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'Time-based Art'

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Time-based art refers primarily to practices involving media such as 8mm or 16mm film, 35mm slide projection (sometimes combined with audio tape) and video. In Ireland, these media have generally been employed since the late 1960s as part of a broader practice encompassing performance, sculpture and photography, or newer technologies. Often defined by ephemerality or by an exploration of site and space, time-based works have been presented within a range of contexts beyond the gallery, including radio, television and, in some instances, theatre. The Project Arts Centre in Dublin, established by a group of practitioners following a festival held at the Gate Theatre in 1966, has offered a particularly important platform for Irish artists interested in temporality. At the 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art' in 1972, Project served as the site of a performance, in which the US-based Irish artist and critic Brian O'Doherty undertook to sign all his artworks 'Patrick Ireland' until the removal of the British military presence from Northern Ireland. While this work, entitled *Name Change*, work did not involve the use of film or video, O'Doherty's fusion of ritual with conceptualism drew attention to the potential of time as medium. A conclusion to his gesture was provided in 2008, when *The Burial of Patrick Ireland* was conducted at the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

A focus on performance is also apparent in James Coleman's exploration of temporality but, significantly, the artist does not take on the role of performer himself. Instead, he prefers to work with actors, both in performed works such as those developed with Roger Doyle and Olwen Fouéré as part of Operating Theatre during the 1980s and in installations involving 'projected images'. In early slide-tape works such as *Slide Piece*, 1973, Coleman combines a static projected image – a photograph of an ordinary Italian urban streetscape – with an evolving audio commentary in order to explore the dynamics of perception and reception. In later works, such as *Box (abhareturnabout)*, 1977, his investigation of embodied perception is complicated by the introduction of references to historical events and their representation. *Box* incorporates fragments of a film documenting a famous boxing match between American Jack Dempsey and then world heavyweight champion, Irishman Gene Tunney, with strobe-like light effects and a breathless voiceover that could be imagined to emanate from Tunney. It is no coincidence that

the film dates from 1927, the moment of transition from silent movies to sound as Coleman has often employed media technologies – and associated conventions of representation – that are (or will be) technologically obsolete.

By the mid-1970s, many artists in the UK and US artists were developing projects for television as part of a critique of commercial media, or employing closed-circuit video feedback loops to explore themes of representation and identity. But in Ireland, despite initial aspirations to set up a co-operative at Project Arts Centre (in 1976), artists had limited access to audiovisual equipment, commercial sponsorship or distribution structures. Nonetheless, the period was marked by formal innovation and political critique in the work of independent filmmakers Bob Quinn and Cathal Black, and in a number of important early films by art-school trained practitioners financed through the British Film Institute Experimental Film Fund (such as *Down the Corner* by Joe Comerford, 1978; *On A Paving Stone Mounted* by Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1978; and *Maeve* by Pat Murphy, 1981). During the 1980s, UK production schemes such as Channel 4’s ‘Experimenta’ season and the BBC/British Arts Council One Minute Television Series, continued to offer an important public platform for Irish artists working with the moving image, most notably Vivienne Dick.

While Ireland failed to develop an experimental film scene comparable to that found in the UK or US, the political situation in Northern Ireland provided an important point of connection both between Irish artists and filmmakers and with critically-engaged practitioners working elsewhere. This is apparent in the programme of ‘A Sense of Ireland’, a major festival of Irish art and culture held at over forty venues in London in 1980, which featured screenings of radical political films such as the Berwick Street Collective’s *Ireland Behind the Wire*, 1974, in addition to a broad ranges of literary events, theatre productions and visual arts exhibitions. ‘Without the Walls’, curated by the Dorothy Walker at the ICA, featured works by James Coleman, Nigel Rolfe, Alanna O’Kelly and Noel Sheridan and while many of the contributions were not ‘time-based’, the exhibition aimed to highlight a shift away from traditional fine art media in Irish contemporary art. Walker had previously been instrumental in bringing Joseph Beuys to Ireland for a series of lectures, intended to form part of the Free International University. His visit to Belfast in 1978 contributed, amongst other factors, to the establishment of Art & Research Exchange (ARE), an artist-run space that included a darkroom and studios. Initially home to *Circa Art Magazine* (before it moved to Dublin in 1992) ARE raised the profile of performance and time-based practice through a programme that included projects by John Carson, Helen

Chadwick, Willie Doherty, Frances Hegarty, Barbara Kruger, Mona Hatoum and Alistair MacLennon.

