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### Curating, cultural capital and symbolic power: representations of Irish art in London, 1950-2010

Cotter, L.Á.

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## Introduction

We are currently in a time of transition from a relatively compact affiliated international art world to a global field of practice in the process of unification. This globalization of the art world manifests itself most visibly in the more than sixty biennials of contemporary art now operating worldwide, over forty of which have been established since 1980.<sup>1</sup> The far-flung locations involved and the mobility of participant artists and curators testify to the concrete reality of a global art world.<sup>2</sup> However, recent research points to the significant disjuncture between this image of the art world as a place which has been thoroughly globalized and the continued power of a select few geographic centres to steer the financial, conceptual and formal interests of art discourse. Larissa Buchholz and Ulf Wuggenig demonstrate for example that the sum of shares of artists from outside of Anglo-Saxon North American and Western European countries has never exceeded 11%, with only a 3% increase in 35 years of the “age of globalisation.”<sup>3</sup> Analyzing the identities of artists represented in today’s biennials vis-à-vis their places of residence, Chin-tao Wu concludes that the large majority of the global artists participating in today’s biennials furthermore live in New York and Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> How are we to consider this discrepancy?

Infrastructural developments can and have taken place relatively quickly in art circles worldwide following increases in economic capital and an expanded global art market. The existence of digital and new media art has alleviated many of artists’ previous logistical barriers to participation in the international art world. Moreover, e-technology has secured a steady flow of discursive and visual information, hampered only by poor and government-censored access in some locations, and more seriously by

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<sup>1</sup> “Did you know?” *All You Want to Know about International Art Biennials*. Consulted: July 2010. <<http://www.aaa.org.hk/onlineprojects/bitri/en/didyouknow.aspx>>

<sup>2</sup> For some further insight into the issue of globalization in the art world see, for example, Mercer et al (1998), Meyer (2003), Lee (2003) and Enwezor (2003a; 2003b).

<sup>3</sup> Buchholz and Wuggenig have used the Capital Kunstcompass, a digital system that maps the symbolic capital and economic worth of artists for market purposes, as a means of testing the relative agency of global artists in current and past discourse (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Wu notes for example that until recently over 90 per cent of the artists represented in Documenta were from Europe or North America. The first really significant change in figures occurred with Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 in 2002, when the proportion of Western artists fell to 60 per cent, a situation that continued in the 2007 edition. However, the proportion of those non-Western artists living in North America or in Europe was almost 100 per cent in 1982 and still remained at 76 per cent during Documenta 11 twenty years later. Wu divides Europe into East and West in her analyses, pointing out that the number of dominant countries in question is even smaller than it might appear. Buchholz and Wuggenig also single out London, Cologne, Paris and New York (2009).

language barriers. Yet the structural realities associated with cultural capital are more difficult to shift. A select few nations, rich with “great” art of the past, still have the authority to determine criteria for artistic quality in the present. These were the first to enter into artistic competition with the result that their national masterpieces came to form the basis of definitions of (great) art. This departure point lent the nations in question unevenly accumulated levels of cultural and symbolic capital that few other nations could ever compete with in the past or present.<sup>5</sup> That these were also the former colonizing nations both proliferated and deepened the authority of these artistic definitions globally, which were often taken to define culture as such.

Since the formation of national canons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nations have continued to measure themselves against one another and to establish hierarchies and relations of dependency; a situation which has created a complex and durable design (Casanova 2004: 83). The notion of modern art was based on this linear understanding of art history, which impeded the possibility of addressing the co-presence of heterogeneous histories and temporalities with the result that art from outside of the dominant art-producing centres was seen to have to catch up. Today, works from all over the world that wish to be accepted as contemporary are still expected to revolve around points of reference that are informed by (the most recent) debates in the dominant art centres. The implication is that artists from outside of these locations still have to catch up, despite the current existence of well-established centres of artistic and critical discourse production in nations all over the globe. Symbolic conflict over the aesthetic and conceptual paradigms of the global contemporary art world is thus foreclosed.

Cultural capital is held most obviously in an objectified form in art works, museum and library collections, as well as in its institutionalized form in the highly valued qualifications that prestigious universities and academies confer. Yet it also exists in an embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body, which are passed from one generation to the next. Because the social conditions for the

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<sup>5</sup> In *Distinction* Pierre Bourdieu, who coined the term symbolic capital, defines it as “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability that are easily converted into political positions as a local or national *notable*” (2006: 291). In an essay on the forms of capital, he describes symbolic capital as “capital – in whatever form – insofar as it is represented, i.e., apprehended symbolically, in a relationship of knowledge or, more precisely, of misrecognition and recognition” (1986: 258). It presupposes the intervention of a socially constituted cognitive capacity.

transmission and acquisition of embodied cultural capital are more difficult to recognize and pinpoint than those of objectified cultural capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital – that is, to go unrecognized as capital as such, but rather to be seen as individual competences (Bourdieu 1986: 244). Without foreclosing the existence of varying levels of artistic talent, attention to uneven levels of cultural capital points to the unequal value attributed to different artistic dispositions. It points to the *a priori* privileging of certain critical positions, media, and aesthetic approaches, and the devaluing of others.

