



Strategic Amnesia: Modernism and Art History in Ireland in the Twenty-first Century

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The strategies of history writing are strategies of amnesia. In order to operate, historians must forget not only certain facts, objects and people, but also particular practices, theories and ways of constructing the past. This is especially the case in the history of art which Robert Smithson called a ‘monstrous museum’¹ whose edifice is constructed on the foundations of those cultural practices that are marginalised, excluded and forgotten. It may be, then, that to be an art historian in Ireland in the twenty-first century might actually require one to adopt certain strategies to negotiate the marginalised, excluded and forgotten; and to forget the recent and not-so-recent past. Not least this might mean to overlook both Ireland’s relatively late embrace of modernism in the visual arts and the consequences this had on how its art history developed. Perhaps such ‘strategic amnesia’ could be employed in the name of writing new histories of art and art history.

Martin Creed and strategic amnesia

I’ve borrowed the term ‘strategic amnesia’ from W.J.T. Mitchell,² but the work of Martin Creed illustrates it nicely. A recent class trip to an exhibition of his work at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Trinity College, Dublin threw up some interesting questions for the second-year fine-art students. They were confronted with several works they found very boring. These included *Work No. 841 Plywood* (2007), which was a stack of rectangular plywood sheets; two wall paintings, *Work # 840 emulsion on wall* and *Work # 843 dark blue emulsion* (2007), both of which were murals of basic geometric patterns painted somewhat roughly on the gallery walls; and another piece was seven nails of varying lengths stuck into the wall, *Work # 701 nails* (2007).

The students were generally nonplussed by, if not hostile to the work. The responses given, when asked to justify their negative reactions, were astonishing for students studying and practising art in the twenty-first century if only because they rehearsed criticisms of art that could have been made 200 years previously. It was almost as if modernism had never taken place. They included complaints that the work was unoriginal, unskillfully produced, was conceptually unsophisticated and that it was not aesthetically pleasing. In other words the problem did not seem to be that the work was boring *per se* (in fact, there was the suggestion that it wasn't boring *enough*). Instead it triggered a series of damning connoisseurial judgements. In a later discussion it seemed that it was not the work's formal qualities that had provoked such judgements but rather its situation within an art gallery in the twenty-first century. One student explained that if they encountered a work like the plywood stack in a non-art context (in the street for example) it could be 'fascinating', 'intriguing' as an interplay of textures and provide a rich perceptual and aesthetic experience. Thus, as far as my students were concerned Creed's work failed within the specific context of art display (which bears with it an inheritance of a multitude of historical precedents). In other words when viewed *as art* the work failed, yet when viewed as part of everyday experience – by strategically forgetting that it was art – Creed's work offered the potential for aesthetic experience.

Creed's work had prompted a strategy of what I call here 'strategic amnesia'. Here it means to view the work in a thoroughly modernist fashion in a manner that recalls Clement Greenberg's often caricatured claim that, 'the purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work are the only ones that count'.³ Paradoxically, this also means attempting to deal with the work outside of an art-historical frame; that is in an historically neutral way. Such amnesiac neutrality offers the promise of an aesthetic experience that is not mediated by expectations as to the effects that a particular work of art should produce. This entails approaching Creed's work as if all the obvious anti and postmodernist precedents for it could all be forgotten. To forget, in other words: Marcel Duchamp and readymades; Robert Morris and sculptural preoccupations with process and phenomenology; Carl Andre and minimalism; Joseph Kosuth and conceptualism; Michael Asher and institutional critique; Sol Lewitt's conceptual wall drawings; Arte Povera and the use of everyday materials; Baldessari and his claim that 'I will not make any more boring art', and so on.

In the case of Creed, strategic amnesia gives a possible onlooker of the work the opportunity to forget that they are looking at art. This means that certain historical precedents and certain expectations for the work can be

bracketed and that attention can focus on the interesting perceptual effects of everyday experience without 'art' getting in the way.

However, could such 'strategic amnesia' be also useful to contemporary art historians; and in particular those working in an Irish context? Can, in other words, Martin Creed's work be used as an allegory for the issues facing art historians in Ireland today? In short, yes. Contemporary art historians operate at a high level of historical awareness. They are always anxiously looking over their shoulders at the historical terrain that lies behind them. I propose that to write about art in Ireland (whether one knows it or not) means to write in a context that is directly shaped by a dialectic of modernity and modernism. Further, strategically forgetting the problems of the unfurling of this dialectic in Ireland can invigorate the contemporary practice of writing about art.

