

TWO POINTS OF VIEW

John Carson and Paddy Graham

Is what we produce affected by the location it is produced in, and how much are we influenced from elsewhere? Circa asked two artists, John Carson and Paddy Graham to reflect personal experiences of living and working in the two Irelands and estimate the impact that their particular locations have had on cultural production.

John Carson is a Belfast born artist who has worked and studied in Northern Ireland, England and the U.S.A. He is currently living in London. His work has

variously used photography, performance, installation and publications to examine cultural indoctrination in Ireland and elsewhere.

Whilst looking for ways of earning money in the U.S.A. I came across an advertisement for people to do voices for a T.V. puppet show. One of the characters

Series of photographs from the colour poster by John Carson, 'I'd walk from Cork to Larne to see the forty shades of green' - A 30 mile 14 day art work, 1978, based on the song 'The forty shades of green'



was to be an Irish drunk. I thought I was sure of a few dollars but I failed the audition and an American actor got the job. The Ulster accent completely baffled them.

The north of Ireland is a cruel obstacle to any notion of pure Irishness. Throughout its tortuous history it has been causing all sorts of identity problems with its volatile mixture of Irish, Scottish and English descendants with their diverse cultural and political interests. The northerner can be made to feel somewhat of a misfit in Ireland and abroad. Out of its home context the accent means 'trouble' of one kind or another. There is confusion for the unknown foreigner at a person from Ireland who does not have the standard stage and screen version of the brogue; and wariness from the foreigner or the southerner who recognises the accent and wonders 'what sort' they are dealing with in reference to politics and violence in Ulster. People of the North can claim British or Irish citizenship and so can choose whether they want to be 'Irish' or not. Without wishing to wade into the constitutional politics of it all I would say that the North of Ireland serves as painful evidence of the fact that the culture of any society can never be hermetically sealed. The culture of Ireland has been an evolving amalgam of invading and infiltrating forces. How far back should we go to define true and essential Irishness?

Several non-Irish artists living and working in Ireland as artists and teachers have made significant contributions to the development of art in Ireland and should justifiably be written into a survey of contemporary Irish art. Occasional visitors and outsiders tackle Irish themes in their work. Positive outside influences enrich the local scene and help to counteract introspective provincialism. However, given the politics of Ireland as a country subjected to imperialism and various forms of outside exploitation, one can understand suspicion among natives as to the motives of people from across the water. For instance, despite the integrity of any individuals, the predominance of English teaching staff in the fine art department at the art college in Belfast has associations with the historical possession of power and control in the particular colonial circumstances of Northern Ireland.

The political situation is such that it is possible to capitalise on the more sensationalist aspects of life in Northern Ireland for careerist reasons. At a talk Joseph Beuys was giving to coincide with his exhibition at the Ulster Museum in Belfast in 1976, an irate woman accused him of being "like the rest of them coming to pick the bones off the carcass". She was not the only one to throw such accusations in the face of the publicity circus surrounding Beuys's visit to 'our troubled province'. Ironically Beuys' visit and his ideas for a free international university proved instrumental in the formation of Art and Research Exchange in Belfast.

Consider the careers of Northern Ireland's two most successful bands from the punk

era. **Stiff Little Fingers'** success owed a great deal to their being the calculated angry cry of frustration of bomb weary Belfast youth. Without the Ulster reference in their lyrics they would have been just another punk band. On the other hand **The Undertones** instantly catchy classic pop tunes on universal teenage love themes would probably have brought them fame no matter what their regional origins. To **Stiff Little Fingers** the fact that they came from and sang about Northern Ireland was vital to their worth, but **The Undertones**, although proudly asserting their Derry background, were not reliant on it for their success.

I remember a lengthy discussion among several Belfast artists invited to show as a group in London. Some in the group felt it significant that they be advertised as Belfast artists and others felt that this was not only irrelevant but that it could create unreasonable expectations from their work. They wished to be considered as artists irrespective of nationality or ethnic origins.

The work of artists concerned with specifically Irish subject matter such as landscape, townscape, people and politics of Ireland might rely on their Irishness for its insight and credibility and the label Irish Art would be readily accepted. However nationality would not be a crucial factor in the work of those dealing with purely abstract aesthetic or formal concerns within a general international fine art discourse. This does not deny the possibility of metaphorical readings within such work.

