

Commemoration: A Forward-Looking Act

JOANNE LAWS, WINNER OF THE VISUAL ARTISTS IRELAND / DUBLIN CITY COUNCIL ARTS OFFICE CRITICAL WRITING AWARD (2013), ADDRESSES THE SUBJECT OF THE VISUAL ARTS' RESPONSE TO THE 'DECADE OF CENTENARIES'



'The 1913 Tapestry Project', work in progress, January 2013, image courtesy of Cathie Henderson

VISUAL ARTISTS IRELAND & DUBLIN CITY ARTS OFFICE Annual Visual Art Writing Award

Visual Artists Ireland and Dublin City Arts Office are pleased to announce Joanne Laws as the recipient of the 2012 Annual Visual Art Writing Award. The award was first launched in 2011 and has been devised as a developmental opportunity for writers, as part of Dublin City Council Arts Office and Visual Artists Ireland's commitment to encouraging and supporting critical dialogue around contemporary visual arts practices.

For the 2012 award, applicants were asked to propose a thematic article looking at how the visual arts might respond to the upcoming 'decade of commemorations' taking place across the island of Ireland. Joanne's article is scheduled to appear in the March / April edition of the Visual Artists' News Sheet.

Joanne received editorial support and mentoring from Visual Artists Ireland and an honorarium from Dublin City Council Arts Office of €800 – comprising a €500 commission to write for this edition of the Visual Artists' News Sheet and a €300 commission to write a short essay as part of the LAB's 2012 / 2013 programme.

AT a national level, commemoration is a complex proposition, existing not just in history, but also across modern-day social, cultural, political, economic and religious spectrums. In areas of post-conflict, where these factors offer contested and multiple readings of events, the commemorative task often necessitates difficult questions, such as "how do we remember?" or even "what should we choose to forget?" Last year Ireland entered a decade-long phase of historically significant centenary dates (2012 – 2022) and the concept of commemoration has been intensely scrutinised, with fear of turbulence in Northern Ireland remaining of utmost concern.

These commemorative anniversaries, which include the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme, and the War of Independence, denote not only defining moments in Irish history, but also legacies which are shared with the North of Ireland and the United Kingdom.¹ In negotiating this shared ownership of history, various official government-led commemoration programmes have been set up north and south of the border, with each affirming a commitment to inclusivity and interdependence.² A "spirit of tolerance and mutual respect" should foster ongoing reconciliation, urged President Michael D Higgins in a lecture at the University of Ulster in Derry last April. Commentary in the mainstream media since then has called for the programme of commemorative events to "respect all factions",³ cautioning against "glory commemorations" and nostalgia, and warning of the importance of historical accuracy and the danger that the commemorations could be "hijacked by certain individuals or organisations"⁴ or become a touristic and "commercial imperative".⁵

Such pressurised debate surrounding the rules of engagement for these commemorative anniversaries suggests that "how we remember and mark them is not only remembering 'then', but defining us 'now' " and what transpires will in turn be archived and remembered in the future.⁶ Commemoration in this way becomes a forward-looking act. In using history as an opportunity to reflect,

many of the challenges of this period might actually lie not in a reconciliation of the past, but in an acceptance of the present. As also stated by President Higgins, for many people the commemorations for the decade of centenaries will go unnoticed, as they struggle to cope with the "severe impact of the current recession". Ireland's twenty-first-century globalised status, against the current backdrop of economic crisis, government-imposed austerity and instability in the Euro-zone overall, has prompted many to comment on the irony of celebrating Ireland's historically hard-won independence, in light of current and ongoing threats to fiscal autonomy and national sovereignty.

The principle task of this article is to outline how the visual arts might respond to the decade of centenaries 2013 – 2023. Rather than speculating on what this could hypothetically entail, I'm offering an overview of the types of activity currently being engaged by artists actively probing the idea of commemoration. Interestingly, many of these projects have used the 1913 Lockout as a basis for their inquiries, stimulating discussions around labour and capital. Given that Ireland doesn't have a strong history of socialism, the subject of the Lockout seems particularly well placed to activate notions and questions around citizenship, protest or resistance within contemporary Ireland.