Writing art history in twenty-first century Ireland

In a recent debate spread over several issues of the Irish art journal *Circa*, the art historian James Elkins gave his pessimistic assessment of the contemporary state of art history in Ireland:

As the Celtic Tiger winds down, Ireland's economy will be levelling out and coming in line with Western European countries of comparable size. At present, however, much of its art history, visual theory and philosophy of art lag behind those of say, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium or Switzerland . . . At the same time . . . The art scene in Ireland is growing exponentially, creating a gap between the creation of art and the critical and historical discourse that surrounds it.⁴

Elkins' main axe to grind was with institutional art history in general and reflected his commitment to the cause of a pluralistic practice predicated on 'visual practices across the entire university and out into the art market'. This was obvious from the way Elkins' argument relocated a familiar critique of a 'lag' in art history in general to a local (specifically Irish) context. Over twenty years previously Norman Bryson similarly claimed that:

It is a sad fact; art history lags behind the study of the other arts . . . While the last three or so decades have witnessed extraordinary and fertile change in the study of literature, of history, of anthropology, in the discipline of art history there has reigned a stagnant peace; a peace in which – certainly – a profession of art history has continued to exist, in which monographs have been written, and more and more catalogues produced: but produced at an increasingly remote margin of the humanities, and almost in the leisure sector of intellectual life.⁵

There is not the space here to engage at length with the responses to Elkins' points that were published in a subsequent issue of *Circa*. However, they included the observations that his administrative language could be easily co-opted as the jargon of bureaucratic instrumentalisation; and that he didn't offer a coherent or satisfactory diagnostic for the state of art history. Nonetheless the usefulness of the debate that Elkins initiated lay in how it drew attention to the manner in which art-historical practice has developed locally rather than globally and how, as he put it, 'each country's art-historical scholarship is poorly known outside its borders (how many Romanian art historians read Irish art history, even when both are writing about the Italian Renaissance?)'.⁶

Perhaps Elkins is right about the state of Irish art history. If so perhaps one reason that Irish art history is not well known outside a small community of practioners on the island of Ireland is that it has not, until relatively recently, developed a large academic community to share the common activity of writing academically about art. For example, the Irish Association of Art Historians has just taken the exciting step of publishing a journal (*Artefact*, 2007), but this is the first instance of a journal focusing on art history and visual culture studies from an Irish perspective.

The foundation of art history as an academic discipline in Ireland came some considerable time after its appearance in mainland Europe and Britain. It began with Françoise Henry's move from Paris to University College Dublin in 1934 and her teaching of early Irish art.⁷ In the same year she began the Purser–Griffith lecture series on European painting which was expanded into a full department in the early 1960s. This was complemented by the establishment of art history at Trinity College, Dublin in 1966. Both departments thus fully emerged a generation after the establishment of the Courtauld Institute in London (1932) and over a century after Gustav Waagen's appointment as the first professor of art history at the University of Berlin in 1844.⁸ Currently art history can also be studied at the newly established but thriving programme at University College Cork and the MA programme at University of Limerick. The history and theory of art is also taught, with disparate foci, as part of the curriculum delivered to students studying fine art and design practice (in Galway, Sligo, Waterford, Cork, the Burren College of Art); and the National College of Art & Design has a faculty of visual culture that includes art historians amongst its staff.

In short, it is only relatively recently that Ireland has had a professional art-historical community. Crucially this community emerged at a significant historical moment. Firstly (and this forms the explicit thrust of my discussion here), art history was established almost simultaneously with the

introduction of modernism in the visual arts in Ireland. Secondly (and this forms the implicit subtext to my discussion), art history emerged in Ireland almost simultaneously with the various reassessments of the discipline under the auspices of post-structuralism, the 'New Art History', visual-culture studies and the historiographic reassessment of both its institutional foundations and its relationship to other disciplines (such as philosophical aesthetics). In other words, art history in Ireland emerged at a point when art history itself was being called into question and arguably this destabilised its very establishment as an academic discipline.

Different modernisms

There is no monolithic or fixed modernism. In *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Marshall Berman establishes what he identifies as a 'dialectics of modernization and modernism'.⁹ He argues that modernism is the symbolic expression and cultural experience of the historical conditions of modernity. An implication of this base/super-structure model is that there can be different versions of modernism relating to different experiences of the material and technological circumstances of modernity.

Berman's argument is echoed by Susan Stanford Friedman's advancement of what she calls 'polycentric modernities and modernisms at different points of time and in different locations'.¹⁰ She advocates the expansion of an account of modernism beyond what she identifies as the Eurocentric or imperialist (following Frederic Jameson¹¹) model to a 'planetary' modernism:

A planetary approach to modernism requires . . . a jettisoning of the ahistorical designation of modernism as a collection of identifiable aesthetic styles, and abandoning as well the notion of modernism as an aesthetic period whose singular temporal beginnings and endpoints are definable, however interminable the debates might be about them. Instead I regard modernism as the *expressive dimension of modernity*, one that encompasses a range of styles among creative forms that share family resemblances based on an engagement with the historical conditions of modernity in a particular location.¹²

