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

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Visitors to *Without the Walls*, held at the I.C.A. in London in the spring of 1980, found themselves in the midst of cutting edge mixed media works informed by the 1970s ethos of rejecting traditional art forms as such. The viewer first met with a raised bed of pigment and flour, which reappeared in the accompanying video documenting *Pictorial and Sculptural Episodes* (Fig. 3.1), a performance in which Nigel Rolfe erases an abstract drawing by pushing his body through its surface. The other three works in the main room were post-minimal in appearance. In Brian King's *Ménage à Trois* (Fig. 3.2) sodden turf expanded to break the sculptural surrounds. John Aiken’s floor grid, made of moulded sand was extended day by day, adding a further time-based element to the exhibition. Felim Egan’s site-specific wall collage ran rhythmic abstract forms the length of one side wall, creating an almost musical intervention. On the other side, Ciarán Lennon’s installation of mirrored panels was barely visible, embedded as they were within the upper arches of the five window frames.

All of the artists featured were resident in or born in Ireland and two of the subsequent three installations, built in separate enclosed spaces, made references to explicitly Irish subject matter. In the first, by Noel Sherridan, the walls and floor of a long narrow space were lined with screen-printed portraits of Irish republican heroes. A small TV screen embedded in the back wall depicted a boy’s legs in the act of Irish dancing, while a voice-over could be heard of a teacher giving instructions. The last room was dominated by a horse jump which almost reached the ceiling, under which small clay figurines could be seen. On closer inspection they might be recognized as depicting the Celtic fertility goddess Epona, known to protect horses. The walls were hung with paintings which related the Epona myth to political events in Northern Ireland.
Fig. 3.1 Nigel Rolfe, Still from video documentation of *Pictorial and Sculptural Episodes*, 1980.
Image Source: National Irish Visual Arts Library, Dublin

Fig. 3.2 View of *Without the Walls* at the I.C.A. showing work by Alannah O' Kelly (front), Brian King (middle) and work in process by John Aiken (back left),
Image Source: National Irish Visual Arts Library, Dublin
Situated between these overtly political works, James Coleman’s installation, *The Ploughman’s Party* (Fig.3.3), offered a more sumptuous and alluring interior. The walls, floor and ceiling of a long narrow space had been lined with white felt, and an elongated relief, made up of smaller curvilinear elements, hung against the back wall. Its gold-leaf surface glistened against the neon blue light that emanated from behind it. The relief almost seemed caught in a spotlight, an effect created by the projection of a slide image of the gilded baroque form onto the physical wall relief. On second glance it could be seen to resemble both a plough and the form of the Plough star constellation alluded to in the work’s title, the blue light now becoming an abstracted night sky. An incessant stream of words, enunciated by an unseen audiotape recording, interrupted the aura that this jewel-like work might have created. This ceaseless monologue intervened in the visible tension between the banality of the farming implement, its stellar allusions and the spectacle of its physical presence, all captured in the work's title.

Dorothy Walker, curator of the exhibition, described in the exhibition catalogue how, in this work by James Coleman:

> A man’s voice speaks in English and French about dressing up to go to a party. The text is full of puns and double-meanings and repeats itself in a continuous cycle. The work is a seductive send-up of glamour and advertising but also even of aesthetics and style. The sound of the French accords with the appearance of the gilded motifs, which are like pieces of a baroque frame on a grandiose ancestral portrait, at the same time resembling an actual plough, and the astronomical constellation. (1980, unpaginated)

*The Ploughman’s Party* negotiated a time of transition in Irish culture. Ireland had joined the E.E.C. seven years earlier and the Irish economy was gravitating towards tertiary industry, moving away from its primarily agricultural economy and the way of life that went with it. Walker commented in her catalogue essay:

> There are echoes of William Trevor’s story “The Ballroom of Romance” strangely modified again by the use of French. Bi-lingualism has been such an issue in Ireland since the founding of the State: Irish is associated with the country, with country life and farming. This piece puts it in several other perspectives: will the second national language eventually be French, in the EEC, particularly for farmers?
Fig. 3.3 James Coleman, *The Ploughman’s Party*, 1979-80. Forged iron, neon, paint, audio narration and slide projection

As Walker proposes, the work negotiated shifting social values; the decreasing emphasis on socio-political agency and labour and increasing attention to the agency to consume, a shift accompanied by the possibility of electing affiliative identities through consumption over traditional rural identity. Coleman elaborated elsewhere that the work is about the power of propaganda and merchandizing in a society where a symbol of labour, the plough, may be transformed into a purely decorative tool of the cultural system (Rorimer 2003: 12). *The Ploughman’s Party* thus extended Coleman's previous engagement with the construction of identity and its entanglement with the construction of representation. I wish to articulate here that it also offered a very particular response to the critical context of the exhibition as a whole.

