

SEMINAR

From the Margins of History

JOANNE LAWS REPORTS ON 'RADICAL ACTIONS', HELD AT KING HOUSE, BOYLE ON 2 DECEMBER 2016.



Jesse Jones, *The Other North*, 2013; -Kennedy Browne, *Ireland is Good for You*, 2014; 'Radical Actions', RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, September 2016

'**RADICAL** Actions' was an ambitious, three-part international project curated by Linda Shevlin, curator-in-residence at Roscommon Arts Centre. The first phase was an exhibition in RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, in September 2016, that formed part of Culture Ireland's commemorative programme 'I Am Ireland', aimed at highlighting the centrality of the arts to the evolution of Irish identity over the hundred years since the 1916 Rising. The exhibition featured the work of Duncan Campbell, Jesse Jones, Seamus Nolan and the collaborative duo Kennedy Browne – Irish artists perceived as identifying with the "politics of social agitation, revolution and rebellion" by engaging with non-idealised versions of Ireland's past.

The second phase of the project was an exhibition by Duncan Campbell at Roscommon Arts Centre, which ran from November 2016 to January 2017. Campbell's film *Bernadette* (2008) focuses on female Irish dissident and social activist Bernadette Devlin and subverts the conventions of traditional documentary filmmaking by combining archival material with modern footage. The final strand of 'Radical Actions' was a day-long seminar to coincide with Campbell's exhibition. Many of the artists involved in the Melbourne show discussed their work, alongside contributions from photojournalist Paula Geraghty and filmmaker Treasa O'Brien. These important practitioners share a desire to excavate previously marginalised or non-idealised versions of history in order to somehow oppose or disrupt prevailing narratives.

THE BI-WAYS OF MATERIAL HISTORY

A fascinating introductory presentation, 'Screen Memories: Popular Imagery and the Rising', was delivered by Luke Gibbons, Professor of Irish Literary and Cultural Studies at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Gibbons is a native of Keadue, County Roscommon, and it was therefore extremely fitting for him to present a material history of the 1916 Rising through a 'Roscommon lens'. Key figures and micro-histories of the Rising were traced back to Roscommon through the shrewd assemblage of cultural and anecdotal references. This approach was welcomed by the audience – which comprised artists as well as locals with interest in regional history – whom Gibbons eagerly consulted on various details throughout the session.

Gibbons set out a number of careful distinctions, the first being that while traditional historians deal strictly with fact, artistic or literary historians focus mainly on perceptions. He went on to make further distinctions between history and the scholarly field of Material History, which examines the conditions upon which the social world is ordered. From fashion and technology to literature and film, Material History takes account of the various cultural influences that add texture to our understandings of the past. He describes it as an examination of the meandering 'bi-ways', as opposed to the linear 'highways', of history.

This divergent approach is embodied through the examination of the margins and corners of historical newspapers. Juxtaposed alongside reports of the Rising, Gibbons found advertisements for theatrical

productions and comedy shows, as well as cinema screenings in Dublin's new suburban picture-houses, which collectively elucidated the 'social life' of the city. A new world of mass media had permeated popular culture, making household names of various film stars. Adverts for Charlie Chaplin impersonation competitions amused the audience, as did a newspaper cartoon from 1915 which mockingly depicted Irish nationalist politician John Redmond as Chaplin. Mildred Harris, Chaplin's first wife, also loomed large in the public imagination at this time. Her films were regularly screened in Boyle, courtesy of the west of Ireland mobile cinema, set up by Ballaghaderreen-born Frank Shouldice, a sniper during the Rising who was imprisoned in the UK following the War of Independence.

BLOOD SACRIFICE

As described by Gibbons, sectarianism and Catholicism took centre stage during the Rising, along with notions of 'blood sacrifice', a term long-associated with Greek and Roman empires that was popularised by Wolfe Tone, leader of the 1798 Irish Rebellion, who had been influenced by the French Revolution. This idea reshaped our conceptions of the Easter Rising, framing the executed leaders as heroic martyrs. The radical socialist Paris Commune of 1871 also reportedly had a profound influence, most notably on James Connolly, who deployed a range of guerrilla tactics synonymous with urban warfare, including using street barricades and tunnelling escape routes through private houses. The links between theatre, literature, poetry and rebellion were carefully illustrated by Gibbons, who suggested that the influence of Dickens on Pearse's family may have explained the mix of archaic and modern in Pearse's later writings. Joyce's writings seemingly gave hope during the rebellion, with Ernie O'Malley – writer, devotee of the arts and leader of the IRA – rumoured to have studied Joyce for "a way out of the dark".