Frances Hegarty, who has subsequently worked extensively with Andrew Stones, presented one of her first works at ARE; *Ablative, Genitive, Dative*, 1984, consisting of a performance with 16mm film and pigmented screens. Willie Doherty initially became known for a series of photo-text referencing the visual language of surveillance, but soon began to develop a more direct engagement with narrative form and the conventions of film and television in time-based works such as the slide/tape installation *Same Difference*, 1990. His first video installation, *The Only Good One is a Dead One*, 1993, is a double projection in which one screen depicts a car journey at night, filmed with a handheld camera, while the second presents a stationary view from inside a parked car. The content and form of the voiceover – an interior monologue of a man who shifts between the imagined positions of victim and assassin – situated the work in relation to both genre of *Film Noir* and locally-specific hybrid media such as the advertisements for the confidential telephone line.

Alanna O’Kelly also came to prominence during the 1980s as one of a number of women artists working with time-based media. Her practice, which encompasses performance as well as sound and video, often involves the incorporation of Irish folk traditions - such as keening – that are specifically associated with women. In 1985, her audiotape *Caoineadh Na Mairbh* was included in ‘Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind – Some New Irish Art’, an important exhibition curated by the critic Lucy Lippard, which toured to several US venues. O’Kelly’s early video works include *Dancing With My Shadow*, 1988, and *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, 1990, a three monitor piece exploring the history of the Famine from a perspective shaped by feminism and the experience of motherhood. Pauline Cummins also developed a feminist critique of aspects of Irish culture in the slide/tape installation *Inis T’Oirr/ Aran Dance*, 1985, which explored sexual desire and its repression. Cummins was one of a number of artists working collaboratively (for political or practical reasons) with time-based media during this period and in 1992 she and Louise Walsh presented *Sounding the Depths: A Collaborative Installation at IMMA*. Consisting of back-projected video, and a series of images on light boxes, accompanied by a soundtrack, this work explored attitudes toward the representation of the female body. In 1987, Cummins, Walsh, O’Kelly and many others formed the Women Artists’ Action Group (WAAG) in order to achieve greater recognition and support for women artists. One of their first initiatives was an

exhibition later that year at Project Arts Centre, taking the form of a slide show of works by women, later expanded into an extensive slide bank maintained by the group.

Two years later, a politically engaged artists' group with a specific focus on time-based art emerged in the form of Blue Funk. Its members (Evelyn Byrne, Valerie Connor, Brian Cross, Tom Green, Brian Hand, Jaki Irvine, Kevin Kelly) had recently graduated from the National College of Art and Design and were specifically interested in exploring questions of identity in relation to gender, class, and nationality using media such as film, video, sound and slide. Blue Funk exhibited in New York, Arnhem, Perth, Brisbane and Dublin in the early 1990s and produced a number of collaborative projects, including *A State of Great Terror* at the Douglas Hyde in 1992. By the mid 1990s, however, a broad range of artists were beginning to integrate sound, video and (to a lesser extent) film into their practices. Daphne Wright's works from this period often combine sculptural installation with audio, typically vocal narration. So in *Lot's Wife*, 1995, for example, an older man's voice emanates from amongst a cluster of tinfoil pear trees, muttering the words 'April Fool, you're only an April Fool'. Dorothy Cross, predominantly known for sculptural works, also began to make video works including *Teacup*, 1996, in which a group of men – extracted from Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* – appear to row across the surface of the liquid in a delicate china cup. Siobhan Hapaska also produced a series of sculptures entitled *Hearts* (1993,1995,1997) incorporating audio. But for many practitioners, video continued to be strongly linked to performance, the exploration of sites beyond the gallery and also the possibilities of new communications technologies.

Based outside Ireland, Anne Tallentire explored the use of ISDN transmission technology in two related works - *Inscribe I*, 1994 and *Inscribe II*, 1994. In the first of these works, ISDN transmission was used to relay live actions and pre-recorded video material shot within the square mile of the City of London, from the BT offices in London to video screens and projections in the Telecom Éireann offices located in Dublin. For the second work, audiences in an empty office building in London and in the Orchard Gallery, Derry could watch Tallentire performing an action – washing a white wall in the gallery – and also communicate with each other. For artists working in Ireland, the mid 1990s was also marked by debate and discussion around site-specificity and the potential of new media. Several members of the Sculptor's Society of Ireland (SSI) formed the group Random Access (later changed to Critical Access) during this period with the aim of developing new contexts for time-based and site-specific projects. Since its inception in 1980, the SSI had advocated a broad definition of sculptural practice

encompassing object making, lens-based media, digital arts, installation and performance, in contrast to the narrower focus on traditional media favoured by many members of the Artists' Association of Ireland. The SSI eventually changed its name to Visual Artists Ireland (in 2005) to reflect its members' broad scope of activity.