Friedman, like Berman, argues that there is no single expression or experience of modernity; and that there is thus no singularity to modernism in terms of aesthetics, location or period. She observes that: 'we need to locate the *plural* periods of modernisms, some of which overlap with each other and others of which have a different time period altogether'.¹³

The dialectics of modernity and modernism explain why art history has not been long or widely established in Ireland as an academic discipline. Firstly, as I argue below, institutional art history is a particular expression of modernisation and is related to particular experiences of modernity. However, such an expression has always been local and geographically specific in its emergence; as Kitty Zijlmans put it: 'Clearly, art history is not global'.¹⁴ This is demonstrated by showing institutional art history's relationship to modernism in the visual arts (and painting in particular) in mainland Europe (and, later, North America). My argument here is that Ireland has not had a tradition of art-historical studies because it has not had a tradition of modernism in the visual arts (and in painting in particular).

The complex relationship between institutional art history, in the Western European and North American mode, and modernism in the visual arts is connected to the institutionalisation of academic discourse and the emergence of the modern university system and other incidents of modernism emerging from the conditions of modernity in the nineteenth century. These include the establishment of modern museums (other systems of ordering) and the emergence of avant-garde art practices. As Hal Foster has argued, modernist (by which he identifies specifically Western, 1850–1950) art history, the art museum and art practice have evolved in a triangular relationship to one another to produce a 'memory-structure' over the period of modernism (between 1850–1950) from which a particular 'dialectics of seeing' emerged.¹⁵

The triangulation that Foster identified is predicated on the autonomy of art as a separate domain of experience. The museum offers the promise of a space that is both socially and experientially autonomous from everyday life; avant-garde practice has, historically, sought autonomy for art; whilst art history is predicated upon a distinct category of objects as the focus of its studies.

Museums, art history and modernism

The modern European museum (the correlate of modern European art history) emerged around the beginning of the nineteenth century as an expression of what Didier Maleuvre called a modernist 'cultural secularization of history'. He also drew the specific correlation between the establishment of the museum and an historical attitude toward art which is exercised in the practice of institutional art history:

This bracketing of art into the autonomous sphere of museums complements the movement that hands art over to the expertise of

historical science, to the investigations of historiographic study and the minutiae of scholarship. This process takes place concretely in the establishing of academies and institutes, in the museification of music via repertoires, in the annexation of literature by philological studies. Art in the nineteenth century becomes an object of historical expertise.¹⁶

The historical moments of this bracketing are well known. For example, the Louvre was established in post-revolutionary Paris in 1793, the Prado in 1820, the National Gallery in London in 1824. The first custom-built structure was the Altes Museum in Berlin in 1830. In Ireland a recognisably modern museum emerged in 1853 with the establishment of the Irish Institution whose aim was 'the promotion of Art in Ireland by the formation of a permanent exhibition in Dublin and eventually of an Irish National Gallery'.¹⁷ This was established the following year. However, the emergence of a modern museum was not accompanied by the emergence of a discipline of art history in Ireland. In other words art did not become the 'object of historical expertise' in Ireland until over a century later.

The complex relationship between art museum, institutional art history and avant-garde art practice is further elucidated when one considers the establishment of professional art history in the nineteenth century as a specifically modernist pursuit. As Elizabeth Mansfield has argued: 'Confidently secular, apologetically commercial, and ambivalently poised between scientific and philosophic aims, art history is a liberal discipline born of modernism'. She observed that one of the conditions of its modernity was that there was little academic or intellectual precedent for art history's particular mode of inquiry:

Humanistic inquiry in the West had, until the appearance of art history, largely traced its methods and goals to classical or medieval models. The fields of history, literature, and philosophy, for example, inherited institutional traditions and legitimacy from the academies of ancient Greece and the universities fostered by Scholasticism. Art history does not share this genealogy. Though its academic practices resemble those of the traditional humanities, art history maintains a distinctive disciplinary character. In practice, art history combines the authenticating and valuating mission of the connoisseur, the hagiographic indulgences of the biographer, the cataloguing impulse of the botanist, the alternately reflective and reflexive tendencies of the historian, and the philosopher's willingness to calibrate aesthetic transcendence.¹⁸

The relationship between modernism in art discourse and the visual arts as being particular symbolic expressions of modernity is clearly demonstrated by the emergence of German-language art history in the nineteenth century in Germany and Austria in parallel with a European avant-garde.

The particular modernist form that art history took in German-language art discourse was as a scientific method or 'Kunstwissenschaft'. Kunstwissenschaft was predicated on the possibility that there can be a study of art which is systematic, scientific and objective. It was, as Richard Woodfield recently observed, 'based on a rejection of academic philosophical aesthetics'.¹⁹ It was particularly concerned with the issue of the legitimacy and validity of its judgements. Such aspirations run through the work of the founding fathers of modern art history such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl and Max Dvořák at the end of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent work of Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich in the twentieth century.²⁰ Their shared concern was to distance themselves from a tradition of connoisseurship, from art criticism and the passing of aesthetic judgements on works of art. Three examples of this are given below.

