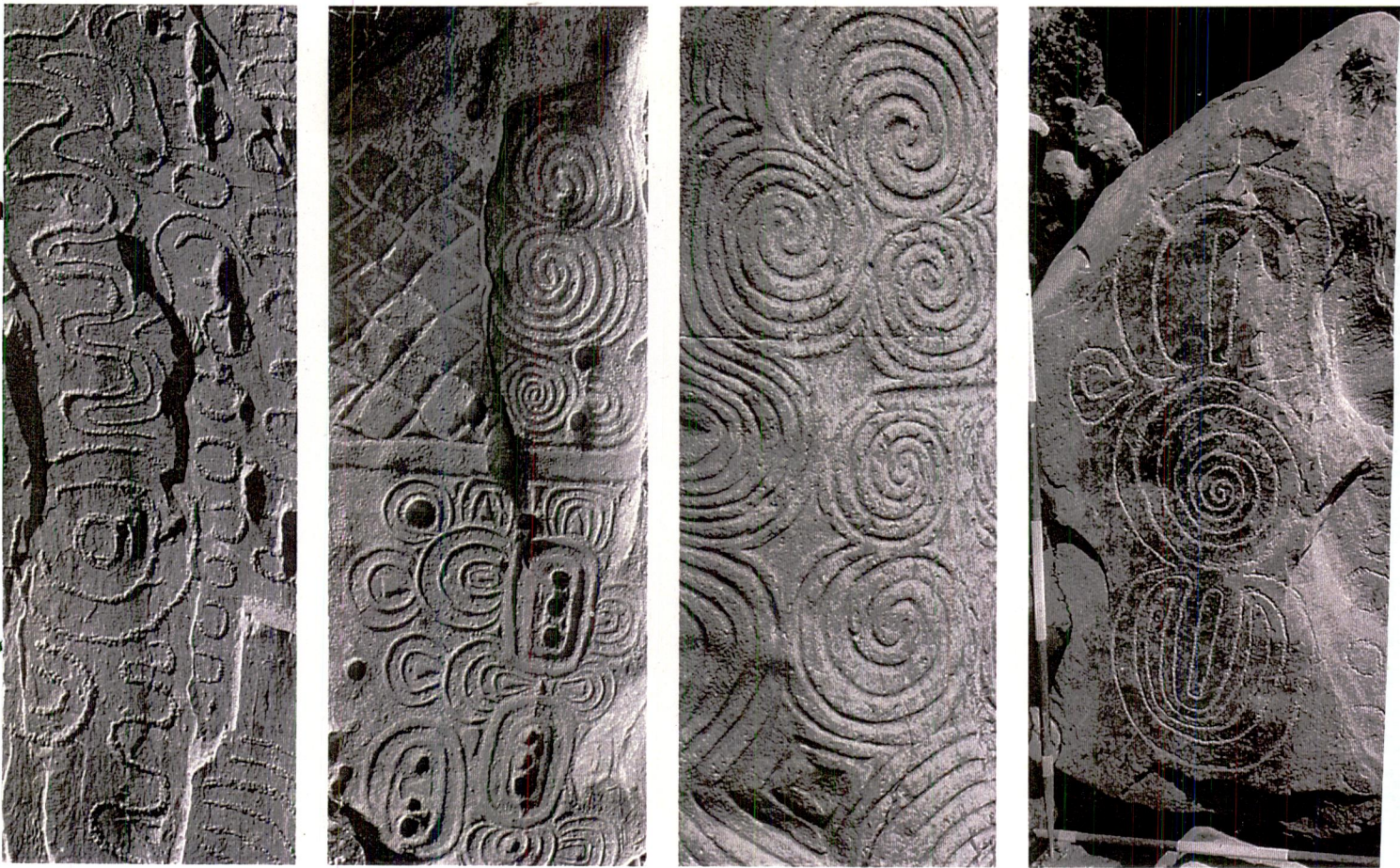
13. ibid., p.13.

Figure 1 The Cornerstones Of Newgrange And Knowth

Figure 2 Pablo Picasso, Les Damoiselles d'Avignon Oil On Canvas 1907

Figure 3 Monolithic Heads, Easter Island AD 400 - 1680

Figure 4 Cave Paintings At Lascaux, France 16,000 - 14,000 BC

CHAPTER 2

ACCESSIBILITY TO CONTEMPORARY ART

In `A World History Of Art`, Honour and Fleming provide a definition of

the importance of art to,

> ...deepen our insight into ourselves and others, they sharpen
> our awareness of our own and other modes of thought and
> religious creeds, they enlarge our comprehension of alternative
> and often alien ways of life - in short they explore and
> understand our own human nature.(1)

If as a society we are to relate to a visual culture which enables us to

`deepen our insight` into our selves we must be confident in approaching

the art produced by our generation - contemporary living art. To enable

confidence, the art that is produced by our society must be accessible to all

and not confined to an elite few.

Poverty: Access and Participation In The Arts is a report which was

produced (1995-97) by the arts and the combat poverty agency drew its

source material and data from a series of commissioned reports from areas

that suffer social and economic depravation. Its objective was to

> "encourage real participation in the arts in terms of availability and
> access, with particular reference to young people, children and people
> with disabilities and taking account of social as well as geographical
> barriers" (2).

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The report targeted issues of accessibility through a wide variety of social groups from school children to the elderly. `Poverty: Access and participation in the arts ` cites R.B McNeal's study of `Extracurricular Activities and High School Dropouts` in the United States as a comprehensive study in the importance of the arts as a motivational force in education. McNeal's study examined a sample of twenty thousand high school students and concluded the place of fine arts in the curriculum,

> ...reduced the likelihood of a young person dropping out the
> and these benefits remained even when factors like race, socio-
> economic states, gender and ability were controlled. (3)

If McNeal's study is applicable to Ireland the potential of a greater emphasis on the fine arts in the Irish curriculum would enhance future educational standards. However through surveys undertaken in the making of the `Poverty: Access and Participation in the arts`, a number of problems were identified in relation to attitudes of people in low income working class areas to the arts. In one survey people were asked what came to mind when they heard the words `the arts`, sixty nine per cent of people interviewed responded that the arts were "for other people...not for us." Art is only for the elite...certain sector of society...for the educated...when you don`t know much about it, you don`t think it`s for you"(4). The report goes on to identify economic and social reasons for

the inaccessibility of the arts in this portion of the population.

An overriding theme of great importance that emerged from the

interviewees was that there should be access for their children. Many felt

that education was the key to increased access for their children in the

future.

In Suzi Gablik`s essay `Art for arts sake or for societies sake?` she debates

the reasons for the inaccessibility of contemporary art to the rest of society

stating that,

> If the disaccord between the artist and society in modern times
> is to be seen as a defect, it must be understood as a social
> problem due not to any defects inherent in art, but to the
> defects in the value system of modern society. (5)

This `defect` relates to art relates to the position of art in the hierarchical

system of contemporary social values. Gablik debates that in modern

western society our capitalist priorities have dampened the value and

meaning of art, disallowing any meaningful dialogue. In the first chapter I

discussed the role of the artist in the marginalisation of art in society.

There are two sides to every story however and this cliché applies equally

to the central issue of this thesis.

For the problem to be honestly addressed our society must also take

responsibility for the alienation of its contemporary visual tradition.