I take the term Irish Art, categorically, to mean art which has been made, shown and discussed in Ireland. But the definition can get blurred at the edges and I wonder about the art of Irish emigrées which may or may not be seen back home or the work of non-Irish artists dealing with Irish subject matter. Within the history of Irish art I can think of no particular style or technique, movement or medium which stands out and defines itself as exclusively Irish. I don't think that the inclusion of a few spiral forms in a painting or sculpture constitutes significant proof of an aesthetic continuum. The absence of any major recognized historical exclusive '-ism' in Irish art could have as much to do with the machinations of the international market place as anything else. Ireland exists very much on the periphery of the international art arena and the rules of the game are being decided in New York, London, Berlin and Rome. I am sure that if Irish angst could be sold as easily as the current German and Italian variety we would have ourselves a movement. The fabrication of history relates to the locations of power and wealth.

Our insularity does not cut us off completely from the world. Certainly in Belfast and Dublin all the international art periodicals are available to keep us up to date with the latest styles; and gallery and college structures ensure enough traffic of art and artists to keep us in touch. I have not sufficient knowledge of art colleges and art

centres outside Belfast and Dublin to comment on the availability of contemporary art information throughout the country. But from what eventually surfaces nationally, art in Ireland over the years shows ample evidence of imported styles and influences adapted and modified by particular personalities within Irish art. I would tend to focus on content rather than form or style in searching for the Irishness of Irish art.

The first years of this present phase of political unrest in Northern Ireland seemed to be received with stunned shock by a visual arts community otherwise occupied with aesthetic and formal art arguments. The violent political turmoil caused some artists to fundamentally re-examine the context for their work. Subsequently I feel that two distinct attitudes developed within Irish art (allowing for manoeuvre in between) – those choosing to continue art practice primarily within a fine art aesthetic and formal discourse and those choosing to demonstrate a political concern in their work. Obviously work within this second category would be specifically Irish in content while methodology in both areas is influenced by international modes.

The word politics in Ireland is almost synonymous with the north/south, protestant/catholic, loyalist/republican dichotomy and this is the main subject for Irish political art. The wishful unification of the opposing factions is a recurring theme often symbolised by the obvious use of orange and green.

Being unaware of a definable Irish style or sensibility this is a type of contemporary work which I would think of as significantly Irish, in that the subject matter which it tackles involves questioning of the state and conditions of Ireland and Irishness and that is all that really distinguishes it from the art of anywhere else in the world where Art Forum, Studio International and Performance magazines are on sale. Ultimately I do not think it matters whether work can be classified as Irish or not, or whether it is done by a native or a foreigner, as long as the work is revelatory in some way.

People make Ireland what they want it to be. Within the desire for a neatly definable Irishness I find a number of disturbing notions such as the connivance to create a category for exclusivity or marketability, or the yearning for a glorious mythical past and future, or the wish to create a strong national identity for political control and manipulation.

Does conformity to a sense of national identity contribute to self-awareness? A stereotype is too simple and its apparent adequacy preventive of real understanding. Why should anyone conform to someone else's fixed idea of what they should be?

I got a job in the U.S.A. as vocalist with a group of American musicians playing traditional Irish music. Our invitation to do a St. Patrick's Day party was withdrawn because I refused to sing 'When Irish eyes are smiling'.

Paddy Graham is a painter from Westmeath who is presently working in Temple Bar Studios in Dublin. He has had various one person exhibitions at the Lincoln Gallery, Dublin and shows regularly with the Independent Artists of which he is a member.

Creativity is destructive of myths and delusions. It is urgent, moving and it hurts. It shakes condition and conditioning to the roots. It liberates us from the supposed and presumed and its workplace is the dark of our being. For this, one only needs faith and despair.