People in positions of privilege typically acknowledge, legitimate and reproduce the common opinions of the dominant art centre as self-evident. This obscures from conscience and practice even the acknowledgment of other possible means of production. It is the power of this self-evidence, rather than the force of consciously undertaken acts of cultural exclusion, that forces artists who do not share these dispositions and values to choose between adopting discursive positions that relate disjunctively to their lived experience, or maintaining what appears to others to be an anachronistic approach or mindset. This prior demand for adaptation to certain cultural and artistic norms is most concretely visible in the overwhelming tendency for global artists who are active participants in mainstream art discourse to already reside in Europe or the U.S.

Curators play a central role in this process of value-making. They are among the most important time-keepers of the “universal artistic clock” which judges whether artists are behind or contemporary, and hence they provide my main focus (Casanova 2004: 103). Standard professional curatorial practice aims to ensure a positive critical reception of the work of the artists in question and (intentionally or not) to increase the market value of their work. In order to achieve this, curatorial framing often involves highlighting aspects of an art work or artist’s oeuvre that are appealing to current art discourse preferences and thus evidently contemporary. This in turn means a sidelining or overshadowing of aspects that are less appealing to the field in the dominant art producing centre and that can appear anachronistic. The visible relationship to dominant narratives can lay claim to more prestige and therefore career success for the artist and the curator, and often does. Yet, unwittingly, the side effects of the most professionally successful curatorial framing are often culturally hegemonic. What goes unsaid is that

the rhetoric speaking positions and references that are unappealing to the dominant centre often relate to artistic, cultural, social and political discourses and histories from outside of the dominant art producing centre, the value of which is not even considered. The foreclosure of other definitions of artistic interest severely undermines art's role as a "cultural container" (Smiers 2005: 11).

Curators have always been cultural brokers in this respect, but under present conditions their agency has greatly expanded. Burgeoning literature tells us that the role of curator has shifted from its prior meaning of "carer of the collection" – a task associated with connoisseurship, questions of authenticity and historical attribution – to a figure with almost as much agency as an artist in terms of generating the conditions of meaning for art works.<sup>6</sup> A clear division between the work of the artist and that of the curator has also become practically impossible in cases where curators plan projects together with artists and/or integrate artworks into the curatorial concept at the moment of their production. Moreover, the curator has largely usurped the previous symbolic position of the art critic as taste-maker. This partly takes place because of the unprecedented growth and acceleration of the pace of the art market, which means that art works are now exhibited and bought before they have even been written about. There is currently much debate over the relative agency of the curator and artist in the determination of art's content.<sup>7</sup> Yet the tacit symbolic contract of professional discretion means that the specific content of the small but significant moments of conflict and power struggle rarely comes to light.

All of this takes place against the background of the current expansion and professionalization of the curatorial field itself. Curators' own self-understandings are in a process of transformation. Not surprisingly perhaps, curatorial practice is now seeking its histories, philosophies and theorizations of its many outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Yet, due to the

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<sup>6</sup> For a general discussion of this changing position see Heinich and Pollak (1996). Harald Szeeman's exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) is seen as definitive in this respect. See Obrist (2009: 80-110) for an interview with Szeeman that outlines his curatorial career.

<sup>7</sup> See Verwoert (2005) for a discussion of the relative symbolic position of the artist vis-à-vis the curator from the 1960s to the present and Cooke (2008) for further insight into this debate. See also Arriola (2009/10) and O' Neill (2009/10) for discussion of collective and collaborative curating; currently emerging alternatives to traditional artist-curator relationships. See also Mouffe (2007) on art activism.

<sup>8</sup> A growing amount of literature and a recent spate of conferences attest to this emerging field of study. Recent publications include Drabble and Richter (1999), Beech and Wade (2000), Thomas (2000), Hiller and Martin (2001), Thea (2001), Marincola (2001, 2008), Pinggen (2003), Townsend (2003), Möntmann (2005), O' Neill (2007), Rand and Kouris (2007), Altshuler (2008, 2009), Obrist (2009) and O'Neill and Wilson (2010). Staniszewski (2001) and Noordegraaf (2004) focus on the issue of curatorial display

globalization of the art market and the rise in importance of the independent curator, it has become the norm to address curating in isolation from the particularities of situated art histories and socio-cultural discourses or what I call its “locatedness.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, curatorial history as it is currently being written revolves around a relatively small number of exhibitions that took place in Western Europe and the U.S. after 1960 along highly specific lines of artistic thinking. This unhinges curatorial discourse from an important problematic being discussed in the discipline of art history right now – namely how to move from a discursive structure based on national art histories to a globalized art history or discourse and how to do so vis-à-vis the entrenched dislocated “Story of Art.”<sup>10</sup>

The rejection of locatedness in curatorial discourse is related to a general consensus that explicitly representational curating – curation that takes artists to be representative of particular national or cultural origins – is passé. This attitude reflects confidence in the fact that artists worldwide share the language of art that has been proliferated through global biennial curating. It is also a response to the after-effects of identity politics discourses of the 1980s and 1990s which, while opening the way for greater inclusion of global artists, also showed explicitly representational curating to be essentializing and offensive. As I see it, the central issue in the present is no longer the inclusion of global artists in the cultural field, as it was in identity politics discourse, but rather how the value of cultural production is defined and determined and in whose interest. I want to ask if there is space to work against these professional norms and the culturally hegemonic force of Value as defined by the Western canon that inform them, in order to enable more symbolic conflict over the definition of artistic quality itself. It

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specifically. Recent conferences in London alone have included *Landmark Exhibitions: Contemporary Art Shows Since 1968* held at Tate Modern, from 10-11 October 2008; *Exhibitions and the World at Large*, April 3 2009, *Art and the Social: Exhibitions of Contemporary Art in the 1990s*, 30 April 2010 and *The Contingency of Curating*, on May 21 2010, all held at Tate Britain.