*Without the Walls* was part of *A Sense of Ireland*, a festival promoting Irish culture with the aim of improving economic and political relations between the two nations. In this chapter I will examine its curatorial strategy, together with those of three other nationally framed exhibitions within the festival that served as platforms from which to launch new identities for Irish art. Rather than considering national representation to be “‘always already’ repressive,” I want to look at their potential for renegotiating the low cultural and symbolic capital associated with Irish art in the English context (Radhakrishnan 2003: 14). I want in particular to examine how the
exhibitions deal with the unwritten, but nevertheless present, call for authenticity that is implicitly demanded of all postcolonial nations when they represent themselves in a dominant nation, and in this case in the capital of the former colonial power. As I see it, the occasion of the festival confronted curators with the challenge of how to both establish the value of Irish art and acknowledge its alterity. This curatorial moment takes place at the cusp of a turn from the social and contextual production of art in the 1970s to the semiotic turn of the 1980s. We will observe that the artists provide a number of strategies to open up, address and harness the variety of signifying possibilities of the national.

The idea of hosting an exhibition of Irish art had been conceived of as one of a series of modest presentations in conjunction with the I.C.A., which set out “to present the best and most important work of a European nation.” However, it grew radically in scale as the festival was quickly recognized as a timely opportunity to promote an avant-garde Ireland. This would benefit international trade relations, Ireland’s industrial expansion and E.E.C. membership having been overshadowed in the media by an intense period of I.R.A. violence in Northern Ireland. Thus, *A Sense of Ireland* was potentially a crucial stepping stone in a rebranding of Irish culture in the British capital. The publicity material suggested that the event aimed “to present the best of the Irish arts, North and South, in a major international context; to demonstrate in England the depth and strength of Ireland’s heritage and contemporary culture; to make an important contribution to improving understanding and relations between the people of these islands.” For this reason the festival attracted sponsorship by over thirty businesses and semi-state bodies and grew into the largest ever presentation of Irish culture in London. Here we see the field of power come into view in relation to the field. In fact, given its overt ambassadorial function, *A Sense of Ireland* might be dismissed as merely a political manoeuvre. Yet it offered a crucial opportunity to bring British audiences up to

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121 I.C.A. press release “A month of Irish Art in London,” November 1978. To date, French, German and Greek contemporary culture had been represented through exhibitions and related film-screenings, concerts and other cultural events. The Irish exhibition had also been initially planned as “a modest display of the avant-garde” that would show “a few conceptualists, some new independent film, [and] an experimental theatre company” (Stephenson 1980: 14).
date with Irish developments and, in doing so, challenged prevalent stereotypes of Irishness.122

This context demanded subtle and sophisticated curatorial representations of Irish art to convince a London audience of the value of Irish art in conceptual and aesthetic terms. There were eight visual art exhibitions in the final event. Here I will focus on the three group exhibitions curated with a view to representing Irish contemporary art of the 1970’s.123 The curatorial essays surrounding the exhibitions as well as the exhibitions themselves became platforms from which to launch new identities for Irish art and thus challenge its relatively low symbolic capital in the British context. I want to now make a brief comparative analysis of how the exhibition narratives negotiated the notion of Irishness in particular before exploring *Without the Walls* in more detail.

**Producing National Narratives**

The largest of the three exhibitions, *The Delighted Eye: Irish Painting and Sculpture of the Seventies*, emphasized visual delight in its title by way of a quotation from W.B. Yeats’s poetry. The exhibition curator, art historian Frances Ruane, had selected work in a “poetic genre,” affected by landscape, Celtic spirituality and myth:

> A significant strand of contemporary Irish art has provided us with a consistently poetic response to the environment. Painting and sculpting in styles that often differ dramatically, these artists work in the same spirit. (1980, unpaginated)

This “poetic genre” had been identified by critic Brian O’Doherty, who had described how the atmosphere of Irish painting “is characterized by a mythical rather than a historic sense, an uneasy and restless fix in the unimportant and reluctance to disclose

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122 There were exhibitions on Irish society, history, crafts and architecture as well as a display of photographs of ancient monuments entitled *West of West*. An extensive programme of film screenings, music, literature, theatre, and dance events was held at 45 venues throughout the city. A lecture series reflected on social and economic developments as well as on national and international relations.