Essentially we are creatures of oppression. The obvious is overstated for the most part. But the less obvious needs clarification if we are to avoid the prison of conditioned myth-making. This externalised oppression had in its effect a more insidious and disastrous self oppression and as follows, suppression of subjective truth and reality. This is formed in defiance to, and in frustration to denial of true will. In this lies the seed bed of conditioning and a rationalizing process that omits or denies true or holistic reality. The psychological manifestations of conditioning are many and varied and much too involved to examine here. At the risk, however, of insulting your intelligence I will simplify what I hope to describe as the 'conditioned response' of artists, critics, and those genuinely confused by, on the one hand their feeling response to art, and the logical rationalizing use of language certain artists and critics use in playing on the vacant shape of Irish cultural identity.

If a race are oppressed physically, for the real or imagined political needs, something happens to the sacred right of that people to retain their sense of creative force which comes from the exploration of their essential difference of identity and separatedness. The obvious is easily met. Language, possessions, land etc. The weapon is force. Patterns of social behaviour are easily disrupted and insidiously destroyed by seductive propaganda; promises of reward for change and examples of civilized grandiosity are made play of. Simply put, you can beat the shit out of people and effect a superficial change in behaviour and/or you can seduce. These two elements of oppression are powerful and effective to a degree satisfying to the oppressor. The core of a nation's resistance is another matter. It is mystic and invisible and manifests itself primarily in the nation's sense of its own religiosity. This is essentially a spiritual ideal of self, impossible to impose upon from the outside. In the face of oppressive might however, an essentially creative religion, pompous and celebratory, turns itself inward in a protective gesture and forms a shell of defiance. This is a profound and deeply felt need in a nation's and individual's construction of an identifiable self as part and of a whole. A great tragedy occurs when this vital outward expression of a need turns inward and becomes a perversion of truth and a tool of dogma. What follows is a conditioned and

dogmatic response to threat in the present and more sadly in future generations. This is the religion of the last stand, and while seemingly beyond external threat it is not beyond the internal, or self threatening humanity now regarded with suspicion and doubt.

There are many objective threats seen and responded to by behavioural changes, practical and logical. But when the reality of a daring (religious) response becomes a killing one, the subjective/emotional health of a people is endangered. Reality is threatened, myths take hold and are made real by the passing of time—the response of artists to art, critics to critique, politicians to politics and people to power, become the casualties of historical myth-making or in psychological terms a conditionally responsive people.

Before we rapidly assess the emotional damage to our stances one way or the other, we miss the point of reactionary consequences by rationalizing it away, or intellectualizing subjective reality out of existence. The same can be said of critics, artists, the lot. This reaction to that school versus that reaction to the other; the international rationalizer versus the scraper in the dark. Reactionary response is all the consequence of conditioning; the truth lies somewhere in the vacuum of self and that spiritual core of self which recognizes conditioning for what it is, untruth.

How many rationalist artists, politicians and pacifists have strangled on their guts while trying to live with their heads? Until such reactionary and conditioned response is understood we will continue our glossily acquired intellectual skin job on truth in art, politics and social reality.

This self suppression begun in that most understandable of causes has claimed truth and replaced it with rationalism and boneless intellectualism. The dogma of religion, rules and rigidity of thinking, deny to the self the greatest gift of all, that of human experience as an outward and creative journey into the dark. That great emotional subjective human experience is lost to a false sense of national process. Thus begins the slow conditioning and the falsifying inheritance that now obtains in describing for ourselves a cultural reality more truly insular than all the rationalized internationalist views so pervasive in art thinking, which in fact emphasizes loss rather than creative validity and integrity.

When a country denies a feeling response to its own humanity, its artists become rational/intellectual and subject to embarrassment and unease with subjective reality. This rationalizing tends to be proclaimed as truth, where in fact, such rationality is merely a clever facility and a conditioned reaction to whole truth which is denying, fearful and lacking wisdom.

In this conditioned and deluded society such rationalists thrive, as the alternative is too painful a process in examination of self as individual and self as national. Myths