Firstly, as has been well documented, the emergence of Kunstwissenschaft resulted in a formalisation of methods by Heinrich Wölfflin, who attempted historical objectivity by grounding art-historical enquiry in five pairs of formal, visual analyses, hence suggesting a structural connection to the formalist concerns of modernist art practice. Hauser, for example, drew a specific connection between art-historical practice and contemporary art practice in terms of a modernist preoccupation with visuality. Hauser argued that Wölfflin's method would have been inconceivable without Impressionism. So, just as Impressionism attempted to reduce the act of painting to the replication of the visual sense, so too, Hauser claimed, did Wölfflin's method.²¹

Wölfflin himself alluded to the relationship between his art-historical method and modernism in art when he claimed that 'Art History and Art run in parallel'.²² Martin Warnke has been more specific in tracing the relationship between Wölfflin's method and the avant-garde at the turn of the century. He gives specific evidence of what he identifies as the 'often-noted proximity of the Principles of Art History to the movement toward abstraction in the Blaue Reiter',²³ due to Wölfflin's position as professor in Munich up to 1924. He notes:

It is hardly correct to say that Wölfflin did not have his eye on the historical contemporaneity of artworks. It is far more correct to say that he had his eye fixed on that contemporaneity with something verging on panicked fear, in order to ward off (as with a taboo) all its possible avenues of access to the world of forms.²⁴

In particular, Warnke suggests an important similarity between Wölfflin's formalist method and Kandinsky's articulation of the spiritually expressive qualities of the formal content of works of art in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911).

Secondly, the explicit connection between modernity and formal methods of art history was drawn by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl did so in specifically visual terms by establishing an analytic system based on the balance between optic and haptic conceptions of space and the act of artistic representation. In *The Late Roman Art Industry* he identified development in the history of art as a slow shift toward a modern perceptual and conceptual sensibility. Such a modern sensibility was predicated on an optical understanding of space as a rational and abstract concept in contrast to a haptic, pre-modern conception of space which, he claimed, was experienced emotionally rather than rationally. Thus the art of the Late Romans served, for Riegl, as a transition from Early Roman and Egyptian art to art that expressed a modern, optic sensibility:

The third period of antiquity deserves our special interest. Not only was the classic attempt to erect a mechanistic system of causality between individual phenomena no longer valued, but one went so far as to bring external, individual shapes in reciprocal isolation from each other. In no way did this mean a return to primitive disconnectedness. Instead, a mechanistic theory of connection between individual shapes no longer seemed satisfactory . . . *A correspondence of this process with the isolation of individual shapes on the visual plane is obvious in contemporary art . . .* The change in the late antique conception of the world was a necessary transition made by the human mind in order to take it from the concept of a purely mechanistic and sequential relationship of things (as if they were projected on a plane) to one of a general chemical connection, including, as it were, space in all directions.²⁵

There are two things at stake in Riegl's above assessment of his method. Firstly, it is a self-consciously modernist attempt to systematise an art-historical method grounded in formalism. Secondly, it reveals Riegl's self-conscious connection to a modernist artistic practice contemporary to his own art-historical practice which therefore invites the comparison between modernism in art *and* art history.

Thirdly, Bakhtin and Medvedev drew a parallel between the claims for autonomy by (and on behalf of) modernist art and the development of institutional art history. They argued that the structural form of formalist art history was implicated in a broader definition of modernism. Art history, they argued, as an autonomous discipline, should be understood in terms congruous with a formalist analysis of the work of art based on the separate and self-contained visual qualities of the work. They thus argued that a common ground could be attributed to the emergence and development of formalism at the beginning of the twentieth century as a guiding principle in contemporary art, on the one hand, and, on the other, attempts to

produce systematic accounts of the history of art. Bakhtin and Medvedev argued that this emergence could itself be understood in terms of a more generally delineated 'Modernity'. More specifically they proposed that this modernity involved a turn to the visual in terms of a formalist understanding of vision and visuality: 'It was not what was seen that was new, but the forms of seeing themselves', they observed.²⁶

Thus modernism in both art and art history was identified by Bakhtin and Medvedev in terms of 'the general ideological horizon of West European Formalism', which was one characterised, in broader cultural terms, as a particular sensory balance in favour of vision. Art historians thus shared a modernist concern with contemporary artists in that both concentrated on the formal qualities of art and

... increased interest in and sharpening of sensitivity to all concrete expressions of world view, whether expressed in paints, spatial forms, or sounds. In short, interest was focused on the forms of concrete seeing and apprehending the things of the world, not on the forms of thinking about them.²⁷