Gablik's argument is mirrored by Martin Drury`s debate in the art and

education's `Back to Basics`. In this essay he discusses an Irish educational

system which reflects modern societies lack of cultural priority.

> It is as if we know art explores such fundamental questions of
> individual and group identity, that it explores issues of divine
> and human authority that it engages our thoughts and feelings
> in such a primal way, that it is not really safe to release its
> potency within formal society. (6)

Drury reflects also on the importance of art and artefacts as a key to

understanding both past and alien cultures. If art can reflect and tell the

stories of societies and civilisations throughout history then a tangible

dialogue must be established with contemporary art, if for no other reason

than to record our stories and bequeath future generations a mirror of their

past.

The Role of The Museum Of Modern Art In Re-Establishing A Dialogue

As a role model for tackling accessibility to contemporary art the Irish

Museum of Modern Art a many modes of successful dialogue with the

public. This success was recognised in 1995 by the `Best Museum

Education Project` award from the Gulbenkian Museum of the year

awards. The education department at I.M.M.A was established in 1991 in

response to the museums philosophy that

> "access to contemporary visual culture can and should be a
> right...and to create meaningful access to the museums resources."(7)

The education department have tackled community access and primary

school access for educators and children in a series of projects initiated in

nineteen ninety-one. The education department has explored a variety of

approaches to access, some projects originate in an art historical context

forging a direct link with the art with the exhibition program, others are

developed in conjunction with artists and the community reflecting both

individual and collective group desires to express personal and social

issues.

Community groups from the areas surrounding the museum were

encouraged to utilise the museum's facilities in the visual expression of

Relevant social issues. `Unspoken Truths` is an example of a successful community based project involving the community and the education program at I.M.M.A. It is cited as a model of community arts practice in `Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts`. The project brought together thirty-two women from Dublin: the Lourdes Youth and Community Service and the Family Resource Centre Inchicore in collaboration with the Education and Community department.

The resulting exhibition `Unspoken Truths` was shown at I.M.M.A and a collection of art centres throughout the country. It is testament to the success of this initiative that the social issues addressed by the exhibition were successfully translated into contemporary visual artworks. The exhibition of the work produced an insight for the public into the stories of the groups involved.

In I.M.M.A`s policy of access is a recognition that working with children at a young age in relation to contemporary art, can break down barriers of accessibility and hopefully establish a pattern of dialogue for life. In the opening statement of the Education and Community departments latest publication `A Space To Grow: New Approaches To Working With Children, Primary School Teachers And Contemporary Art In The Context Of A Museum `, it is proposed that "education at its best is often the

miraculous empowerment of the smallest and most vulnerable of people:

children". (8)

In exploring methods of `empowerment` of children the museum has

devised a primary school program which invites primary schools to

participate in workshops with artists in connection with the exhibitions

program.

> " The program is designed to be open and explorative, to create space
> for each child's vision and to use the visual arts as a conduit to
> explore a child's view of the world" (9).

In each workshop project the gallery experience of the child is seen as a

central motivating force to stimulate the child's creativity. In the Beverly

Semnes primary school project children were encouraged to explore the

artists work in the gallery through a sense of play. With the aid of an artist,

children gradually Semnes sculptures to imaginative places. Teachers

were encouraged to develop the seeds of the museum workshops in

classroom based projects. The success of this project is reflected in the

children's imaginative memories of the sculptures they encountered (see

fig.1).

> I went to a room with a waterfall and there was a time
> machine when you go through the waterfall. You walk
> through it and you go into some other age. (10)

The museums in service program for primary school teachers was initiated in 1991 with fifteen teachers. The area of primary school in service for art was a vital area as many primary school teachers have little experience with the visual arts. In 1987 the report of the review body on the primary curriculum states that many teachers devote as little as one hour per week to arts and crafts. The in service program has successfully targeted this group aiming to develop confidence and support for primary school teachers in the area of art education. The museum's achievement is reflected in the increase from fifteen participating teachers in 1991 to a current database of four hundred and seventy.

In an interview with Ann Davern- education and community officer at I.M.M.A she emphasised the museums ethos that Ireland is a "cultural democracy" therefore every person from the young to the elderly have a right to access art. She saw the education department's role as to `facilitate engagement` with contemporary art. By developing community and school programmes the museums job could not stop at providing access to contemporary art but also "to make it accessible." She also acknowledged the problem of extending this aim to the secondary school student.

'Because the current educational system in Ireland is examination orientated, time constraints can often impede school trips to museums and galleries". (11)

The museum relies on the role of the mediator in terms of making contemporary art accessible to the secondary school student. The term mediator is used its implication to mediate between the artworks and the public. This `mediating` involves facilitating tours of exhibitions and being present in the gallery to relate information to the public about artwork. As a mediator in the Irish Museum of Modern Art from April 1995 to September 1998 the researcher has gained experience of dealing with a wide variety of groups including secondary school groups from all over Ireland. This experience suggested the openness and critical ability of the adolescent secondary student to challenges poised in confronting contemporary art. In asserting the relevance of contemporary art for the development of critical thinking the third chapter of this thesis will deal with the classroom application of a scheme of work, utilising contemporary art as a basis for establishing a dialogue with the suggested model of the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER TWO

1. Honour Hugh and John Fleming A World History Of Art (Great Britain: Laurence King, 1995) p.xxxii.

2. Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts   (Ireland: The Arts Council and the Combat Poverty Agency, Pre-publication Issue,1997) p.vi.

3. ibid. p.34

4. ibid. p.80.

5. Gablik Suzi Has Modernism Failed? (United States of America: Thames and Hudson, 1984) p.29.

6. Drury Martin " The Arts and Education, Back To Basics" in Compass (Ireland: The Irish Association for Curricculum Development, 1991) Vol 20: No.1, p.13.

7. Researcher's Interview with Ann Davern - Art Education Officer, IMMA, Feb. 1999

8. A Space To Grow: New Approaches To Working With Children, Primary School Teachers And Contemporary Art In The Context Of A Museum (Ireland: The Irish Museum Of Modern Art, 1999) p.9.