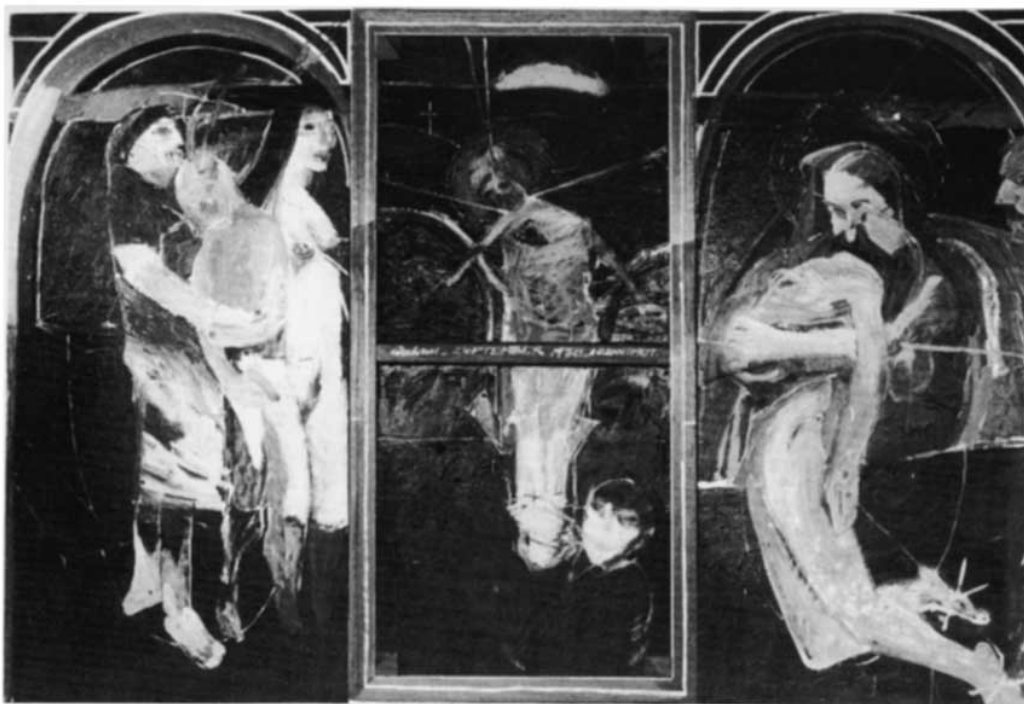
can crack and crumble, supports fall away, form becomes shadow in reversal of Plato's Cave theory until we reach the situation of slave and shadow and will have to begin again.

So . . . rationalists can survive in their own paradoxical statements that *they* are painting in an international manner (substitute 'style') and that the external portrayal of mannerisms gives them validity internationally. They further compound this view by rationalizing international styles to accommodate obtuse references to national interests. This logic can only survive ignorance and/or the conditioning of a nation bereft of courage in identifying the dark of its soul. The vacuum is filled with the shiny and glossy images suggesting style and good taste and arrival as fully grown international practitioners on a par with the best. A virgin birth so to speak, never mind the denial of process, of growth, and the paradox in claiming content, no matter how imitative, as truth.

England has hovered hugely like a dark mantle on our doorstep for centuries and her departing to sit across the hall only highlights our reactionary thinking and confused philosophy about directing ourselves. Her rationalist and empirical thinking is a legacy more subtly distorting of ourselves than we care to admit.

We live so rigidly under this dense fog of English thinking that we project as read, such thinking upon the world at large, miming her rationalist views on art in support of the most superficial understanding of genuine international art. As in all newly independent nations, whether in Ireland's case, politically named Independence, or in such a country as Australia, Geographic Independence, there follows a fairly set pattern of development: Self Government. Stable or not, then a kind of political maturity and definition of aims. Sociological aims are agreed, classes and dreams, expectations, hopes, philosophies, identity is shaped, whether founded on redefined historical perspective or the implanted ethic of civilised achievement.

Ireland's rationalists solved the problem by galloping headlong towards the evolved content of internationally established artists, never mind the aesthetic integrity of such art. A process was arrived at and enacted; Irish artists robbed blindly and rationalized loudly claiming words such as self originated to sustain the deception. This sustaining effort meant decrying home-evolved attempts to describe the truth. Provincial, garish, no talent, were and are words still used to flay the breed. **Now**, it's bandwaggoners (a projection that hides a home truth surely), the New Expressionists, New Wave, Neo this and that and the other, denying the reality that artists were painting in this manner for twenty years or more, and much more to the point in a more real way by the enforced isolation of dismissal. Survival and continuance go to make for more than styles or movements. This, of course, is an act of faith, just as painting is or should be.



