

Exhibitions

Momentous Times

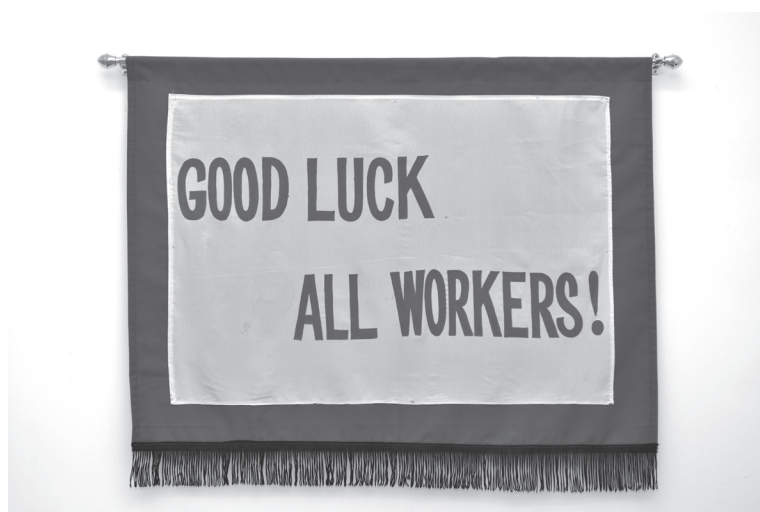
CCA Derry 26 August to 2 November

Bringing together a range of aesthetic and dialogical practices, 'Momentous Times' seeks to examine the relationship between art and the shifting forms and conditions of labour. The curatorial vision for the exhibition does not gloss over the complexity of this relationship; rather it provides multiple points of access, employing useful categorisations of artworks across historic, present-day, futuristic and abstract spectra. As a result, the depth of the enquiry is far-reaching and the exhibition – which is supplemented by two forums, three screenings and a publication – evokes reflection on a broad 'labourisation' of culture as it is represented in contemporary art.

This year marks the centenary of the 1913 Dublin Lockout: Ireland's most prolonged and significant industrial dispute to date, when 20,000 workers cited the right to unionise as

Aideen Doran
*Good Luck All
Workers* 2013

Melanie Gilligan
Popular Unrest 2010



their central concern. An in-depth, nationwide, labour-themed exhibition programme has been devised across six gallery platforms in Dublin, Belfast, Limerick and Derry, utilising the centenary as a timely moment to consider not just historical legacies but the present-day, globalised interplays of labour and capital in post-bailout Ireland and beyond. This exhibition takes its title from a speech given by trade union leader Jim Larkin in 1914 acknowledging the achievements of the Lockout strikers in 'raising the Irish working class from their knees', opening with the words, 'Comrades – We are living in momentous times.'

Taking a longer view of history, several artworks in the exhibition trace the evolution of labour under empires which have come and gone. Within Olivia Plender's playful installation *Words & Laws*, 2012, a sequence of illustrative works contrasts the grandeur of stately homes possessed by ruling classes with the sparse means and produce associated with peasant life. An image of a lion, crown and unicorn references the British coat of arms while also triggering associations with Orwell's vision for a specifically English form of socialism, liberated from empire and an outdated class system. These elements hang in a mobile formation across the windows of the gallery, floating like clouds above a plan of a Victorian walled garden adorning the floor below. Notions of fairy tales (which temper society's hidden dangers) and folktales (which evolve in their passing from one generation to the next, accruing cultural changes) further pervade an ethnographic reading of Plender's multifaceted work. An evolving acknowledgement of childhood during the Enlightenment period is embodied in a pile of children's wooden building blocks, which also provides a physical metaphor for the cycle of demolition and reconstruction upon which empires are built.

No less complex in its research and production, *Ultimate Substance*, 2012, by Anja Kirschner & David Panos comprises a single-channel video projected on to a screen supported by a large-scale geometric sculpture. Shot in the Numismatic Museum in Athens and the ancient mining district of Lavreotiki (which produced the silver for the introduction of coinage in ancient Greece), the film fluctuates between the two locations, conjuring tension between different cinematic modes. A dark, fictive, subterranean drama unfolds, depicting naked, toiling bodies enslaved in their molten surrounds, eating fruit – sensuously, almost decadently – around a meagre fire with dirty hands. A harrowing, repetitive audio punctuates these scenes with each thud of stone against stone. In contrast, above ground, cool documentary-style footage relays the interior of the contemporary museum as school children consider the role of historians in preserving and disseminating history. The film is interspersed with computer-generated geometric diagrams, allowing a correlation with the sculptural work in the room while also referencing the Pythagorean legacy of geometry, among the many contributions of ancient Greece to modernity.

The first of the three programmed screenings for 'Momentous Times' was Harun Farocki's mesmerising film *Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1995 – referencing the Lumière Brothers' pioneering film of 1895 – which uses the factory gates as a semblance-point for an analysis of the evolution of the moving image. A screening later this month of Megs Morley and Tom Flanagan's film *The Question of Ireland*, 2013, promises to further extend this alignment of labour history with cinematic narratives, enacted through cross-disciplinary accounts of the relevance of Marxism for contemporary Ireland.