123 A fourth but smaller exhibition showed works on paper from the Contemporary Irish Art Society collection at the Angela Flowers gallery. Furthermore, an exhibition entitled *Portrait of the Artist: Abbey Theatre 1904-1979* displayed portraits of the literary greats associated with the theatre at The Fine Art Society gallery. There were three further solo exhibitions: one celebrating minimalist painter Patrick Scott at Annely Judy Fine Art, works by hard-edge abstractionist Roy Johnston at South East Gallery and drawings and watercolours by Jack B. Yeats at Theo Waddington Gallery.
anything about what is painted …” (1972: 16). Ruane’s vision for *The Delighted Eye* was partly communicated in the catalogue cover. Depicting Louis Le Brocquy’s *Táin Tapestry*, it evoked Irish mythology through stylistically modern means.

Ruane represented three generations of painters whose work fell under the three loose strands critic Aidan Dunne later identified in Irish painting of the 1970s: “figurative expressionism,” “formalist international abstraction” and “the use of abstract techniques as a means to capture a subjective approach to the local landscape” (1990: 22-23). She refers to O’Doherty’s argument that post-war isolation had meant that Irish art had managed to avoid internationalism till the mid 1960s. Although Ruane acknowledges younger artists’ engagement in international art developments, she specifies that this search has been “for contemporary aesthetic alternatives that reflect their own [Irish] sensibilities.” She sees the recent work “retaining a strong undeniably native impulse,” drawing on a frame of reference of agricultural roots, conservatism, an obsession with the past and a passion for the indirect statement.

O’Doherty’s description of Irish reluctance to disclosure resonated with Ruane’s personal experiences as an American living in Ireland for seven years (Ryan 2006: 150). However O’Doherty had associated the evasiveness of the artistic statements with “a certain minority or subject mentality” that could not be separated from a particular socio-economic and political history. In Ruane’s essay the socio-political nuances of O’Doherty’s argument are overwritten by a romanticized and rather essentialist “poetic” mentality, which she equates with a Celtic imagination. Severing links with international art discourse, Ruane concludes that the artists are collectively pursuing a course “which is quite independent of mainstream international movements.” While this isolationism was possibly appealing to commercial British galleries selling Irish art with the help of a romanticized notion of mythical Ireland, it could only prompt critical neglect in the inner circles of the contemporary art world. To argue, as Ruane did, that

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124 O’Doherty wrote: “Its evasiveness summarises a whole defensive and infinitely discursive mode of existence in Ireland in the forties and fifties. In its way, it could be considered a last examination and confrontation of a certain minority or subject mentality that never responds to anything directly. Undoubtedly it is connected to national self-image as explicated by a small community of artists and audience – not consciously or as a program, but as a natural outgrowth of an isolation that encouraged introspection.” O’Doherty’s essay had in fact come under frequent critique for its essentialist approach to Irish art and Irishness and oversight of works which exceeded his categorizations. See especially Duddy (1987). Roisin Kennedy highlighted this socially nuanced aspect of O’Doherty’s essay (2007).

125 Ruane writes: “This illusive quality called Celtic imagination manifests itself again and again and remains the most important binding element in this exhibition” (1980, unpaginated).
“there is nothing parochial or unintelligently derivative,” was unwittingly to suggest these very qualities by denial.

The second exhibition, The International Connection: Irish Art in the Seventies took an entirely different approach, identifying a group of Irish artists who had been directly or indirectly influenced by recent art from the U.S. The works which its curator, philosopher and art critic Cyril Barrett, had brought together at the Round House Gallery engaged with colour field, hard-edge and abstract expressionism and represented a strand of painting that had been invisible in The Delighted Eye. Barrett commented, “If I was to choose one [characteristic] which seems to touch almost all the group it is coolness.” He identified this quality in the bold lines of Michael Craig Martin’s drawing and in John Aiken’s geometrically structured mixed media works on board for example. He also noticed a persistent sense of wit, “a cool wit,” in works like Robert Ballagh’s photorealistic paintings as well as in such works as Patrick Scott’s “Bent Rainbow” (1979), which added a lyrical and witty twist to hard-edge abstraction.