<sup>9</sup> Biennial curators have increasingly developed their narratives to reflect a greater sense of site-specificity. There is however a limit to the locatedness of discourse that is acceptable. Take for example the 2002 Shanghai Biennial, which, despite its stated curatorial focus on urban developments in China and their consequences for society, was criticized internationally for its dominant focus on Chinese artists, who made up almost half of those represented. Instead, most Biennials pride themselves on their cultural diversity – the number of artists and the range of countries they come from. See also *Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art*, a book of essays that address the question of whether contemporary artists are in a position to resist incorporation in corporate and political discourses (Harris 2008). See Oguibe (2004) for a specific analysis of African artists vis-à-vis the system of the art market. See Smiers (2003) for analysis of the protection of cultural diversity in the arts in a globalizing time.

<sup>10</sup> See Elkins (2006) and Zijlmans (2007) for examples of this discourse.

goes without saying that there can be no return to the identity politics discourse in the present. Let me briefly recall its shortcomings before considering what kind of alternatives might overcome them. In addition I will address the ways in which globalization and the merging of the cultural and economic sectors have shifted the stakes of identity discourse in the present.

Most detrimentally, by suspending the necessarily tenuous situatedness of individual artists and the possibilities of negotiation and play in identity formation to foreground the social urgency of global artists' inclusion, the curators behind the identity-driven exhibitions of the 1980s and '90s often sacrificed the resonance of much of the art work on view.<sup>11</sup> The aesthetic and conceptual content of works was overshadowed by the all-too-heavy burden of "representing" identity, with artistic representation and political representation conflated into one. This meant, among other things, that identity politics seemed to be of political concern alone. It seemed to provide little in terms of aesthetic interest for mainstream art. Furthermore, it soon became evident that a seamless relationship between the represented and the (curatorial) representation was impossible. This emerged in practical terms through the negative reception of explicitly representational exhibitions and in theoretical terms through the work of poststructuralist authors.

As we know, the outcome of identity politics discourse in the art world was often a politically correct quantification of fixed identities. There is no doubt that there was subsequently a greater level of inclusion of artists from outside of Europe and the U.S. in international art discourse. Yet I have suggested that the impact on the agency of those artists to co-define the terms of art discourse was far less substantial. Identity politics discourse rather entrenched an existing polarization of positionalities within art discourse, with art works from outside the North American/Western European axis seen as located (and inherently political) and those within the axis assumed to be culturally neutral (and apolitical). This conception persists today in the construct of "cultural diversity," in which certain national cultures continue to be the unspoken measure of cultural neutrality against which cultural otherness is defined.<sup>12</sup> This binarity has been

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<sup>11</sup> In my formulation I draw on Charles Wright's review of the 1993 edition of the Whitney Biennial, a central object of analysis in identity politics critique of curation (2004).

<sup>12</sup> The framing of the politics of culture as a question of cultural diversity becomes more problematic in light of philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek's observation of the concomitant culturalisation of politics as the ideological basis of neoliberalism. He points to the current tendency to frame social and

upheld in recent curatorial conferences, which address questions of location or identity as if they are only relevant to non-Western nations.<sup>13</sup> Nations are clearly not the only cultural container. Yet their centrality to processes of canonization, and thus to the accumulation and maintenance of cultural and symbolic capital, makes the recent denigration of the national referent in contemporary art discourse problematic.

Crucially, identity politics discourse neglected to address the identity of institutions. Without the wider situating of identity issues within the institution of art itself, and curatorial discourse in particular, the emphasis fell all too heavily on the identity of individual artists and curators. In the absence of an articulated notion of curatorial ideology as larger than, if dependent on, the individual curator, critiques of exhibitions like *Magiciens de la Terre*, held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Musée National d'art Moderne, La Villette in Paris in 1989 and the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* in New York often transmuted into an attack on the prejudices of the individual curator. The hegemonic drive of the norms of curating was largely unaddressed. Individual artists were left to solve the unresolved discourse on an individual level, while curators shifted their focus to developing a plethora of curatorial forms to respond to new artistic developments, many of which can barely be distinguished from the curatorial models associated with them.<sup>14</sup>

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political problems as a question of cultural tolerance, rather than problems of inequality, exploitation or injustice. They are presented as something natural and thus neutralized as cultural difference or ways of life. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, he suggests that this situation calls for a politicization of culture (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Let us consider for example how, for example, in *Rotterdam Dialogues: The Curators* symposium on held at the Witte de With art centre in Rotterdam, The Netherlands on March 6 2009, the panel addressing locatedness was made up exclusively of curators from outside of Western Europe, in great contrast to the panels on curating in general. There is also a persisting tendency to only address identity issues in relation to exhibitions that directly address identity as if it was irrelevant to other kinds of art. Consider for example how at *Exhibitions and the World at Large*, a conference hosted by *Afterall* at Tate Britain, London on Friday 03 April 2009, the case studies were two identity politics exhibitions held in London in the 1990s, despite the interim globalization of the art world.