Examining the conditions of the present-day worker, Marianne Flotron's multi-channel film *WORK*, 2011, depicts a therapeutic intervention in a Dutch corporate setting. Using techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed and guided by its director, participants search their souls, uncovering their true feelings about their living and working conditions. The resulting sections of footage are presented across four screens installed in a room isolated from the main gallery space. Following a residency in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Aileen Doran is currently devising ways to synthesise her experience. Her photographic and text-based contributions to the exhibition's publication focus on the poverty and inequalities of workers in the region's garment factories, outlining the precarity of globalised labour. Doran's new works have gathered momentum, combining digital stills, audio and dual-language textile banners which locate a more hopeful pop-optimism in the relentlessly industrious process.

Toril Johannessen's *Words and Years*, 2010, employs capital's hard-edged data aesthetic to meticulously map the fluctuating use of key words such as 'hope' and 'reality' across a range of journals and publications since the late 1800s. Similarly, Hito Steyerl's *Red Alert*, 2007, deconstructs codified vocabularies and reproducibility in an era of global terror. With a future-orientated trajectory and a strong theoretical grounding in Marxist critique, Colin Darke's *The Year of the Revolution – Remove as Appropriate (or hand over to the barbarians)*, 2011, consists of 200 copies of Rosa Luxemburg's book *The Accumulation of Capital* published in 1913. Viewed in multiplicity, the collective books become abstract, which, on a sculptural level, has infinite appeal.

Presenting at the first of two scheduled seminars, Shuddhabrata Sengupta of Raqs Media Collective spoke pensively about 'time' as an omnipresent power and driving force of labour, which served to situate the group's practice across spatial and temporal dimensions. Raqs Media Collective's *The First Telegram from the Last International*, 2013, is a time capsule interred within the gallery's disused fireplace, to be opened on 26 August, 2113 – exactly 200 years since the start of the Dublin Lockout. This act of 'putting away a box of time' warranted some reflection on assembly-line production targets, 'time theft' as a corporate crime and the erosion of distinctions between work and leisure through technological commodification, while also functioning to reaffirm the very purpose of this exhibition.

In marking history, the process of commemoration aims to understand why something is worth celebrating and to 'seize the time to make it memorable'. Occurring at a point of convergence between disparate histories, the timeliness of this exhibition also indicates an acute awareness of context. Providing a temporary 'distraction' from a troubled militant past, and the effects of mass unemployment felt in the region since the decline of manufacturing industries, the UK City of Culture 2013 programme proclaims 'A New Story for Derry-Londonderry'. As a counter to such slogan-orientated, authoritative claims, 'Momentous Times' suggests conversely that 'there are no clear answers on how to proceed'. In responding to the Lockout centenary, this exhibition, along with concurrent programmes in other venues north and south of the border, reactivates a focused discussion on the inherent themes of labour for a contemporary audience. Once subjects reserved for the political left, the forms and conditions of labour (like political corruption and the state of the banks) have become mainstream conversation points. With precarity defining a post-industrial western workforce under

a macroeconomic jobless growth strategy, and mass protests by industrial workers in Asia and the Middle East highlighting the dubious role of western multinationals in these scenarios, it is hard to identify a set of issues more pertinent or worthy of exploration and representation in the visual arts. ■

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Continental Drift – Conceptual Art in Canada: The 1960s and 70s Part II

Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe 28 June to 8 September

'Continental Drift' reviews a significant body of Conceptual Art produced by over a hundred artists who were making work in Canada from roughly the mid 1960s through the end of the 1970s. Canadian nationals, émigrés and visitors to the country are all accounted for in this large show, which raises the question why, given such a plethora of work, it has been so overlooked, especially considering the number of revisions of Conceptual Art in exhibition-making since the early 1990s. While the US and western Europe have usually been the focus of its development, with New York around 1967 seen as its nucleus, this show demonstrates how Conceptual Art simultaneously flourished in localised forms up and down regions of Canada, distinguishing its own take on the then burgeoning art practice.

Yet operating from the periphery is precisely fitting with Badischer Kunstverein's ongoing recovery of forgotten art histories. It also has an uncanny knack for making museum-grade shows; one could imagine an exhibition of this magnitude on an even larger scale. However, it is testament to the ability of this regional kunstverein to perform a task usually assigned to major institutions. This isn't purely David taking on Goliath though; the relationship between the centre and the margins correlates with an aspect of Conceptual Art that attempted to decentralise art from the capitals. So it is only appropriate that this work finds a European host on the outskirts too.

No doubt due to the sheer amount of work collected, the exhibition was divided and shown in two consecutive parts, and arranged thematically rather than, as in previous incarnations in Canada, being divided geographically. Part two, which was installed when I visited, was split into sections – Language, Site,

Carole Condé and
Karl Beveridge
...It's Still Privileged Art
1976 artists' book cover



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