According to Gibbons, Boyle has a 'speaking part' both in the history and internationalism of the Rising. Margaret (Gretta) Cousins (nee. Gillespie) was a feminist and activist from Boyle who actively campaigned for women's suffrage, co-founding the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908. Not only did the suffragettes introduce hunger striking – the ultimate weapon of twentieth century Irish warfare that would taunt successive governments – but the Irish Women's Franchise League also revived usage of the Irish tricolour, which Connolly symbolically unfurled above several Dublin buildings. In 1915 Cousins moved to Madras (now Chennai), India, and founded the Women's Indian Association. She was a natural egalitarian and traced her militancy to her upbringing in Boyle. Gibbons suggested that Cousins worked tirelessly to relay the Irish experience during the Chittagong Uprising (1930–34), which is believed to have been inspired by the Irish Rising.

THE EVOLUTION OF PROTEST

After Gibbons's illuminating presentation, the audience convened upstairs for a screening of *Eat Your Children*, a 2015 film by Treasa

O'Brien and Mary Jane O'Leary that documents the evolution of protest in modern Ireland. It was most interesting that audience members – many of whom might not have typically attended an art event like this – seemed to feel somewhat invested in the day's proceedings, following Gibbons's generous interactions, and most of them stayed for the afternoon. As many multi-purpose Celtic Tiger art centres nationwide struggle to maintain committed arts audiences, such astute programming has the capacity to address local, national and global concerns in ways that are not mutually exclusive.

The title *Eat Your Children* came from Jonathan Swift's controversial 1729 essay *A Modest Proposal*, wherein Swift satirised British foreign policy by suggesting that "the impoverished Irish should eat their children". With Ireland's colonial history providing a stinging undercurrent to the economic hardship of recent years, the film relays the journey of two friends who set out to uncover the extent of Ireland's acceptance of government-imposed austerity and a crippling national debt.

In the first few scenes, media footage from 2008 onwards conveys the extent of the country's crisis, yet there is little evidence that resistance of any sort is taking place. Turning to the past for answers, the filmmakers emphasise Ireland's long and rich history of rebellion, from the Land League in the 1870s, to the mobilisation of labour during the 1913 Dublin Lockout. They argue that a degree of fatalism began to accrue around protest in Ireland after the late 1960s and the violent state repression of Bloody Sunday. The Social Partnership agreement of the late 80s enforced strike and wage moderation, further eroding workplace solidarity.

Overall the film felt like an important historical record, documenting a period of powerlessness and indecision that was swiftly followed by direct action. In the closing scenes, momentum is beginning to gather around the water protests of 2014, when the sense of betrayal and anger felt by the Irish people spilled out onto city streets. Speaking afterwards in a panel discussion with photojournalist Paula Geraghty and filmmaker Johnny Gogan, O'Brien quoted political theorist Chantal Mouffe in describing art and activism as "agonistic companions" – a timely sentiment as art increasingly inhabits the vocabulary, discourse and domain of protest.

O'Brien also highlighted the inadequacies of state media in reporting working class resistance – a situation that also prompted Paula Geraghty to take action. In 2009 she established Trade Union TV as a platform to "disprove the narrative that nothing is happening". Capitalising on liberating technological developments, Trade Union TV disseminated short films via YouTube to demonstrate the widespread anger, isolation and depression being felt across the country on issues such as direct provision, water ownership and fracking. Geraghty identified the Marriage Equality referendum of 2015 as a pivotal moment in which the public asked themselves: "What sort of society we want to live in? Are we citizens or consumers?" In that moment, the 'Ladybird' version of Irish history was irretrievably disrupted, along with the false belief that we, as citizens, are powerless.

The closing panel discussion, 'The Artist as Activist', was chaired by Wexford Arts Officer Liz Burns. Sarah Browne and Gareth Kennedy briefly discussed *The Special Relationship* (2013), which examines Ireland's neutrality in light of the use of Shannon Airport by US military aircrafts. The duo amassed dozens of images found online of these planes landing in Shannon between 2001 and 2013, roughly coinciding with US conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. What might otherwise be considered 'digital debris', now constitutes a potent civic archive. Jesse Jones discussed her film *The Other North* (2013), which was co-commissioned by CCA Derry and Artsonje Center, Seoul, South Korea. Following a trip to the Korean Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) – a bio-diverse, uninhabited border region between North and South Korea – Jones began to reflect on the 'psychic partition' of her own country. *The Other North* dramatically recounts turbulent histories of Northern Ireland, conveying the exhausting fragility of conflict resolution. Seamus Nolan's 'The 10th President' was a political campaign to commemorate victims of institutional abuse. Nolan proposed that William Delaney, a 13-year-old boy who died in state care, be made President of Ireland for one day. The artist felt it was important for the public to actively reflect on their own relation with this recently-acknowledged history. Nolan conceded that it may be optimistic to think that your voice can be effective; however, it is always important to try.

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