Paddy Graham, 'Untitled' 1983 Oil on canvas 6' x 8'

Thinking English happens in general societal evaluations of events in this country. Politics, social behaviour, moral judgements, all slide uneasily over our emotionally suppressed reality, and artists tend to be better at this than most—especially if facility is a godlike end in itself.

Look to the Arts Council's collection, the Bank of Ireland etc., one slides over the superficial surface for a time but what is happening—one has a sense of déjà vu—one gets an uneasy feeling in the low pit of the stomach. For those interested try the catalogue department of Foyles, London, 1952/'64,—that's where you can leave your stomach.

We are so submerged in English thinking that we imagine we have failed when unable to describe a process beyond the reach of establishment thinking. The creative process is a stab in the dark; signposts lit in a flash and gone again. The more light of recognition, the dark that follows is terrifying and full of doubt. The clipped logic and defined solutions of the BBC2 Arts Programme is part of our acceptance of this phenomenon—the word merchant, smug and secure in his knowledge. This is death in public. The murder of creative continuity. It states arrival, and it more usually states style. The French, Germans etc., are different. What happens is an artistic event, the cameraman is also an artist. He/she uses the camera like a brush. Words only describe difficulty, joy, doubt, food, women, gestures, shrugs. No rational sense of the event is explored because everyone knows it is not a distinct and separated process, it is more to do with integrity of self/thinking and feeling, but it is a fact of the English approach to art, that word and sense are a vital aspect to the assemblage as is the mute event itself. That art is appraised in this cool removed way, and

must be perfectly understood is OK for the critic, but that artists present this view as a response to expectation is blind conditioning and while bearing up to the scrutiny of the present, cannot carry the rationalizing voice of the artist into history and the more objective assessment of having the painting only speak for itself. Unfortunately, the presentable face of Irish art conditionally responds in this way to the conditioned money, which needs an international face of acceptable cultural attainment, notwithstanding the fact that money is no substitute for ignorance and it can cost as much for an imitation as it does for the real thing and anyway the only people worth conning are wealthy fools.

Art in the real sense is creation out of nothing but one's own experience, whole and entire. The evolving process that goes first to arriving at an ever demanding awareness of conscious conditioning and its ensuing reaction. Reaction on this narrow conscious level is *about* art, not *of* art. This is death, trapped as the artist is by his/her own conditioning and the equally conditioned response of critics and audience. We all want to be accepted, but at what price. A hard-won and sometimes traumatic arrival at a personal truth is too expensive a price to pay to satisfy ignorance.

If this is the truth, then the artist begins again and again—the event is creative unsurety, and gains, lost, found, but loss is life, and finding is style, if this is the redemption sought.

How damaged we are, then, immature and despairing. We are what we fear . . . yes. If we fully accept internationalist generalities as an answer to our own creative space, we are lost to sham and hypocrisy. That kind of fear is delusion—what I and others fear is the loss of ourselves that is real fear,

you can finger it, smell it.

In the more vulnerable of conditions, one is more likely to arrive at a moment of truth of being an artist, rather than the other conditioned *act of* being an artist. The act is dependent for its life on awareness of trends, styles, fashions and taste, while the former is about breaking dependencies through understanding conscious, then unconscious and even subconscious elements of conditioning. This of course can lead to fearful truths and confession to self wherein lies a truth. Art such as this comes off the backbone and shatters the delusion of facility as talent. In a country that recognizes facility as the supreme objective of artistic endeavour, this is full of its own risks not least of which is a two mile dole queue. The facilitative manipulation in formalized concepts of art has no meaning any more, and along with a personal vision must evolve a handling language sensitive in the extreme to a child being born—crude and awkward it may be, to those believing in the practiced deception of the tolerant/slick hand. Such facility becomes another prison to break from and escape to the unknown. The subjective language grows objective, hand in hand with the destruction of style. For every destructive element of style eliminated, a new awareness of paint/colour crawls from under the stone of fashion and good taste, the years of inward looking. The anger and frustrations make sense, the cannibalizing, immobilizing anger used against ourselves is the force of creative belief.

Artists seduced by the rationale of being men of their times might simply look to the garbage can of history where such artists and critics clutter the edges of vision and courage. □