The Dublin Lockout of 1913 was one of the most significant industrial disputes in Irish history, with the right to unionise being a central concern for the 20,000 workers who took part in the seven month long general strike. Under Jim Larkin's new Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, mobilisation and solidarity amongst workers marked an important chapter in Irish labour history, denoting a class-based struggle, which paved the way for nationalist victory in the 1916 Rising. This revolutionary period in modern Irish history is being widely debated in academic events nationwide, including a conference entitled 'The Cause of Labour: 1913 and

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Beyond’ (8 – 9 March 2013) organised by the School of History, University College Cork, which focuses on the implications of home rule and partition for the labour movement at the time. Elsewhere, many community organisations, such as the North Inner City Folklore Project, are planning to mark the anniversary with community participation and youth-orientated projects.

In acknowledging the role of the labour movement in the development of the Irish State, SIPTU, Ireland’s largest trade union, have collaborated with NCAD to commission a large-scale commemorative tapestry depicting the Lockout. The visual narrative has been developed by painters Cathy Henderson and Robert Ballagh in the style of a comic strip. The 30 mixed-media textile panels are currently being crafted by volunteers in a range of contexts including the Irish Guild of Embroiderers, local youth initiatives, several Dublin schools and Limerick prison. In acknowledging the power of collective action that mobilised the strikers of 1913, President Higgins described it as very fitting that it is through collective action, collaboration and community involvement that they are being remembered. It is envisaged that the tapestry will be finished by August 2013, and will be housed in the SIPTU Headquarters, with a trust currently being established to facilitate a tour of civic spaces including the National Library, and Liberty Hall.

As Ireland’s first major urban-centred conflict, it seemed appropriate that the LAB Gallery, situated in Foley Street in the north inner-city, should commemorate the Lockout with an exhibition last October entitled ‘Digging the Monto: An archaeology of tenement life and the 1913 Lockout’. Foley Street – formerly Montgomery Street – was once one of Europe’s largest and most notorious red-light districts, and provided an interesting location in which to view photographs, records and artefacts from the area’s vivid history, complied by a community archaeology group led by resident researcher Dr Thomas Kador. A panel discussion, ‘From the Lockout to the Rising and the Treaty: (How) should we commemorate?’ presented historical, academic and artistic insights into the function of commemoration. Director of Limerick City Gallery, Helen Carey, offered an illuminating account of her ‘1913 / 2013 Lockout’ visual art research project which began in 2009 and was formed out of a deep interest in Irish Labour History, with the power relationship between citizen and state central to her curatorial inquiry. In marking this ‘pivotal moment’, contemporary visual art practice seeks to probe perceived notions of work, civic engagement and resistance. A specially commissioned series of lens-based works by Mark Curran entitled ‘The Market’ will form part of the ‘1913 / 2013 Lockout’ commemorations. Focusing on the function of the global stock market, artworks are being developed by Curran in response to sites of the international financial crisis, including Dublin’s financial district.

Using the centenary of the 1913 Lockout as a point of departure, Limerick City Gallery has embarked on a yearlong programme of exhibitions, which seek to further probe the relationship between labour and capital. The current exhibition ‘Strike!’ (25 January – 15 March 2013) features Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) and a collection of archival material from the Limerick Soviet,⁷ alongside a programme of documentary films curated by artist and researcher Anthony Haughey depicting workers’ resistance and international labour disputes, many of which have been filmed by the workers themselves in keeping with the social realist film genre. Most compelling for an Irish audience is the recent film *161 Days* (directed and produced by Declan and Barra O’Connor), which documents the Cork Vita Cortex workers’ dispute and sit-in during 2011 / 12. Haughey, who was also present during part of the protest, recalled being particularly struck by the workers’ “use of their own products – foam material to make beds on the factory floor”.⁸ Modern industrial disputes such as these, he claims, “are as relevant as any historical account of the 1913 Lockout”.