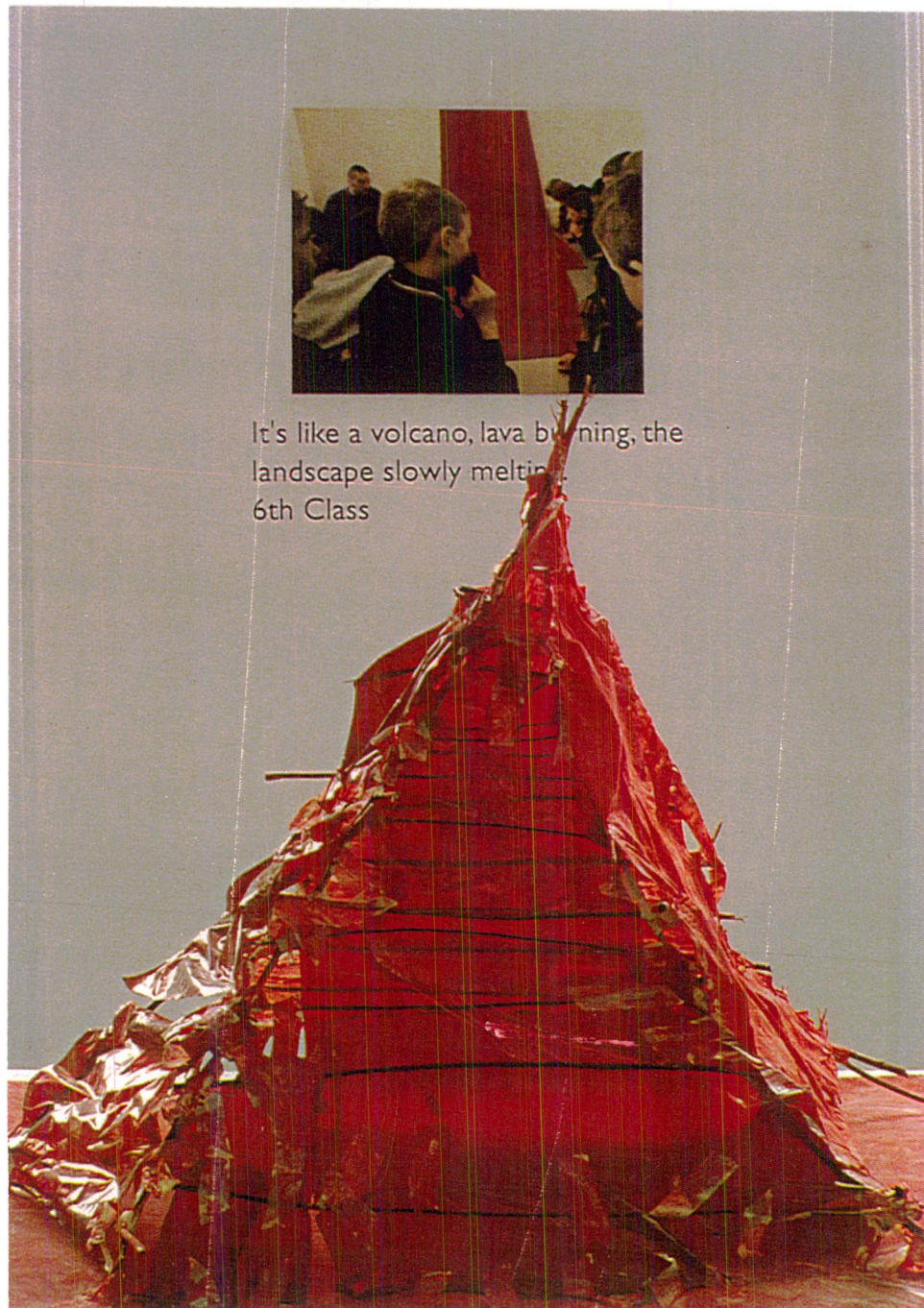9. ibid. p.13

10. ibid. p.106.

11. Interview - Ann Davern

It's like a volcano, lava burning, the landscape slowly melting.
6th Class

Fig 1 Primary School Work Made In response To The Beverly Semmes Exhibition At I.M.M.A

CHAPTER 3

<u>Introducing Contemporary Art To The Secondary School Student</u>

The Relevance Of Art In The Development Of The Adolescent

Art is often called a mirror of society reflecting civilisations continual

state of change. Inherent in human nature is a need to question and

explore both ourselves and our surroundings. Each discovery both social

and scientific alters our perception of ourselves and the society we live in.

For thousands of years, artists have recorded and contributed to these

changes. David Best reflects on the importance of the contribution of the

artist to society in 'Feeling And Reason In The Arts', proposing that,

> throughout history the arts have made powerful and incisive moral
> and social comments. It is a recognition of just how dangerous the
> arts can be in this respect which induces totalitarian regimes to censor
> and apply stringent restrictions on the arts.(1)

If art is to recognised as a dangerous and powerful tool, then any

breakdown of communication between the artist and society will have

negative consequences for future generations. With no understanding of

the visual expression of the individual within contemporary society,

humanity will gradually loose an important medium for questioning and

self-discovery. In addressing the issue of the breakdown of a dialogue between contemporary art and the people, an obvious starting place must be through education. To many adults the task of interacting or developing a relationship with contemporary art is an arduous one. The development of new innovations, conceptualism and the use of twentieth century technology within contemporary art can present difficulties for any adult unfamiliar with such visual languages.

The psychologist Erikson proposed that one critical issue in the development of the adolescent is resolving the crisis of personal identity - our definition of self - how we see ourselves and how others see us, forms the foundations of our adult personality. If that foundation is firm and strong a solid personal identity will develop. Martin Drury identifies the role of the artist in fostering this sense of personal identity and aiding the development of this defintion of self. He states that neglecting the arts in education

'is an enormous educational loss sustained by children not reflecting on their own experiences, their own lives and seeking to give meaning in a creative act'.(2)

He further expands his argument on the place of arts education in the development of the child in the means of self-understanding,

For what is most important in this domain is the interior landscape of a

child's own mind; how rich is that landscape; how full of ideas, memories

and aspirations is it?; how does the landscape correspond to the external

landscape of the child's behaviour? In poems, stories, pictures, drama and

dance lie the materials whereby these correspondences are born and

nourished so that the child's external attitudes and behaviour are informed

by reflection and exploration so that his/her thoughts, ideas and

convictions are tested through his\her life in the real world.(3)

If the arts can aid in the well being and development of the adolescent then an

understanding of the new contemporary visual languages of expression is not

only desirable but also crucial. Because contemporary artists often choose

modes of expression which are non-representational and can involve video,

performance, film and installation, issues and meaning can often only be

realised through a process of thinking, analysing and responding to these

artworks. In Julie Springers essay 'Object Based Study In Art' she proposes a

model for engaging the adolescent student in critical, cognitive and emotive

engagement with artworks. Students stating that,

> When teaching thinking skills I prefer to work with modern objects.
> My reason is simple. Modern art is difficult for novice viewers and
> requires thorough engagement. Non-representational art or art made
> of unorthodox materials poses unique problems of interpretation. Such
> works challenge our ingrained notions of what 'art' is, and what impact
> it such have on us. (4)

In exploring the issues addressed in this dissertation this researcher undertook a scheme of work which would hopefully engage a group of senior cycle in the practical and critical understanding of one aspect of contemporary art. Initially this researcher explored the possibility of developing this scheme within the progressive framework of the Leaving Certificate Applied curriculum. Within this curriculum there is a large emphasis placed upon self-exploration and forging a sense of identity in the student. A core area of the curriculum is 'individuality and identity', encouraging the student through a variety of media to develop personal values and gain self esteem. Suggested areas of study include the work of contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol and Lucien Freud. Unfortunately the reality of teaching a group of students where discipline and establishing trust with individual students was a priority made this scheme unfeasible. As another option this scheme was developed and carried out with a fifth year group. The aim of this scheme was to reinterpret the traditional still life through examining and exploring contemporary approaches, culminating in a low relief painting. This group of students had been involved in a lengthy still life scheme with their teacher based on the study of the Dutch still life. It was the

intention of the researcher to introduce the students to contemporary and conceptual approaches to painting. The scheme consisted of five lessons, culminating in a visit to the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The objective of the first lesson was to develop the students' understanding of line and shape through observational drawing. This lesson was crucial to the scheme as it was to introduce the students to the concepts behind Giorgio Morandi's still lives as a contemporary approach to dealing with not only the still life but as a way to understanding the visual language of twentieth century artists. In introducing the scheme this researcher related Galileo's writings about the existence of a 'human alphabet', which has nothing to do with the 'abc' of the written word. This human alphabet is the alphabet of geometrical shapes such as the square, triangle and cylinder. These shapes are not to be found in nature. They are integral to human civilisation - invented by man and forming the building blocks of all that is human. Giorgio Morandi (see Fig.1) imbued in his simple still lives a spiritual awareness of these shapes as a visual language.