This was manifested in the formal methods that art historians employed to replace connoisseurship with the study of art as rigorous and systematic, with attention shifted to the 'objective' visual away from judgements based on taste:

The problem of seeing occupies a very important place in European formalism. The work does not exist for thought, or for feelings or emotions, but *for the sight*. The concept of seeing itself underwent extensive differentiation. The perception of form, the perception of the quality of the form, became one of the most important problems of not only art scholarship, but of theoretical aesthetics and psychology. Here too the basic tendency was to assert the inseparability of significance and meaning from the sensually perceptible quality.²⁸

Thus there is an important equivalence between modernism in art and modernism in art history in so far as both are particular expressions of modernity and modernisation. Modernism in art history and art practice is predicated upon an attitude of autonomy which assumes the equivalence between the formal structures of the work of art, and the formal structures of viewing and analysis of that work. In summary, art-historical method consists of a series of academic conventions that are situated within a system of cultural values; and such a cultural system includes a theory and experience of art.

This has implications for the specific situation in Ireland where the comparatively late emergence of modernism in the visual arts lead to the equivalently comparatively late emergence of academic art history.

Ireland's modernism

The establishment of formal art history in Europe occurred in tandem with the emergence of modernism in the visual arts. It follows then that if Ireland did not experience modernity in the form of a modernism in the visual arts then this explains why it did not experience modernity in the form of institutional art history.

It would, of course, be ludicrous to suggest that there were no experiences of modernity in Ireland that played out in particular configurations of modernism. The central role that Irish writers such as Joyce and Beckett played in modernism in literature and the theatre is so well known that it need not be rehearsed here. What does seem clear, however, is that experiences of modernity were mediated either literarily in prose and poetry, in theatre and, crucially, socially in the violent reconfiguration of the social sphere (particularly in the twentieth century when Ireland, like much of mainland Europe in the nineteenth century, experienced revolution), but not in visual-art practice.

There were at least two factors at play that meant that a critical discourse on art did not develop in the first half of the twentieth century. Firstly, in Ireland there was not an experience of modernity grounded specifically in visuality. And secondly, as Luke Gibbons has suggested, whilst there were certain experiences of modernism in Ireland, this did not include a rigorous critical discursive culture:

Far from being secondary to the work of art, the centrality of theory and criticism is such that while a creative voice may readily be granted, as a kind of poetic licence, to dispossessed or marginal cultures, the critical mediation of the resultant artworks is less easily devolved onto the cultures that produce them . . . Ireland has produced leading literary figures of the stature of Joyce, Yeats and Beckett, but where are the equivalents of Adorno, Barthes or de Beauvoir, or, for that matter, Marx, Wollstonecraft or Weber?²⁹

One might add the names of famous art historians such as Ernst Gombrich or Erwin Panofsky to his list.

The particular dialectic of modernisation and modernism in Ireland is complex, and cannot be fully unpacked here. On the one hand it has been suggested that modernity arrived too late, as Diarmuid Ferriter argued:

. . . superficially at least, Irish social conditions were improving somewhat in the post-war period, but full-scale modernisation was a long way off. In 1949 Ireland still had the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality in Europe.³⁰

On the other hand it has been convincingly argued that Ireland experienced modernism comparatively early. Luke Gibbons, for example, has maintained that:

Irish society did not have to await the twentieth century to undergo the shock of modernity: disintegration and fragmentation were already part of its history so that, in a crucial but not always welcome sense, Irish culture experienced modernity before its time. This is not unique to Ireland, but is the common inheritance of cultures subjected to the depredations of colonialism.³¹

However, in relation to art it seems clear that Western European modernism was not taken up by artists in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernist art was either practised in exile, as in the case of Norman Garstin who practised in Realist and Impressionist idioms first in Brittany and then Cornwall, or adopted somewhat unconvincingly. For example, there was no prominent Impressionist working in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century, and those who did paint in a recognisably Impressionist style, like Walter Osborne, produced an undistinguished approximation of European painting.³² As Kenneth McConkey observed in the case of Roderic O'Connor (who also spent most of his adult life abroad):

... in the 1890s, with this one personality, Ireland acquired a 'paid-up' post-impressionist without ever having had an impressionist! ... Clearly there never was a group of closely knit Irish co-exhibitors who formed a Société Anonyme.³³

Avant-garde practices in the visual arts fared little better in the twentieth century in Ireland. In the 1930s there was what Terence Brown called: 'an almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism . . . combined with prudery and a deep reverence for the Irish past'.³⁴ This led to a general climate in which even those artists who attempted a European style of painting (such as Manie Jellet,³⁵ Evie Hone and Louis le Brocquy) had no real audience for their work outside of a very small group of what Aidan Dunne has identified as: 'a relatively contained community of artists, collectors and curators'.³⁶ Even as late as the 1960s what modernism there was being exhibited in Ireland could still be dismissed as a 'kind of tame second-generation modernism',³⁷ exemplified by the derivative paintings of Colin Middleton, who appropriated a variety of European styles including Expressionism and Surrealism.