In constructing dialogues around this type of artistic activity, platforms for dissemination are crucial. “Troubling Ireland: A Cross-Borders Think Tank for Artists and Curators Engaged in Social Change” was set up to probe and unravel perceived “notions of Irish identity, history and politics, and Ireland’s relationship to global capitalism”. Commissioned by the Fire Station Artists’ Studios, and conceived by Danish curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion, ‘Troubling Ireland’ was a yearlong project that brought together six socially-engaged artists and curators, convening north and south of the border in several locations to collectively reflect on their practices and the “social realities of the two Irelands and their relationship to the global world order”. In each location, the group engaged across a

range of site-specific issues, documenting labour history and social dissent, tracking global capital, probing environmental, democratic and judicial boundaries and defining citizenship and the nation-state in the wake of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger. In devising ways for their activities to become visible in the public domain, the group developed the Public Poster Campaign for Dublin city centre in September 2011, with a public hearing in Liberty Hall that provided a platform for the participants to reflect on the think-tank process. A major exhibition in Limerick City Gallery is planned for October 2013. The poster campaign reflects a wider revival of the principles of commonage within contemporary art practice, which situate as counter-cultures to neoliberal enclosure. In opposing political forces and the privatisation of resources, socially-engaged art seeks to raise civic awareness and develop co-operative structures, which support active citizenship.

With this in mind, an invitation to participate in ‘The Future State of Ireland’ conference at Goldsmiths, University of London (17 – 18 November 2012) was an opportunity for ‘Troubling Ireland’ to adopt an external vantage-point, viewing Ireland’s recent history from a critical distance.⁹ The event, which was organised by researchers Dr Derval Tubridy and Stephanie Feeney, sought to examine “cultural responses, in order to gauge the effects of a traumatic transition from Celtic Tiger prosperity to post-bailout austerity”. With keynote contributions from leading intellectuals and cultural commentators such as Professor Roy Foster, Fintan O’Toole and Dr Elaine Byrne, Ireland’s post-crisis future was debated and framed by a diverse programme of artistic activity. This included a screening of Kennedy Browne’s film *How Capital Moves* (2010) which was originally commissioned for the Lodz Biennale, Poland and was conceptually inspired by the relocation of the Dell Corporation’s manufacturing plant from Limerick to Lodz in 2009, shedding 1900 Irish jobs. Given that an unhealthy reliance on foreign direct investment in Ireland’s economy was a determining factor in Ireland’s financial crisis and subsequent insolvency (when multi-nationals like Dell shifted eastward, enticed by lower labour and manufacturing costs), placing emphasis on this same model for economic recovery seems unsustainable, but few alternatives are being proposed by current government. *How Capital Moves* currently forms part of the ‘United States of Europe’ project, a touring exhibition aimed at probing notions of European identity, culture and citizenship, now showing at Crawford art Gallery, Cork (7 – 13 March 2013). Kennedy Browne’s ongoing research project ‘Ireland is Good for You’ is based on the little-known fact that “nine of the world’s top ten global pharmaceutical companies are located in Ireland”. Using Ringaskiddy in Cork – once a picturesque village, now an industrialised hub for logistics, transport and pharmaceutical manufacturing – as a site for much of this investigation, this location itself functions as an analytical tool for addressing the conceptual links between labour, landscape and globalisation.

If the process of commemoration is about assessing the present in relation to the past, then the legacies of labour disputes such as the 1913 Lockout (where the distribution of wealth and the right to unionise were integral to the campaign) provide an opportunity to take stock of current living and working conditions, as the crippling repercussions of Ireland’s recent short-lived prosperity continue to unfold. With a shift away from agriculture, manual labour and heavy industry, towards information technology, commerce and the service industries, Ireland’s economy is more heavily reliant on foreign investment than ever before. Strategies by multi-national companies to thwart trade union activity amongst employees have been well documented, while pay cuts, tax-hikes, outsourcing, unstable temporary contracts and an emphasis on up-skilling are all characteristic of the western work-force under late capitalism. Growing income inequality, extensive household debt and negative equity further exemplify the poverties of twenty-first-century Ireland.

As the Republic acts to regain its globalised status at any civic, cultural and environmental cost – a model for progress that is floundering, even on its own terms – the North attempts to live up to its inscription as a post-conflict zone with efforts that are clearly ongoing. The centennial commemorations of the 1912 Ulster Covenant (a mass unionist opposition to home rule) last September was carried out peacefully, with one of the highest policing efforts ever deployed in the North. In Belfast, media coverage has focused on the periodic outbreaks of violence over the Union flag controversy, while regeneration in Derry-Londonderry continues to inspire mainstream coverage in which its touristic and cosmopolitan appeal

is emphasised, as the city grows into its role of UK City of Culture 2013. In translating the economic language of ‘culture-branding’ into something meaningful and sustainable for Derry-Londonderry, the role of socially-engaged, site-specific art practice will prove paramount, supported and extended by the city’s arts initiatives which will play an integral role in providing diverse and challenging programmes of exhibitions, events and offsite projects.