The students were required to explore a geometrical still life through line and shape. They were responsive during the introduction and appeared to develop a good understanding of the concepts expressed in Morandi's work.

Because the students had already dealt with a lengthy traditional still life project this researcher intended to challenge the students through the use of a variety of media. The objective of the second lesson was 'to aid the students understanding of form through the use of collage'. The students reacted well to the introduction of this alternative means of exploring form. As their work developed the use of collage enabled them to not only explore the form of the objects but also to begin to abstract the image of the still life in the choice and placement of torn and cut coloured paper.

The third lesson in the scheme aimed to again enhance the students understanding of form through collage and introduce griding and priming in preparation for a low relief painting. This class was quite lively and animated. The students were very motivated by the prospect of using 'real' artist's techniques such as priming and preparing a surface for painting as they generally painted directly onto wallpaper. By the end of the class the students were very pleased with their collages. In the evaluation a discussion arose about how the work was developing in a very original and abstract manner.

The fourth lesson in this scheme held an objective to introduce the students to paint additives as an aid to understanding alternative approaches to painting. Crucial to the success of this scheme was the use and introduction of support studies which would reinforce the students understanding of shape and geometrical form as a visual language. In this lesson the work of William Scott (see figs.2&3) was used to emphasise how a traditional still life can be abstracted gradually, emerging from direct representation and through abstraction a concentration on simple shape and geometrical form. Through the use of these support studies the students developed confidence in their understanding of the process of abstraction and a desire to develop their own images from collage to painting. The class was introduced to paint additives as an alternative means of exploring the still life image. The students were interested in using materials such as flour, rice, sugar, gravel and tealeaves to aid in their departure from traditional flat two-dimensional painting. This class was highly motivate, each student engaged well in the process and during the evaluation they noticed how differently each of them had interpreted the theme. These differences emerged through each student's choice of colour and texture and through the process of painting.

The objectives of the final lesson of this scheme was 'to further develop the students understanding of shape and geometrical form as a contemporary

visual language through the use of paint additives'. In this class the still

lives of Georgio Morandi (see fig.4) were re-introduced and discussed in

relation to the contemporary installation artist Tony Cragg (see fig.5) who

takes his influence from Morandi's conceptual use of the still life as a

visual alphabet of geometrical shape and form. In the evaluation these

works were discussed in relation to the students own paintings. The class

was very pleased with their work, many of them were suprised at how

their work had developed in an abstract fashion through the process of

exploring still life (see fig.6, 7 & 8), commenting that if they had seen

their work in a gallery they would have dismissed it, not realising the

process and thought involved in developing an abstract image. It was the

intention of this short scheme to develop the students' understanding of

contemporary art practices and to enable them to develop skill in reading

and critically analysing a visual language used by many contemporary

artists. In undertaking such a scheme this researcher realised how

ambitious this aim was. Because of time constraints in completing the

scheme, it could not be concluded definitively that the students fully and

completely gained an uninhibited understanding of all the concepts

introduced by the scheme. However in evaluating the success of the

scheme this researcher felt that the students were motivated, were

introduced to alternative materials and broadened considerably their

understanding and acceptance of the relevance and meaning articulated in one aspect of contemporary visual language.

Visit To The Irish Museum Of Modern Art

At the end of this scheme we visited the Irish Museum of Modern Art. It was the hope of this researcher that the artists and process encountered in this scheme would enable the students to engage with the artworks encountered and put into practice the students developing critical and analytical abilities. The students completed a questionnaire (see apendix 1) asking the students to document their experience of galleries, previous artists encountered in museum and to brainstorm the term 'contemporary art'. Most of the students had visited at least one gallery before on a school trip, were unsure if they had encountered any contemporary artists in these visits and gave a colourful variety of responses to the brainstorming. Reactions varied from 'hard to understand' to 'rubbish'.

On visiting the museum we met with a mediator who tailored our tour to the level and ability of the students. Each artwork was introduced to the students through a gradual process of questioning and encouraging responses. The students although reserved at first became involved in lively debate with the mediator. The students' confidence developed during the tour as they realised that the meanings of many of the artworks

relied on their input and engagement with the pieces. After a tour of one hour the students were given worksheets. It was the intention of the researcher's worksheets to continue the mediators process of questioning and analysing response as a means for the students to access the artworks (see apendix 2). Unfortunately because of school time constraints our museum visit had to end after two hours. It proved to be a lively and enjoyable day. The students related some of the concepts explored in the scheme of work to the contemporary art seen in the museum. They still found much of the more alternative works quite incredible and debated their validity as 'art' vigorously.

In completing this scheme and availing of the facility of the Irish Museum of Modern Art to access contemporary art, this researchers findings were two fold; the students showed that with encouragement they were both willing and open to exploring and arguing contemporary art practices, and secondly the time constraints of the art curriculum could present difficulties in developing in students a comphrensive familiarity with the broad range of concepts and mediums involved in contemporary art. As a candidate for the Dip. ADT, this researcher would hope in a teaching career to incorporate the study of contemporary into the development of the students practical work, rather than in confining this crucial area of study to an already intense history of art curriculum.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER THREE

1. Best David, Feeling And Reason In The Arts (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1995) p.169.

2. Drury Martin,"The Arts And Education: Back To Basics" in Compass (Ireland: The Irish Association For Curriculum Development, 1991) Vol.20: no.1, p.14.