Many have written commentaries on the peripheral status of modernism in visual-art practice in Ireland. These include Paul M. O'Reilly, who acknowledged that:

I have great admiration for Jellet and Yeats and all those modernists we recognise as innovators in the story of modern Irish art. We do recognise, of course, that they were peripheral to what was going on in Europe. Yet they felt a need for radical basic change and they sought it in Europe, years after innovations they were interested in were already well established.³⁸

This is a sentiment echoed by Brian Fallon:

When I started writing for the *Irish Times* [from 1963–98], nineteenth-century art was under a cloud. For Modernism, nothing except French and English art was accepted, and a little later American art began to be accepted . . . There was still a sort of neo-Fry aesthetic which has people talking endlessly about formal values, without seeming to know what formal values were a lot of the time.³⁹

And by Brian O'Doherty:

With the decline of modernism local art looks better . . . In Ireland one is spared this doppelgänger provincialism (The Irish Warhol, The Irish Rauschenberg) so prevalent in more visually sophisticated cities. Dublin still preserves a somewhat rural mentality within its urban pale. A jeering suspicion makes short work of modernism's more exotic hybrids. Both the artist and his audience discourage formal impoliteness or radical gestures. Modernism is kept at a distance by what modernism eventually rid itself of – taste. Most Irish art since 1959 is very tasteful.⁴⁰

What should be strategically forgotten?

I cannot discuss in detail the complex reasons that gave rise to the circumstances sketched above; nor do I wish to get bogged down in the by now quite stale debates regarding post-colonialism. However, it appears that there are at least four closely intertwined factors that frame the discussion as to why modernism in the visual arts did not emerge in Ireland until late in the twentieth century. I propose that a 'strategic amnesia' concerning these framing factors might invigorate the practice of contemporary art history in Ireland by circumventing them as obstacles. They are the factors of nationalism, geography, economics and tradition.

Firstly, nationalism. From its inception until the last twenty-five or so years of the twentieth century the notion of modernism in the visual arts was as conflicted as the Anglo-Irish identity with which it was associated. Such a conflicted identity can be deconstructed in nationalist and colonial terms. As Kennedy observed: 'In Ireland the debate surrounding [modernist art] was smothered by the quest for national identity'.⁴¹ This underpins Terry Eagleton's claim that:

... if there is a high modernism in Ireland, there is little or no avant-garde – little of that iconoclastic experiment which seeks to revolutionize the very conception and institution of art itself, along with its relations to political society.⁴²

Modernism in the visual arts was, until quite recently, viewed with a certain suspicion from Catholic and nationalist Catholic perspectives as a colonial ideology that was imposed externally and which might challenge religious, national or Celtic identities (hence the relationship between the Celtic Revival and nationalism) in a power dynamic enacted in the name of modernisation and colonial order(ing). As Declan McGonagle has observed:

... Modernity was resisted in Ireland, quite consciously after independence in the early part of the twentieth century by a powerful and volatile mix of Catholicism and Nationalism. To be Modern[ist] was to be English and in the 1920s in Ireland, Englishness has been rejected.⁴³

From this perspective, a certain strategic forgetting of the historically fraught Anglo-Irish context of modernism might mean to consider both contemporary art practice and contemporary art history within a European and/or global context.

Secondly, geography. Ireland is a geographically distinct entity from mainland Europe (even more so than Britain) and this, arguably, lead to a certain distancing from avant-garde practices in geographical as well as cultural terms. For example, Brian O'Doherty couched his critique of contemporary Irish art in geographical terms when he made the following observation in 1971 in response to the Irish Imagination exhibition (organised, in 1971, in parallel with the second ROSC exhibition):

... no colour field, no op art, no art and technology weddings, no environmental machinery, very little pop, hard edge or minimalism are to be seen here. Yet local translations of international modes are de rigueur from Taiwan to Buenos Aires, signifying if not membership in the avant-garde club, at least a desire to belong. Why has Ireland, handily situated between Paris, London and New York not displayed these international symptoms? ... The reasons go back to the second world war which forced Ireland into some of its dullest isolation when the probity of the literary magazine *The Bell*, revealed by contrast the brackish intellectual climate in which self-indulgent apologies were the order of the day. The spiritual powers of tradition and the secular power of the church were equally oppressive, and food and intelligence were both rationed.⁴⁴

It was not until the 1960s that modernism in the visual arts began to gain both a public and an academic profile in Ireland, albeit a tentatively established one. This only happened when art and artists migrated both into

and out of the island of Ireland. For example, between 1967 and 1988 the six ROSC exhibitions brought contemporary avant-garde art to Ireland from abroad and was the first introduction of a recognisably modernist art to the general public in Ireland;⁴⁵ whilst from 1972 the IELA (Irish Exhibition of Living Art), which had been showing contemporary art from 1943, began to embrace modernist international art under the new chairmanship of Brian King.