<sup>14</sup> Artist Jeff Wall offers a summary of these new art forms that suggests their open-ended structures. He describes them as “events containing events, platforms inducing event-structures – tentative, yet spectacular models of new social forms, rooted in community action, ephemeral forms of labour, critical urbanism, deconstructivist tourism, theatricalized institutional critique, anarchic interactive media games, radical pedagogies, strategies of wellness, hobbies and therapies, rusticated technologies of shelter, theatres of memory, populist historiographies, and a thousand other ‘stations,’ ‘sites,’ and ‘plateaus’” (2006: 25). Many of these art forms developed out of an artistic focus on social relations rather than objecthood. In the late 1990s curator Nicholas Bourriaud coined the term “relational aesthetics” to describe this development. See Bourriaud (2002).

While the diversification of contemporary curatorial practice appears to undermine curation's relative autonomy, this fluidity also sustains its agency under current cultural conditions. The ways in which these new forms of curatorial practice relate to staple forms of exhibition-making is complexly informed by changing structures of cultural activity and social viewing codes. Yet the art world does not jump from one system to another in such a way that the possibility of a new system coincides with the impossibility of the former system. Rather, all forms of artistic expression depend on historically constituted systems of possibilities that determine forms of visibility or criteria of evaluation (Rancière 2009a: 50). So too, the field of possibilities for new curatorial forms is informed by the norms and values of traditional curating. Before we can come to terms with the current curatorial moment, it thus seems important to identify the methodological and philosophical paths by which curating reached its present status quo. What kind of disciplinary premises informed these developments? How have they affected the establishment and administration of the meanings of art?

Rather than addressing exhibitions as isolated curatorial acts, I wish to articulate a long-term vision of how the internal dynamics and values of the norms of professional curation interweave, problematise and fundamentally clash with art's complex imbrication in the cultural and political functions of representation. I will do so in relation to the representation of art associated with one nation in one location in order to make visible how the underlying drive towards prestige demands the reproduction of certain discourses. I will show how the re-articulation and transformations of those discourses are related to wider cultural, social and political shifts, and with them, renegotiations of sources of value (both critical and economic). My aim is to demonstrate the relevance of creating alternative curatorial strategies to enable a redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital and to sketch out some initial ideas in this direction.

The case study in question is the representation of Irish art in London. As a European country and a former British colony, Ireland provides a unique perspective from which to question the binary axiology that underpins identity politics and cultural diversity discourses. It is precisely in its holding of multiple levels of subordination and dominance that Ireland prompts a more complex approach to colonialism and to the

binary understanding of power and otherness that underpin art discourse. Edward Said was among the first to consider the potential of Ireland's position in this respect. His discussion of Irish literature within a postcolonial framework in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) led to worldwide scholarly engagement.<sup>15</sup> His lecture, "Yeats and Decolonization," published as a pamphlet by Field Day Theatre Company in Ireland in 1988, was a particularly important catalyst for domestic post-colonial study of Irish literature.

The proposition that Ireland's position productively challenges the binary thinking underpinning postcolonial theory has yet to be fully explored in relation to art discourse.<sup>16</sup> The Irish art world's cultural and symbolic capital is drawn explicitly from the international, and not national, affiliations of Irish artists, historically and at present. Curating an exhibition at the Turku Art Museum in Finland in 2002, Maija Koskinen noticed that the working title "Irish Contemporary Art" aroused contradictory or even defensive reactions in some of the artists. This ambivalent sense of identification hints at Ireland's contradictory cultural dispositions, which I associate with postcolonial cultural conditions. I can count myself among those who had no awareness of the influence of these dynamics on my former practice as an artist. It was only with the distance afforded by emigration to mainland Europe that I could start to examine my own ambivalences regarding Irish identity and the very notion of Irish art. It was in fact in the course of research on the European and American reception of Japanese art that I started to consider what Ireland's position might mean for art discourse.

The notion that Ireland is a former colony remains controversial and, on an academic level, is actively opposed by revisionist historians. The most outspoken contestations include the nation's geographic location in Europe which, by extension, means active participation in Western market capitalism and a predominantly white population. There is further debate surrounding the criteria for defining colonial status, given that British rule of Ireland changed constitutionally from direct British control in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to granting Ireland its own parliament in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to acquiring so-called equal status following the Act of Union of 1801. Postcolonial

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<sup>15</sup> See also his afterword for a more recent anthology of writings on Irish postcolonial discourse (2003).

<sup>16</sup> Most writers addressing art from this position work in Irish Studies departments focusing on literature. They include David Lloyd, Luke Gibbons and Colin Graham, literary postcolonial scholars whose work I will draw on in the course of my study.

scholars point rather to a cosmetic parity of esteem which masked the ongoing subjugation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ireland's historic role as colony was nevertheless complicated by its complicity at different levels of operation.<sup>17</sup> Following the division of the island of Ireland into an independent Republic of Ireland and the British-ruled territory of Northern Ireland in 1921, debates surrounding colonialism and conflicts over the status of Northern Ireland became inseparable. To assert that Ireland is a former colony is to question, if not reject, the legitimacy of British government in Northern Ireland.

The exhibitions I look at take place against a backdrop of these transforming Irish-British relations. This relationship was at its most volatile in recent history during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which, starting in the late 1960s, consisted of about thirty years of violent acts between the (mostly Catholic) nationalist community who wanted to reunite with the Republic of Ireland and the (mostly Protestant) unionist community who wanted to remain part of Britain. This violence was carried out by the armed campaigns of paramilitary groups, including the republican Provisional I.R.A. (Irish Republican Army) and the unionist Ulster Volunteer force as well as the British army and police. The Troubles were brought to an official end by a peace process which resulted in the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998.<sup>18</sup> In 2005, the Provisional I.R.A. declared an end to its campaign. In 2007 a devolved government returned to Northern Ireland led by unionist and nationalist parties.