These shifts in art practice contributed to the establishment of Arthouse in 1995, a purpose-built facility located in Temple Bar's newly designated cultural quarter, which aimed to support artists working with new media practices. During its early years, Arthouse provided much-needed access to media production and training resources and developed a programme of projects and commissions that included the Audio Artists Radio Transmissions (AART), curated by artist Garrett Phelan and involving live radio broadcasts by art practitioners working collaboratively over four days in May-June 1998. In 2002, however, Arthouse closed abruptly and the building was later reassigned by Temple Bar Cultural Trust to Filmbase, a resource organisation for filmmakers. Project Arts Centre, however, remained central to the production and exhibition of time-based art in Ireland. The redevelopment of the East Essex Street venue in 1998 provided the impetus and context for an ambitious off-site programme curated by Valerie Connor. The programme included *Trailer*, 1998, by work-seth/tallentire, a series of daily actions by John Seth and Anne Tallentire carried out over a period of two weeks at locations around Dublin. These actions were not witnessed at first hand, but instead experienced as moving images presented at other locations, or in the form of a selected still image posted on a website each day. Daniel Jewesbury also utilised the web in a two-stage work, with the first part *mirage.htm*, 1999, presented online and the second, *Mirage*, 2000, taking the form of a three-screen video installation for the new gallery. This exhibition was preceded by 'Somewhere Near Vada' curated by artist Jaki Irvine and installed across all of Project's spaces. Featuring works by Bas Jan Ader, Marcel Broodthaers, James Coleman, Tacita Dean and Gary Hill, among others, the show drew attention to both the history and ongoing significance of the moving image within contemporary art.

The late 1990s and 2000s were marked by the emergence of new opportunities for the commissioning of time-based art and by the broad acceptance of media such as film and video within a range of institutional contexts. Artists working with video, in particular, began to show more widely in commercial galleries and the Darklight festival, established in 1999, fostered the development of new audiences for media art, through screenings, discussions and exhibitions. Film, video and audio also emerged as more viable media for public art commissions, most

obviously in the case of *Breaking Ground*, the percent per art programme of Ballymun Regeneration Ltd., which included works by Grace Weir, Cecily Brennan and desperate optimists (Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor). Time-based practices were also very prominently showcased in Irish representations at numerous international exhibitions, such as the São Paulo Bienal (Alanna O’Kelly in 1996, Clare Langan in 2002, desperate optimists and Dennis McNulty in 2004) and the Venice Biennale (Jaki Irvine in 1997, Anne Tallentire in 1999, Grace Weir and Siobhan Hapaska in 2001, Gerard Byrne in 2007). The collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art also expanded during the same period to include a broad range of time-based artworks by younger Irish artists and also an important trilogy of projected image works by James Coleman, *Lapsus Exposure*, 1992-94, *I N I T I A L S*, 1993-94 and *Background*, 1991-94, purchased with funds from the Heritage Committee of the National Cultural Institutions. But even though works realised in film, slide-tape and video since the late 1960s can now be found in several Irish public and private collections, many forms of time-based practice are not easily represented in this way, to the extent that communicating any sense of the breadth of artists’ engagement with temporality constitutes a significant challenge for both museum curators and historians.

Selected Further Reading

- Deepwell, Katy, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2005.
- Gibbons, Luke, ‘Narratives of No Return: James Coleman’s GuaiRE’, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996, 129-133.
- MacGiolla Léith, Caoimhín, ‘Troubled Memories’, *Willie Doberty: False Memory*, Exhibition Catalogue, London and Dublin: Merrell and Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2002, 19-25.
- MacWilliam, Shirley, ‘Screen and Screen Again’, *CIRCA 100*, Summer 2002, 42-49.
- MacWilliam, Shirley, ‘Sound, Sense and Sensibilities’, *CIRCA 83*, Spring 1998, 30-34.
- McLoone, Martin, ‘The Commitments’, *Same Old Story*, Exhibition Catalogue, London/Derry/Colchester: Matt’s Gallery/Orchard Gallery/Firstsite, 1997, 8-16.