Likewise Ireland's first representation at the Venice Biennale came at the twenty-fifth show in 1950.⁴⁶ It is no coincidence that these dates correspond to the establishment of art-history departments in Trinity and UCD. Perhaps, then, this activity was predicated on a strategic forgetting of geographical distance.

Thirdly, economics. The lack of an historical avant-garde in the visual arts in Ireland may be attributed to the lack of an autonomous middle class with a political, economic and national identity.⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg made the point that avant-garde practices were always tied with an 'umbilical cord of gold'⁴⁸ to the bourgeoisie. For the early part of the twentieth century the well-known traumatic historical events on the island meant that such an affluent middle class was not present in Ireland. The financial security that facilitates reflection upon art in either the radical self-reflexive practices of the avant-garde or the historically reflexive practices of art history was lacking. It has been only relatively recently that there has been the financial and attendant cultural confidence to support such practices.⁴⁹

Fourthly, tradition. Some of the resistance to modernism in the visual arts in Ireland came from the playing out of a complex dialectic between tradition and modernity. As Paul O'Brien has observed:

Irish visual modernism, then, may be seen as sharing with Irish literary modernism an element of the archaic, embodying pre- or anti-Enlightenment values, represented for example by the Celtic elements in le Brocquy, the Celtic and religious elements in Jellet, and the Romantic Expressionism of Jack Yeats. There are closer similarities between the poles of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in Irish culture than might be supposed at first view.⁵⁰

Perhaps, then, the resistance by tradition to modernism might also be forgotten.

I suggest that strategically forgetting certain traditions has a dual role. On the one hand, contemporary art gains its vitality from circumventing anachronistic and familiar themes and practices. On the other hand, contemporary art history can similarly renew itself and adapt to contemporary art by also circumventing anachronistic and familiar themes and practices. I began by suggesting that history was constructed on the foundations of those cultural

practices that are marginalised, excluded and forgotten. My conclusion is that the contemporary practices of both making art *and reflecting upon it* might see positive implications in this. Art practice and art history can move forward by strategically marginalising, excluding and forgetting certain traditions and ways of thinking and doing that link back to a troubled past.

This essay also began with Martin Creed's work, introduced as an allegory for how one might use strategic amnesia to negotiate a mode of art-historical reflection that operates with a heightened sense of historical awareness. The benefit of this lies in how it might liberate both art practice and writing about art in Ireland from a paralysing weight of history. This does not mean, however, 'forgetting' modernism. On the contrary. If, as Paul de Man (alluding to Nietzsche) claimed, 'Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier', and modernity is predicated on a 'ruthless forgetting' of history,⁵¹ then contemporary art history in Ireland will, by consciously employing 'strategic amnesia', continue to contribute to the still incomplete project of modernity.

Notes and References

- 1 Robert Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', *Art International*, March 1968, p. 21
- 2 'What if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than reconstituting it? What if identity had to be constituted out of a strategic amnesia, a selective remembering, and thus a selective *dis(re)membering* of experience? What if the technology of memory, the composite visual-verbal architecture of the memory palace becomes a haunted house?': W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 200.
- 3 Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', *Partisan Review*, 7 (1940), pp. 299–300.
- 4 James Elkins, 'The State of Irish Art History Revisited', *Circa*, 116 (2006), pp. 48–55 and 'Response' [to eight letters responding to the original essay, by Joan Fowler, Lucy Cotter, Maeve Connolly, Mia Lerm Hayes, Róisín Kennedy, Rosemarie Mulcahy, Sheila Dickinson and Siún Hanrahan], *Circa*, 118 (2006), pp. 45–7.
- 5 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. xi.
- 6 Elkins, 'The State of Irish Art History Revisited', pp. 48–55.
- 7 W.G. Strickland's two-volume *Dictionary of Irish Artists* (1913) is an early forerunner of Irish art history, yet is almost entirely uncritical and lacking a theoretical framework.
- 8 For a more detailed discussion on the establishment of academic art history, see Mitchell Schwarzer, 'Origins of the Art History Survey Text', *Art Journal*, 54: 3 (1995), pp. 24–9.
- 9 Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 16.
- 10 Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies', *Modernism/Modernity*, 13: 3 (2006), pp. 425–43.
- 11 Frederic Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism' in Terry Eagleton et al., *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 41–6.