Received national art historical models may not prepare us mentally or culturally for the current situation but they still determine the way we respond to it.<sup>19</sup> It seems to me that a much more complex conception of the nation “as an intersection of social, economic and political relations, rather than a bounded geographic location” is necessary if the uneven positions of nations and cultures in today's art discourse are to be understood and challenged (Doherty 2007: 103). As Chantal Mouffe has proposed:

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<sup>17</sup> For a summary of general debates surrounding Irish postcolonial status and the nation's complicity with British politics, see Cleary (2003) and Flannery (2005). For a deeper analysis of colonial status vis-à-vis economics, culture and politics in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, see McDonough (2005). For revisionist contestations of Irish postcoloniality see Foster (2001) and Kenny and Louis (2004).

<sup>18</sup> This reiterated the long-held British position, never before fully acknowledged by Irish governments, that Northern Ireland will remain within the United Kingdom until a majority votes otherwise. The British Government agreed for the first time that the people of the island of Ireland as a whole have the right to solve the issues between North and South by mutual consent, without any outside interference.

<sup>19</sup> I paraphrase Griselda Pollock from an observation made at the National Identity and Visual Culture conference, held at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam on June 10-11 2010.

It is only when we discard the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself, and discard as well the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions, that we are in a position to theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination. A single individual can be the bearer of this multiplicity and be dominant in one relation while subordinated in another. (2006: 77)

Today, many curators are situated uncomfortably in between unambivalent identification with their position of power within the field and rejection of that power and identification with the dominated in society.<sup>20</sup> My focus on various forms of capital in the following chapters highlights ways in which British and Irish curators and artists simultaneously inhabit positions of power and non-power. We will see that it is often through their professionalism and sometimes through their investment in cultural diplomacy that the curators in question bring about hegemonic results.

While globalizing markets have meant that corporations have stripped nations of their traditional agency, state support of art remains central in many locations. Its form and function, however, is transforming.<sup>21</sup> There is a significant blurring of the terrain between state-funded art infrastructures and the commercial interests of private galleries. Individual artists are typically affiliated with commercial galleries in multiple locations, which indicates the extent to which national representations have vested private as well as public interests. The endeavours of commercial galleries are in turn increasingly supported by state funding, in response to the decreasing opportunities for state organizations to mount national pavilions at major biennials (Murphy 2007: 28). The larger friction between globalized markets and the symbolic order of culture creates a mish-mash referential field in which fixed (national) identity markers knock against globalized and transnational identity markers and national discourses underpin cultural discourse in erratic and uneven ways.<sup>22</sup> The nuances of identities and their associated values and histories are also flattened in the well-branded exhibition products produced by museums that have been forced to trade much of their traditional civil and

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<sup>20</sup> Andrea Fraser made this observation in a presentation given at the *Museum 21: Institution Idea Practice* conference, held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin on November 12-13 2008.

<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of the transition from state-led to corporate driven culture in general, and in relation to the U.S. and Britain in particular, see especially Wu (2003).

<sup>22</sup> This dynamic is part of a larger friction that arises between the sphere of production in late capitalism and the symbolic order of culture which still partially supports it, despite being simultaneously in contradiction to it. For an elaboration of this status quo from a Marxist perspective see Eagleton (1990: 374).

educational remit for commercial competitiveness.<sup>23</sup> We will see Irish artists develop a range of strategies to deal with this contradictory playing field.

In order to address the question of how the value of cultural production is defined and determined and in whose interest, the current situation requires a consideration of value as cultural, economic and political. Only on the basis of such an assessment can we bridge the gap between postcolonial discourse's emphasis on the cultural basis of history (which informed identity politics discourse) and globalization theory's highlighting of the cultural basis of the economic.<sup>24</sup> This forces us to think beyond the traditional divide between the Humanities and the social sciences. The notions of "cultural capital" and "symbolic capital," that are crucial to understanding the deep structural stasis within the art world, were coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). From my perspective, Bourdieu's wider theoretical concepts for conceiving the dynamics of the art world from a sociological perspective offer a suitable model for rethinking the art world in its present state. Crucially, they enable a reintegration and reconception of value in art discourse within the circuits of both cultural and economic capital.<sup>25</sup>

For Bourdieu each individual occupies a position in a multidimensional social space and is defined by the various forms of capital he or she bears. The individual in question articulates those forms differently depending on which relatively autonomous fields of life he or she is engaging with; each having its own specific complex of social relations.<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu observed that in the field of the art world, the accumulation of recognizable forms of cultural and symbolic capital (prestige) was central to an artist's chances of climbing the career ladder. He was critical of how individual success was

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<sup>23</sup> In *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, Andrea Witcomb traces the passage from education to market niches in the mission statements of the Australian National Maritime Museum as an example of this process. She notes how "the breaking down of the 'public' into a series of market niches was explained away as a more effective way to reach the public" (2003: 48).

<sup>24</sup> In my formulation I draw on Krishnaswamy (2002: 108) who suggests that postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak's work bridges this gap.

<sup>25</sup> See Beasley-Murray for an analysis of value in Bourdieu relative to economic understandings of value in contemporary discourse and historical Marxism (2000).