3. ibid. p.14&15

4. Springer Julie, "Object Based Study In Art" in Teaching Critical Thinking eds. John H. Clarke and Arthur W. Biddle (New Jersey: Prentice Hall) p.32
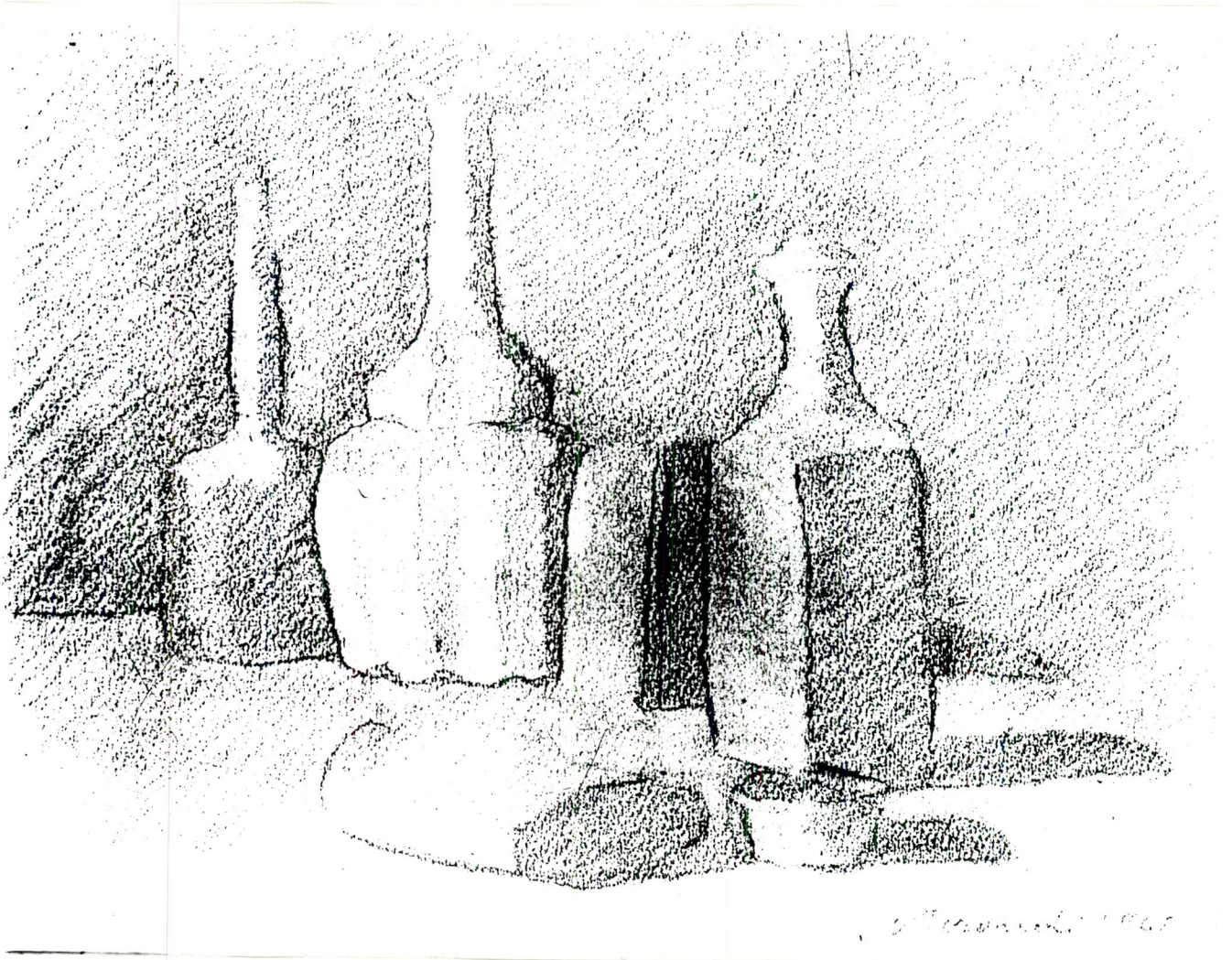
Figure 1 Giorgio Morandi Drawings

Figure 2 William Scott Still Lives Oil On Canvas 1948 - 1950
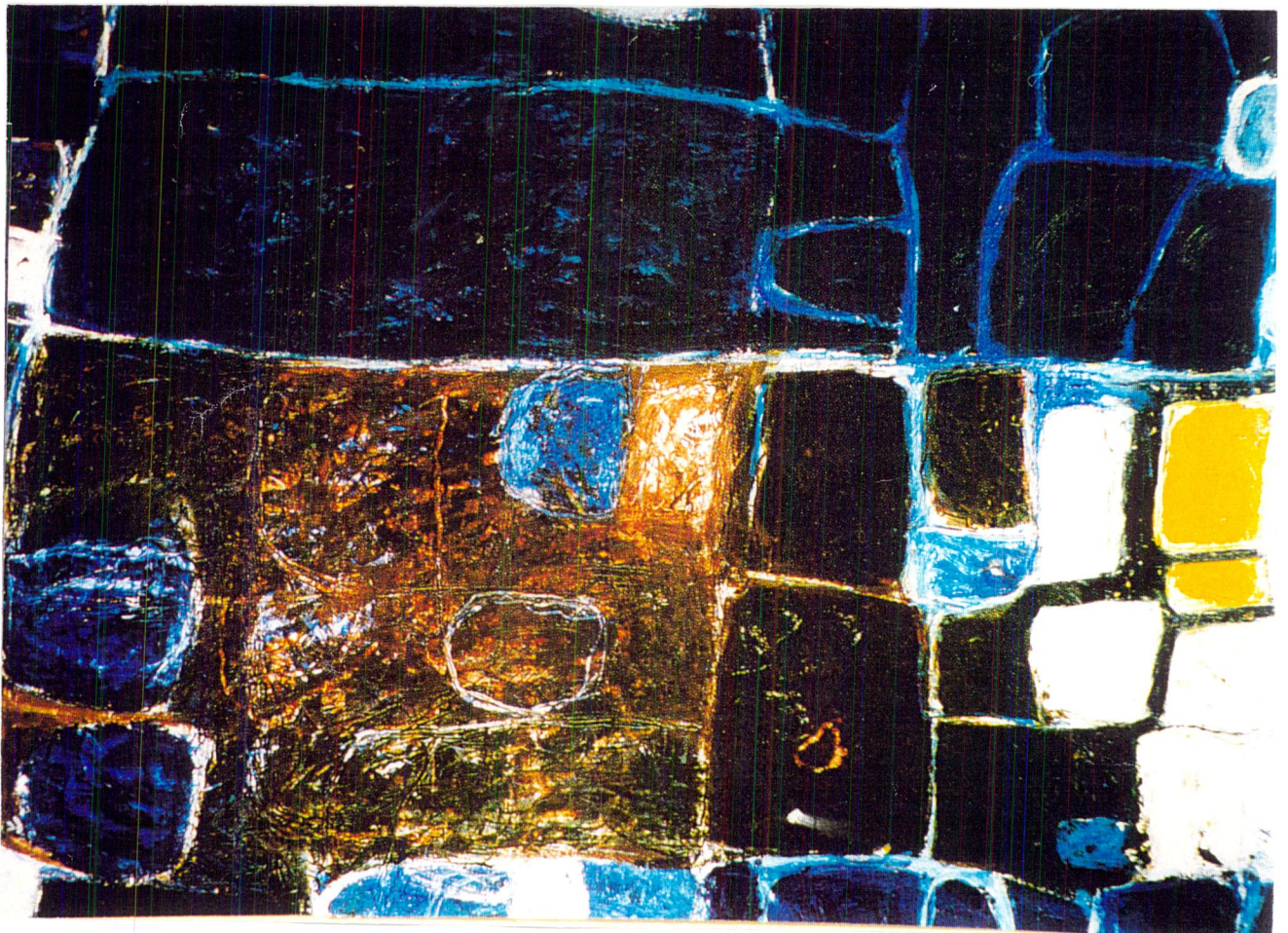
Figure 3   William Scott Paintings Oil On Canvas 1955 - 1959
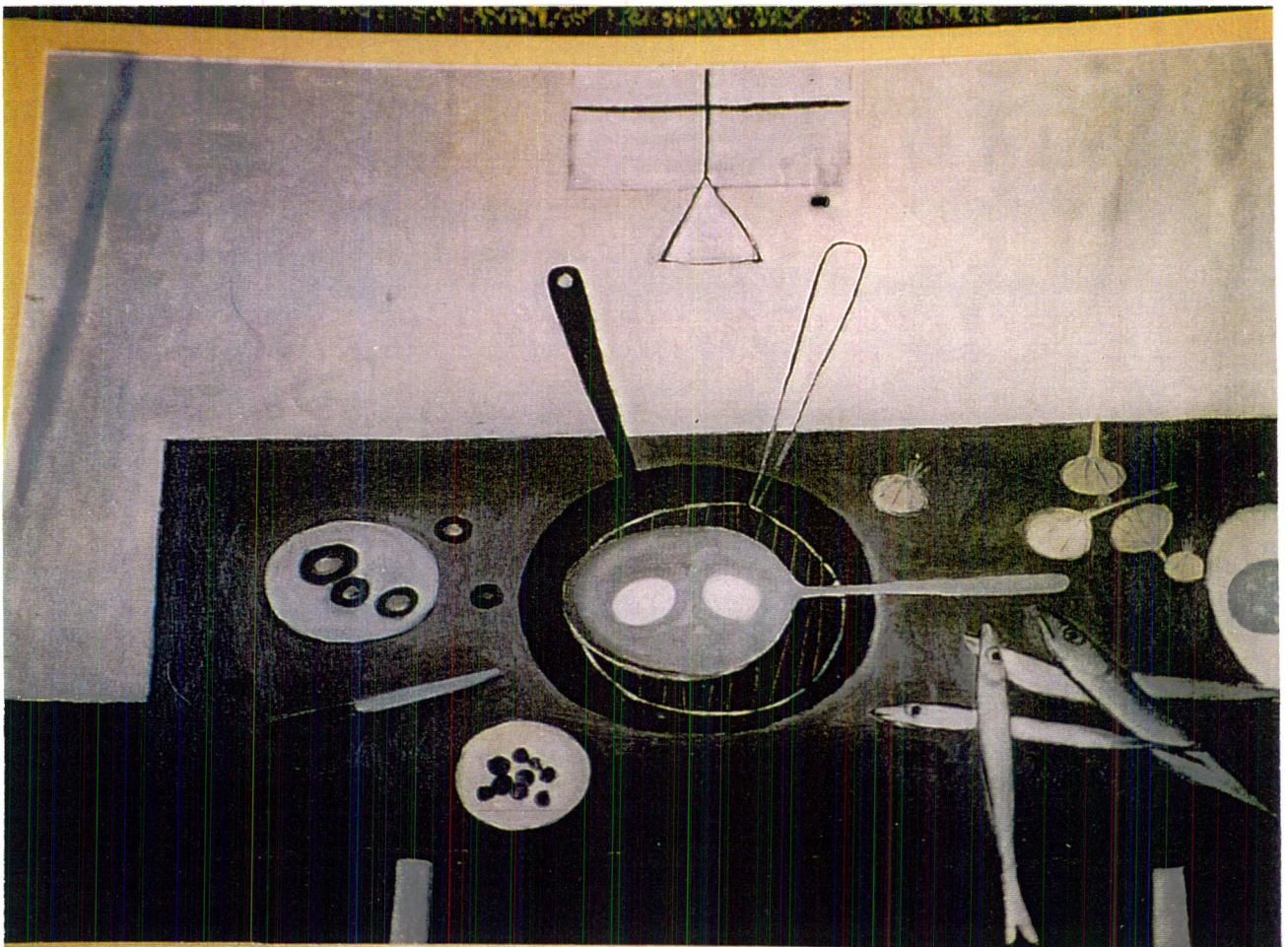
Fig 4   Giorgio Morandi, Still Life   1964