- 12 Friedman, 'Periodizing Modernism', p. 432.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Kitty Zijlmans, 'An Intercultural Perspective in Art History: Beyond Othering and Appropriation' in James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 289.
- 15 Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 68.
- 16 Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories* (San Diego: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 9.
- 17 Raymond Keaveney, 'A Brief History' in Christine Davis, *National Gallery of Ireland: Essential Guide* (London: Scala, 2002), p. 2.
- 18 Elizabeth Mansfield, 'Art History and Modernism', in Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 11–28.
- 19 Richard Woodfield, 'Kunstwissenschaft versus Ästhetik: The Historians' Revolt Against Aesthetics', in Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen and Tony O'Connor, *Rediscovering Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 20 For a manifesto, see Hans Sedlmayr's 'Toward a Rigorous Study of Art' in Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), p. 132 ff.
- 21 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (London: Routledge, 1999), vol. ii, p. 160.
- 22 Quoted in Martin Warnke, 'On Heinrich Wölfflin', *Representations*, 27 (1989), pp. 172–87.
- 23 Ibid., p. 179.
- 24 Ibid., p. 178.
- 25 Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (Bretschneider, 1985), pp. 232–3, emphasis added.
- 26 M.M. Bakhtin and P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 43.
- 27 Ibid., p. 43.
- 28 Ibid., p. 49.
- 29 Luke Gibbons, 'Towards a Postcolonial Enlightenment: The United Irishmen, Cultural Diversity and the Public Sphere' in Clare Carroll and Patricia King (eds.), *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), pp. 81–92.
- 30 Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p. 496.
- 31 Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 6.
- 32 Julian Campbell, *The Irish Impressionists: Irish Artists in France and Belgium* (Dublin: The National Gallery of Ireland, 1984).
- 33 Kenneth McConkey, 'Review: The Irish Impressionists. Belfast', *The Burlington Magazine*, 127: 983 (1985), pp. 115–16, 119.
- 34 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–79* (London: Fontana, 1981), p. 147.
- 35 See too Eagleton's dismissal of Jellet's work as 'mandarin Modernism': Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 299.
- 36 Aidan Dunne, 'On Reflection' in *On Reflection: Modern Irish Art 1960s–1990s: A Selection from the Bank of Ireland Art Collection* (Cork: Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, 2005), p. 11.
- 37 Brian Fallon: 'Without Waddington any form of Modernism, even the kind of tame second-generation modernism which had a validity here, could not have been on the map' quoted in Vera Ryan, *Movers and Shakers: Irish Art Since 1960* (Cork: Collins, 1990), p. 240.
- 38 Paul M. O'Reilly quoted in Ryan, *Movers and Shakers*, p. 192.
- 39 Brian Fallon quoted in Ryan, *Movers and Shakers*, p. 245.
- 40 Brian O'Doherty, *The Irish Imagination, 1959–1971* (Dublin: Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, 1971), pp. 10–11, 20.
- 41 Brian Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, 1991), p. 3.

- 42 Eagleton, *Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger*, p. 100.
- 43 Declan McGonagle, 'The World to Come' in Susan Bacik and Catherine Marshall (eds.), *Re-Imagining Ireland: Irish Art Today* (Virginia: University of Virginia Art Museum, 2003), p. 8.
- 44 Brian O'Doherty, 'The Irish Imagination' in Fintan Cullen (ed.), *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), pp. 268–73.
- 45 In 1967 the ROSC jury included international art-world luminaries such as James Johnson Sweeney and Willem Sandberg.
- 46 See Fionna Barber, 'Excavating Room 50: Irish Painting and the Cold War at the 1950 Venice Biennale' in Fintan Cullen and John Morrison (eds.) *A Shared Legacy: Essays on Irish and Scottish Art and Visual Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 207–24.
- 47 The discourses of class and post-colonialism are not mutually exclusive in relation to art and art history in Ireland. For example, Lucy Cotter argues that 'Vera Ryan also raised the issue of the class bases of Irish art academies. She alluded both to the class make-up of art academy students and the profile of the staff, which had in the 1980s been dominated by British staff due to a government rule that staff must hold a B.A. in Fine Art – a qualification not available in Ireland at that time': Lucy Cotter, 'Multiple Agendas, Impossible Dialogues: Where Irish Studies and History of Art Meet', *Variant*, 29 (2007), pp. 18–20.
- 48 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, 6: 5 (1939), pp. 34–49.
- 49 For example, upper-middle-class employment (for men) rose from 7.6 per cent to 16.1 per cent between 1961 and 1981. For more, see Richard Breen, Damien Hannan, David Rottman and Christopher Whelan, *Understanding Contemporary Ireland: State, Class and Development in the Republic of Ireland* (London: Macmillan, 1990).
- 50 Paul O'Brien, 'Word and Image in Irish Modernism,' in 'From the Edge: Art and Design in Twentieth-Century Ireland', special edition of *Circa*, 92 (2000).
- 51 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 147–8.