South of the border, the task of the arts in mediating economic forces is equally urgent. The National Campaign for the Arts has articulated its concerns that the decade of commemorations “may coincide with the single most dramatic assault on our cultural infrastructure, and the legacy of this government may be one of curtailing our artistic independence for future generations”.¹⁰ The NCFEA has recently embarked on a shift away from the ‘Economic Argument’ initiated by the campaign in 2009 – a worthwhile activity which sought to penetrate political discourse by quantifying the contribution of the funded arts sector to the Irish economy, lobbying local TDs at constituency level in light of cuts to the sector. Concerned that the arts would be seen as a solely ‘economic instrument’, a second phase of the campaign was devised, producing a *Research Strategy* (2012), which connects artistic research to public policy-formation, facilitated through meaningful consultation with the arts sector. Following a two-day debate on the arts conducted in both houses of the Oireachtas last July, the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht withdrew certain aspects of the planned merger of the National Cultural Institutions. This insistence on political accountability and transparency, informed by consultation, is one way for civic resistance to be vigilantly practiced in a modern democracy.

From the nature of contemporary labour and the occurrence of industrial dissent, to culture post-conflict and role of the artist in imagining future states, these insights provide a crucial opportunity to scrutinise the unfolding present, in order to assess what will in turn be contributed to history’s long trajectory. The next phase in the decade of centenaries will focus on the 1916 rising, with debate already underway regarding its legacy for contemporary Ireland. An upcoming conference on material and visual culture entitled ‘Object Matters: Making 1916’ aims to robustly engage with the objects, images, myths and paradoxes of the Rising, under the premise that history is ‘made and re-made over time’.¹¹ With shifting contemporary socio-political conditions generating new readings of the past engaging with recent and distant history in this way allows us to become more connected with what is actually happening right now – to be alerted to what we are allowing to happen through apathy or a lack of insight, vigilance and action. This particular form of commemoration being explored in the visual arts denotes a particular clarity of vision, and becomes potentially liberating, as a lens through which to understand the past, amidst attempts to engage in the present and visualise the future.

Joanne Laws is a critical writer based in Leitrim. She has been published in Afterimage Journal of Media, Arts and Cultural Criticism, Axisweb, Cabinet and Variant.

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Notes

1. List of centenary dates (not exhaustive): 2012, Ulster Covenant, 100 years; 2012, Titanic, 100 years; 2013, the Plantation of Ulster, 400 years; 2013, the Dublin Lockout, 100 years; 2016, Easter Rising, 100 years; 2016, Battle of the Somme, 100 years; 2017, Belfast Strike and the rise of the labour movement, 100 years; 2017 / 18, Lloyd George’s Convention, 100 years; 2018, universal male and limited women’s suffrage, 100 years; 2018, general election, 100 years; 2019 / 21, War of Independence, 100 years; 2021, Government of Ireland Act, 100 years; 2022, Civil War and Partition, 100 years.
2. In the South, the Oireachtas Committee (chaired by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan) is managing the National Commemorations Programme, in consultation with an Advisory Committee of historians
3. John Green, ‘Decade of centenaries must respect all factions’, the Irish Times (27 December)
4. Rosita Boland ‘Caution against ‘glory’ commemorations as centenary of crucial decade beckons’, the Irish Times (25 June 2012)
5. John Gibney ‘Yes, centenaries are tourism gold but let’s not forget our past for a quick buck’, journal. ie (29 January 2012)
6. *Remembering the Future: A Decade of Anniversaries*, discussion paper, the Community Relations Council (September 2011)
7. The Limerick Soviet – also known as the Limerick General Strike (1919) grew out of a workers solidarity movement. A self-declared, self-governing soviet was formed, which took control of the city for 12 days, internally organising food distribution and printing its own money
8. Informed by email correspondence with Anthony Haughey, January 2013
9. *Ibid*
10. Information obtained from NCFEA website and email correspondence with Valerie Connor (Chairperson NCFEA) January 2013
11. ‘Object Matters: Making 1916’ (26 / 27 April 2013) Wood Quay, Civic Offices, Dublin, supported by GradCAM, the NCAD, UCD and Dublin City Council