<sup>26</sup> In *The Field of Cultural Production* Bourdieu explains that "a field is a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy. The existence of a writer, as fact and as value, is inseparable from the existence of the literary field as an autonomous universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works. To understand Flaubert or Baudelaire, or any writer, major or minor, is first of all to understand what the status of writer consists of at the moment considered; that is, more precisely, the social conditions of the possibility of this social function, of this social personage" (2008: 162-3).

often addressed as if it was disconnected from these wider conditions for the production of discourse. In *The Rules of Art* he questioned the way the myth of the autonomous artist “directs the gaze towards the apparent producer and prevents us from asking who has created this ‘creator’” (1996: 167).<sup>27</sup> In its place, he developed a further series of terms – *habitus*, field and field of power – to articulate the dynamic relationship between artistic dispositions, art discourse and the politics of culture. In my analyses I will use these concepts to supplement notions like “identity” and “representation” which cannot fully cover the multi-layered operations at work.

Let me briefly elaborate on Bourdieu’s definition of the terms in question. The *habitus* is a set of dispositions, tendencies and inclinations that are the result of a person’s internalization of the logic of specific fields or social practices into which he or she is socialized:

The conditioning associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (1990: 53)

*Habitus* has a macrological texture in the sense that people with a shared cultural background are seen to embody many shared dispositions. Yet it is also socially differentiated according to one’s position in social space, as well as being informed by the micrological texture of a whole range of individual experience. This includes the influence of such factors as class background, regional origin and intersubjective relationships, as well as the impact of major moments of change in social environment, such as is brought about through emigration.

Artists are typically addressed in terms that conflate their role as professional practitioner with their subjectivity. The underlying notion that art is pure expression is foundational to art’s wider appreciation by the general public as well as its unique value on the art market. In terms of the understandings of the critical gatekeepers of the art

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<sup>27</sup> For an overview of how Bourdieu sees artists in relation to wider socio-cultural and political discourses, see especially Bourdieu’s essay “But Who Created the ‘Creators’?” (1995). See also Michael Grenfell and Cheryl Hardy’s *Art Rules: Pierre Bourdieu and the Visual Arts* (2007) for an introduction to Bourdieu’s work on visual art.

world, the definition of the professional artist is, rather, his or her engagement with existing art discourse. Bourdieu's conception of the relationship between *habitus* and what he calls *field* enables analysis of ways in which the art work is informed by the opinions, trends and tastes of the art world to which the artist belongs or aspires to belong. It starts to open up the complex relationship between where one comes from and how one makes art; the two meanings of representation that the term "identity," as it has been used in art discourse, conflates as synonymous. Emphasis on the *habitus*-field relationship allows a shift away from the assumed visibility of identity markers in art. It makes space to consider how values, norms and beliefs which are deeply woven into the social and cultural fabric manifest as narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception in art works. It helps to explain why an artist would feel under pressure to adapt his or her expression in keeping with the norms of an art world in a location other than his or her place of origin.

A shift in focus to the relative exchange rate of different national identities in terms of cultural and symbolic capital enables us furthermore to consider the play of identity in a transactional art world. I will look at artists' role in highlighting and underplaying aspects of their own identity construction in collaboration with the curator with a view to greater success in the field. We will see that artists' self-understandings in terms of their national identity affect their art production. Moreover, curators' understandings of an artist's identity will be seen to inform fundamental aspects of their representation of the work. I will demonstrate that, rather than being of ethical interest alone, challenging received readings of national identity can bring about very different understandings of artists' oeuvres.

Bourdieu stresses the complicity of the *field* with the *habitus* and we will see that judgements on what constitutes the interest of an art work are also informed by dominant social and political norms specific to the location of the field. To think through the relationship between the *habitus* and the *field* is effectively to re-locate the apparently culturally neutral art discourses of dominant centres of art production. This as a necessary step towards the redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital because the field itself operates within what Bourdieu refers to as a *field of power*, a range of mechanisms intended to accumulate and preserve differentiated but convertible forms of capital. This third element allows a consideration of the relationship between the

micropolitics of the art world and the wider macropolitical level. It makes space, among other things, for the political origins of the field, which may no longer be visible in the present. As Pascale Casanova highlights, the longer established the field, the less visible its political origins become (2004: 101). In fact the non-located speaking position inhabited by many contemporary artists from Europe and the U.S. is telling of the relative privilege and long establishment of their respective fields. In such privileged countries, the state maintains a dynamic relationship to the art world by securing its apparent autonomy. I will address this field of power at the national and inter-national level. Thanks to the long duration of my case study, we will observe shifts in the cultural and symbolic capital of Irishness and the relative value of Irish art as the nation goes through economic recession in the 1950s and 1980s and an economic boom in the 1990s, known as the Celtic Tiger economy.

The exhibitions I will examine in my case studies take place in museums and galleries over a period of sixty years. The histories of these exhibitions have yet to be written. Yet many of them are landmark exhibitions in the context of Irish art in the sense that they were pioneering in their specific critical framings. My approach will be to undertake a kind of “double reading” of their contents with a view to thinking the unthought within the curatorial framing. I will often read against the grain of the stated intentions of the curator in order to reveal the multiple readings pressing for attention within the narratives themselves. My aim is less to critique the specific curatorial acts than to find out what these deconstructions might mean for present and future curatorial interventions. I “lever open” the given curatorial discourses through the location of “blind spots” and consider how they might be overcome through the creation of new curatorial strategies.<sup>28</sup> I hope that in taking these exhibitions as departure points for rethinking the present, I also do justice to their respective inventiveness.