Fig 5   Tony Cragg, 'Eroded Landscape' glass   1992

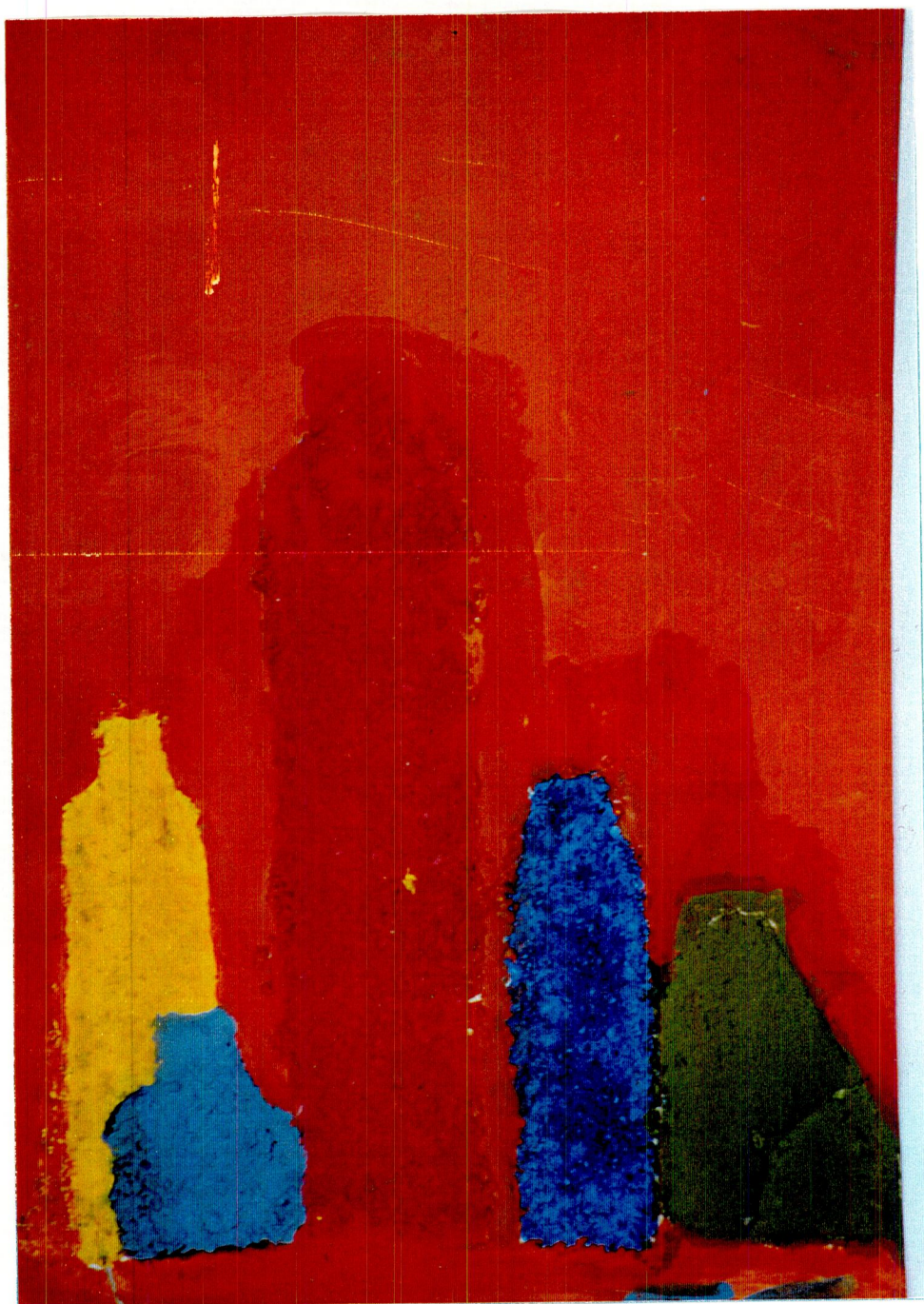Fig 6.   Students Finished Painting Acrylic And Mixed Media
              1999

Fig 7   Students Finished Painting Acrylic And Mixed Media
             1999

Fig 8   Finished Painting Acrylic And Mixed Media   1999

APPENDICES 1&2

YOUR EXPERIENCES OF CONTEMPORARY ART

(1) Have you ever visited a Museum or Gallery?

(2) When? _____

(3) Which Gallery? _____

(4) Were you with a School Group?

(5) Can you name any artists work that you saw
there? _____   _____

_____   _____

(6) Apart from the work we have encountered in
this scheme, have you ever studied contemporary
art in school?

(7) Can you name any artists that lived and
produced worked in this century?

_____

_____

(8) Write down all the words that come to mind
when you think of the words *Contemporary Art?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

(9) In previous centuries artists subjects were often dictated by Kings, wealthy patrons and the clergy. Artists relied on these patrons to survive financially. What subjects or issues do you think artists deal with in their work today?

THE COLLECTION AT...

THE COLLECTION AT **IMMA** WAS STARTED IN 1990. COLLECTING ARTWORKS IS VERY EXPENSIVE SO THE MUSEUM RELIES ON FUNDING FROM THE GOVERNMENT, DONATIONS AND LOANS. AS **IMMA** IS A MUSEUM OF **MODERN ART**, ITS POLICY IS TO ONLY COLLECT ART FROM THE **1940s'** ON.

GILBERT and **GEORGE** ARE TWO ENGLISH ARTISTS, THEY HAVE BEEN WORKING TOGETHER SINCE THE 1960s', WHEN THEY DECLARED THEMSELVES TO BE 'LIVING SCULPTURES', PAINTED THEMSELVES SILVER AND SANG AND DANCED IN 'PERFORMANCE' PIECES. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE THIS BROUGHT THEM ALOT OF PUBLICITY! IN THE PAST TWO DECADES THEY HAVE WORKED IN LARGE SCALE PRINT, USING IMAGES OF THEMSELVES AGAINST COLOURFUL BACKROUNDS. EACH OF THESE ARTWORKS TELL A STORY OR HAVE A MESSAGE. SEE IF YOU CAN FIGURE OUT THIS 1989 WORK 'SMOKE RISING'
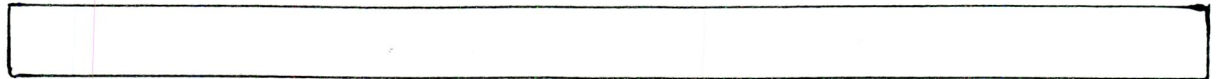
SMOKE RISING
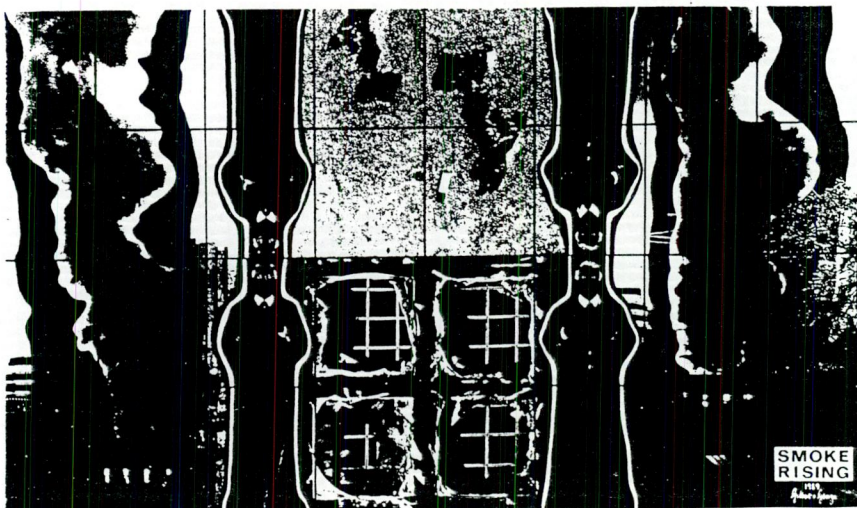
USE THIS BOX TO RECORD YOUR IDEAS ABOUT THE MEANING OF THIS WORK. START BY LOOKING AT THE BACKROUND AND THE DRAMATIC COLOURS THE ARTISTS HAVE CHOSEN

BILL WOODROW is an english artist who works with INSTALLATION.
this means that his work usually consists of a number of objects
which were either found or made, they are INSTALLED together in a gallery
so by linking them together and thinking about them YOU can make the meaning
of the work!

LOOK AT BILL WOODROWS' ARTWORK "IN CASE OF....."
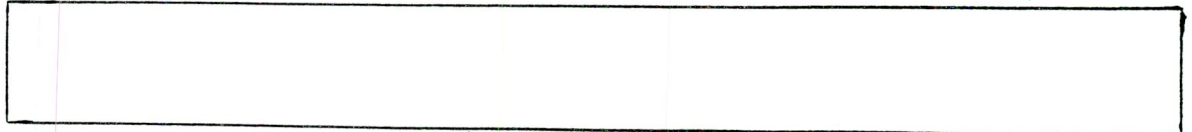
WHAT DO YOU SEE INSIDE THE GLASS TANK?
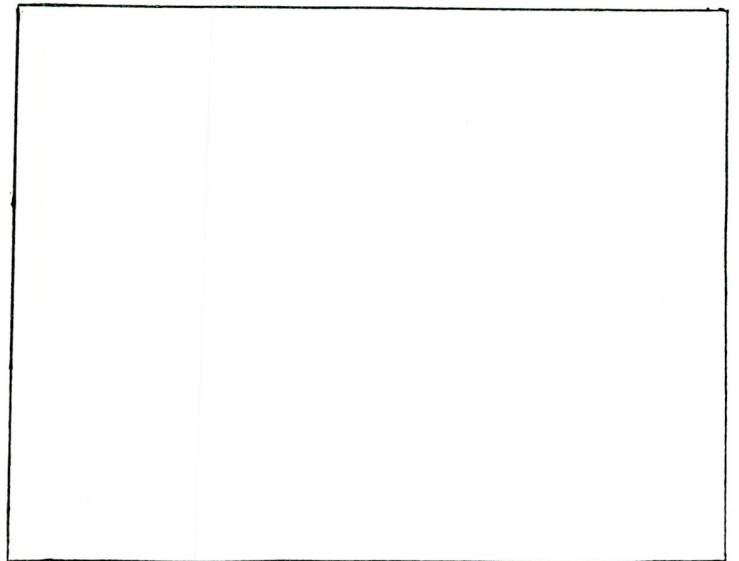
WHY DO YOU THINK THE TURTLES ARE SINKING?

bill woodrow is often concerned with the environment in his work
does this give you a clue to the meaning of this artwork?