It seems to me that in shifting all too rapidly from the explicitly representational discourse of the 1990s to the anti-representational discourse of the 2000s, the creative and emancipatory possibilities that go with considering the possibility and nature of a truly post-representational discourse have been cut short. I will try to unravel and elaborate on some of those possibilities over the course of the next five chapters. More specifically, I will consider the curatorial relevance of postcolonial scholar Gayatri

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<sup>28</sup> I draw here on Simon Critchley’s description of deconstruction (2008: 3).

Spivak's observation of the need for ethical representational practices in the interests of postcolonial politics as well as a radical deconstruction of representation as such.<sup>29</sup>

Spivak has tried to bring about a convergence of postcolonial discourse theory, Marxist discourse and deconstruction by stressing parallels between their respective critiques, an approach that makes her observations an important tenet in my research. I hope that, by following in the tracks of representation's failures, I can open up a more nuanced ground for the articulation of the complexity of identities, and with it a wider range of political meanings and possibilities. I will propose the possibility of "inhabit[ing] the very cracks that open up between the promise of representation and its contingency" to develop post-representational representation (Laclau 2007: 87-88). Inspired by deconstruction, I will offer some tentative ideas for the further development of traditional exhibition forms.

My use of Bourdieu's work to come to such conclusions goes against some of his personal reservations about deconstruction. Nevertheless, in Bourdieu's critique of Jacques Derrida's reading of Kant in *The Truth of Painting* which appears in his seminal *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu found himself constrained to admit that Derrida raises many of the questions also implied in his own sociological reading, albeit in a very different stylistic register (Loesberg 1993: 1035).<sup>30</sup> While Bourdieu's work has previously inspired older debates over spontaneity and structure, I want to emphasize its compatibility with deconstruction, which puts these oppositions into question.<sup>31</sup> My juxtaposition of Bourdieu's concepts with postcolonial discourse analysis is also not standard practice, but it seems compatible with the wider

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<sup>29</sup> In an essay entitled "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," Spivak outlines the possibility for a poststructural approach to historiography and, by extension, a transformed enunciative position for the subject (2006: 270-304). See also Radhakrishnan (2008) for an analysis of the position of the subject in relation to postcolonial discourse, post-structuralism and Marxism. See also May (1995) for a discussion of the ethical need for representation and the relationship between this ethical demand and poststructuralist thought.

<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Johanne Angermüller points to the fact that in his analysis of Flaubert, the case study Bourdieu chooses to theorize the habitus, field, field of power interrelationship, he never speaks of reality but of "le réel (the real), or the effects of the real: "The real is the reality of the fictional that has recourse to concrete histories and singular events. Since the functioning of the 'effect of the real' depends on the meaning-generating structures of shared schemes of perception, the fictional representation of reality is ultimately linked by the common sense" (2001: 187). See also Loesberg (1997) and Angermüller (1998) for Bourdieu's work in relation to deconstruction.

<sup>31</sup> Poststructuralist theories of consciousness and language suggest that all forms of expression share a common distancing from oneself so that meaning can arise. This is not only meaning for others, but also the meaning of oneself to oneself. The self is thus always in production rather than forming a fixed ground. My formulation here draws on Spivak (2006: 292). See also Eaglestone and Glendinning (2008) for a consideration of Derrida's effect on philosophy from a number of perspectives.

parallels Spivak identifies between the critiques of postcolonial and poststructural thought.<sup>32</sup>

During the course of writing I had the opportunity to test the wider validity of Bourdieu's sociological conception of the art world through my co-curation of a two-year artistic research project, *Here as the Centre of the World* (2006-7), with Gabriëlle Schleijsen and Alite Thijsen.<sup>33</sup> Partly in response to the centralized steering of art discourse by a few select locations, we set out to engage with six cities worldwide as centres of art discourse production in their own right: Taipei, Damascus, Beirut, Khartoum, Diyarbakir and Enschede in the Netherlands. The project consisted mainly of a series of ten-day workshops involving site-specific collaborative artistic research as well as related programmes of panel discussions, lectures and debates on local artistic, social and cultural discourses. Through these means the complex relationships between *habitus*, field and field of power relationships were made palpable for the 75 participant artists, curators and partner institutions. Crucially, artists participated in their place of residence and at least one other location. This brought about an estrangement from their *habitus* and the taken-for-granted aspects of the discourse of their local field. It showed the existence of multiple competing paradigms for contemporary art; differences that could not be neatly packaged as cultural diversity because the collaborative art-making process forced negotiation.

*Here as the Centre of the World* has been an important parallel research to the studies I present here. It showed me the highly complex and differentiated ways that the state intervenes both directly and indirectly in holding open the field for art production. Working in Diyarbakir highlighted both the emancipatory aspects of nationhood and the epistemic violence that often underpins national sovereignty. Damascus showed me the fragility and potency of contemporary art as an agent of free speech. The global reach of the project might have tempted me to forego the geographic specificity of my main case study, but, if anything, the opposite was the case. I became increasingly aware of how the neglect of the interweavings of contemporary art discourse vis-à-vis art historical developments in each location stood in the way of deeper understandings of the complex relationship between culture, the field of art and the political regime. Moreover,

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<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of Bourdieu's thinking in relation to postcolonial discourse, see Puwar (2008).