DO YOU THINK THE AXE WOULD BE ANY USE IF YOU WERE
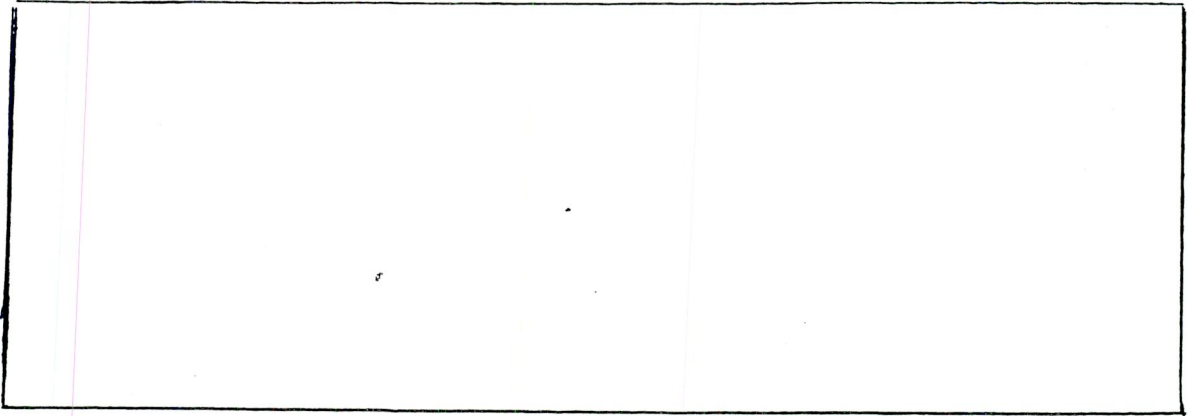TO TRY TO FREE THE TURTLES?

DO A DRAWING
OF "IN CASE OF....."
AND RECORD YOUR
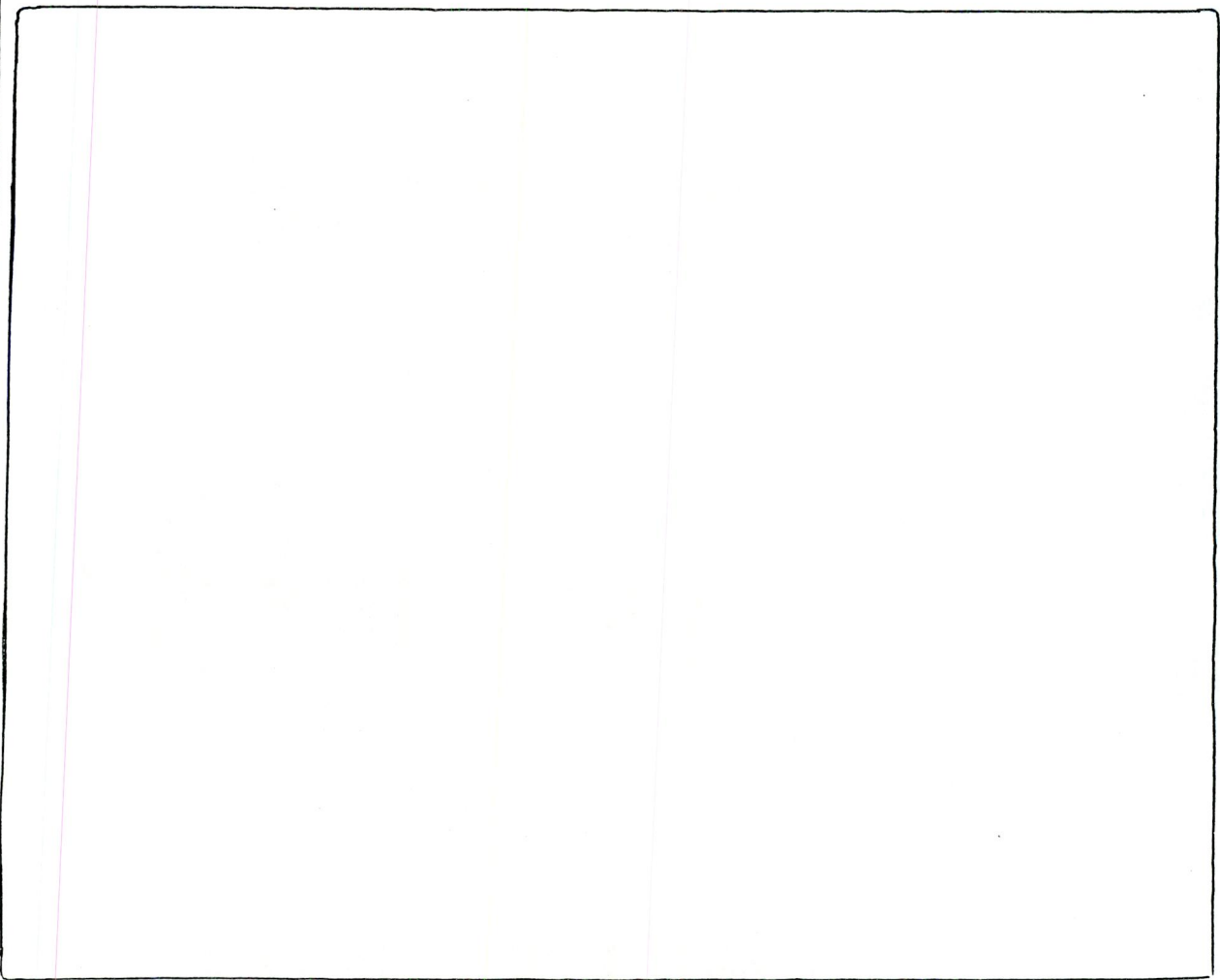IDEAS ABOUT THE
MEANING OF THE
PIECE

PICK **ONE** ARTWORK THAT YOU LIKE AND RECORD IN
THE BOX PROVIDED, WHY YOU ARE INTERESTED IN THIS WORK?
WHO IS THE ARTIST? WHAT MATERIALS DID THE ARTIST USE?

DO A DRAWING OF THE PIECE YOU HAVE CHOSEN USING
LINE AND TONE

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United States: Addison and Wesley, 1974

Conclusion

In developing the initial concept for this dissertation, this researcher had started the process of developing `Re-establishing a dialogue with contemporary art`, with a number of preconceptions about the reasons for the alienation of society from comtemporary art, and the possible remedies for this situation. However through the research and development of this dissertation it was the realisation of this researcher that this issue was broader than originally realised, encompassing issues from both the artists and societies perspectives. Within the confines of a dissertation, it has been the intention of this researcher to explore as fully as possible in chapter one the question of societies loss of involvement and interest in its visual tradition and the contemporary artists autonomous course catering only to an elite gallery system. Conclusions drawn by the researcher from this chapter are that both society and the artist hold responsibility for the breakdown of dialogue; the former engrossed in all that is immediate in this era of technological advancement, the latter having now progressed from the dizziness of liberation from duty, has become pre-occupied with self reflection unaware of its isolation. Only through education can this growing barrier be broken down. In researching the issue of re-establishing the relationship between contemporary art and people a wider issue arose-accessibility.

The third chapter examines this issue, concluding that social and economic concerns are critical problems which need to be addressed in relation to accessibility to the arts and in particular contemporary art. The Irish Museum of Modern Art has been shown in this chapter as a model for not only providing access to contemporary art, but also making contemporary art accessible. Finally within the time constraints of a period of six weeks the third chapter documents a scheme of work attempting to open a dialogue between one aspect of contemporary visual art and the secondary school student. It concludes that it is possible to introduce contemporary art to the adolescent student with lively consequences! - opening debate in healthy argument and thus empowering the student with the realisation of the importance of their own opinions and incites.

It is the overall conclusion of this researcher that the issue of establishing a relationship between the contemporary artist and society is an immediate one which must be dealt with before the gap the two developes into an insurmountable gulf. The only way to prevent this from happening is through education in schools, museums and art galleries and finally to address the issue of economic and social barriers of accessibility to art and cultural facilities.