<sup>33</sup> See Cotter, Schleijsen and Thijsen (2009). See also <http://www.dutchartinstitute.nl/here-as-the-centre-of-the-world/home.html>.

I saw more clearly that the locatedness of European art discourse specifically must be made conscious in order to break down the imaginary division between mainstream and other art.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière highlights that most of us still cling to a rather simple model of political efficacy when it comes to art. He compares this model to classical Greek understandings of theatre in which the stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum. The play's capacity to produce "ethical effects in the minds of the spectator" was taken for granted (2009b: 61). Yet, as Rancière acknowledges, so-called "political" or "critical" art has filled and thus obscured the gap left by the absence of a much more complex discourse on aesthetics and politics. My aim in this study is to work towards re-establishing some of the conditions of intelligibility of that gap in curatorial discourse in particular, and especially those surrounding the notion of identity.

In chapter one, I examine a retrospective exhibition of William Orpen (1878-1931), an artist whose life spanned the period before and after Irish Independence. Although the exhibition is held in London in 2005, it emerges that the issues addressed by identity politics remain unresolved. Rather than being merely a case of a culturally reductive reception however, a further analysis of the second staging of the exhibition in Dublin suggests that the exhibition narrative has been adapted in keeping with the artist's differing sources of critical and market value in each location. Yet both seem unable to fully address the complexity of Orpen's postcolonial identity. I examine how understandings of the artist's oeuvre become affected in the process of this curatorial framing and reframing. What appears to be a mere issue of national identity offers the means for an aesthetic reorientation of the retrospective as a whole.

In chapter two, I look more specifically at the relationship between curating, identity formation and the art market. I follow the early career trajectories of two Irish-born London-based artists, Louis Le Brocquy and Francis Bacon in the post-war period. I look at the interrelationship between the curatorial framing of their national identities, past and present, in Britain and Ireland. This chapter deconstructs the assumed naturalness of artists' assimilation in particular national canons and tracks a general curatorial bias towards the accumulated cultural capital of dominant nations. I question how much leeway there is in curatorial practice to go against the normative drive

towards the accumulation of prestige and sketch out possibilities for curatorial alternatives.

In chapter three, I examine whether nationally-framed exhibitions offer the potential for a redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital. My case study is *Without the Walls*, a group exhibition showcasing nine Irish artists working outside of traditional art forms. It was held at the I.C.A. in the spring of 1980 as one of three contemporary art exhibitions in the *A Sense of Ireland* festival, which I briefly compare. We see that each of the curators attempts to solve the problem of derivativeness that undermines the perceived value of postcolonial cultural production. However, they all come to an impasse of some sort with regard to creating alternative narrative productions of Irishness. I follow James Coleman's artistic strategies with a view to the solutions they might provide for this curatorial cul-de-sac; opening the way for post-representational curating.

In chapter four, I examine a comparative exhibition of Mexican, Chicano and Irish contemporary art, held in London in 1996 at the tail end of identity politics discourse. The artists are presented in terms of potential postcolonial commonalities. I re-examine the show from the unaddressed aspect of race. I reflect on the contingency of Irish whiteness due to the British framing of Irish as black in the nineteenth century, an issue which re-emerges around the time of the exhibition when definitions of Irish culture as white are confronted due to a sudden influx of immigrants during the Celtic Tiger economic boom. My analysis enables an examination of the often unspoken colour line that informs definitions of otherness in art. We will see that many of the contradictions of the racial construction of Irishness derive from the capacity of any one individual to be at once "inside and outside," "subject and object of racist discourse," a situation which poses the challenge of how to address multiplicity and contradiction in curatorial discourse (Lloyd 1991: 88).

In the first four chapters, it becomes evident that the symbolic power relation between individuals or institutions engenders the social conditions of the possibility of establishing (artistic) discourse. In chapter five, I specifically negotiate the interplay between the authority of the curator, social opinion and artists' own reflections on their practices and identities. My point of departure is an exhibition entitled *0044*, representing the work of Irish artists resident in London, which was held in 1999. I look

especially at embodied aspects of cultural capital, focusing on the voice. I draw on the artists' interviews from the catalogue, the curatorial essay, a related interview with the curator and wider critical response to issues surrounding Irish emigration to Britain. I examine the uneasy transition from national to transnational art discourse in practice in relation to the curatorial concept.

The research I present here occupies a space that Irit Rogoff has called “the curatorial” – a space for thinking about curating as more than the sum of its visible parts; as a field with agency, in spite of its multiple compromises.<sup>34</sup> Given that curators are busy with the problems of insufficient budgets, recalcitrant lenders, space constraints and competing institutional imperatives and priorities, this level of analysis appears to be utopian in its drive and in many respects it is. Keeping in mind the enormous energy that goes into the production of exhibitions, my critique and analysis can also be taken as parasitic in their approach. Yet, if the agencies of curatorial endeavors are to be recognized and harnessed, it seems necessary to make a more engaged theoretical analysis – both of curation itself and its attendant discourses. A proliferation of voices from various positions on the theory-practice continuum appears to be necessary to do justice to the complexity of curating, which is itself a discourse about discourse.

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<sup>34</sup> Rogoff made these observations in a keynote lecture given at the *Rotterdam Dialogues: The Curators* symposium on held at the Witte de With art centre in Rotterdam, The Netherlands on March 6 2009.