The works were confident. Barrett’s selection was based on critical coherence as much as a desire to show recent works. Over a third of the artists lived outside of Ireland and some included artists were not Irish by birth. Barrett discussed this aspect of the selection candidly, suggesting that he had finally used the criteria of including artists who work and exhibit in Ireland or have done so for an extended period over the past 15 years and/or “take Irish themes for their work”. This did not stop him from needing to distinguish something particularly “Irish” about the work, however. Barrett likened the work to the Celtic tradition in terms of its being abstracted but not entirely abstract – like the “men and curious beasts intertwined in those elaborate patterns” in the Book of Kells or the Ardagh chalice, two national treasures. He even suggested that the habit of “borrowing” international stylistic elements had come from the Normans or the Celts, who “were not beyond flinching ideas and turning them to their own purpose.” Unlike

126 Ironically, a number of the represented artists had in fact been in The Irish Imagination. Their hardedge styles were overshadowed by O’Doherty, the opening line of whose essay had highlighted, “No colour field, no op, no art and technology weddings, no environmental machinery, very little pop, hard edge or minimalism are to be seen here.” By 1980, it had also become clear that they represented a leading style of the 1970s. Furthermore, it b efitted the increasing Americanization of Irish culture, commented upon by critics of the period.

127 Most of the artists were in their thirties but for the sake of continuity Barrett included forerunners of this younger generation such as Patrick Scott, Anne Madden and sculptor Deborah Brown.

128 Like Ruane, he stressed that “while one might find affinities between the works in the exhibition and works produced elsewhere, the Irish artists have their own sensibility and individuality – well within the tradition of Irish art” (1980, unpaginated).
Ruane, Barrett also stressed that the artists were sensitive to the socio-political context of the past ten years, which he suggested was present in oblique references within the work. Nevertheless, the question of how, being international, the artists’ work could be identified as Irish took up the remaining two thirds of Barrett’s essay. While Barrett's approach could hardly be considered indigenous, his attempts to embrace influence rather than avoid the issue of being derivative were undermined by his elaborate reasoning, which unintentionally amounted to a kind of defense of the artists’ Irishness.

*Without the Walls* was conceived as a supplement to these overtly Irish and international exhibitions. Walker addressed the artists’ work in a manner that suggested its relevance to recent critical shifts in art practice. She considers the work to be ideologically at one with the spirit of Brian O’Doherty's *Outside of the White Cube* essays from 1975-6, in which he highlighted the ideological role played by the modernist gallery space. Walker proposes that the featured artists are part of a worldwide trend of opposing the use of art as a mere form of currency by producing impermanent works that cannot be purchased. She implies that working with non-traditional media within the gallery space offers the possibility to recuperate a sense of time, history and memory, a line of thinking that suited the Irish artist especially:

> The development away from the art-object has suited Irish artists particularly: the Irish, in any sphere, are not best at the hard fact. We tend to see the complexities of things, the multi-layered meaning, the inter-relationship of disparities. So it has been an immense creative opportunity for the artists in this exhibition to invade “the space of the world we are in” as [artist] Ciarán Lennon puts it – not only space, but time, narrative, memory and memory of visions. … Although this type of work forms part of a world trend, it is interesting to see how it grows out of Irish pre-occupations at deeper levels.

Walker stops short of explaining what she considers these preoccupations to be. The remaining three quarters of the essay are devoted to formal descriptions of individual works, characteristic of conceptual art writing of the 1970s, in which she

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129 He gave the example of drawings of Dublin city in which the city is desolate – probably referring to Rita Donagh’s “City Series” (1979) – and where violence is invisible but hinted at. He comments, “The viewer in the know knows what’s being said. The viewer who takes the work at face value would probably not understand anyway.” This explanation seems to me a concrete example of the kind of reluctance about disclosure that Ruane had mentioned but mystified as a naturalized Irish trait.
generally refrains from discussing Celticism or Irishness per se. Take for example her matter-of-fact description of Brian King’s time-based sculptures in the landscape:

In a second piece “Burning Spiral,” a large spiral 18 ft in diameter was dug in the sand, again at the edge of the tide. The spiral was filled with paraffin and as the evening tide came in, the paraffin was ignited and a spiral of flame floated in the dark on the shallow water. Both [“Burning Spiral” and “Sea Holes”] ... do not represent or portray anything, nor symbolise anything other than their own existence.

Here, Walker resists the temptation to refer to the recurrence of the spiral in Celtic art. Even when talks about King’s recent work, which engages with burial and, in the artist's own words, “evolved through the study of cairns and megalithic tombs in a particular part of Ireland,” she does not indulge in reflection on Ireland's ancient past and its legacy in contemporary artists’ work. Yet the trace of her introductory notion of an essentially Celtic artistic mindset is always present as a kind of artistic unconscious from which these conscious artistic activities spring.130

At the end of a number of similarly restrained descriptions of the artists’ works, Walker includes one short paragraph that alludes to the centrality of a certain mindset to all of the work on exhibit:

For a deliberate formlessness, even paradoxically in the most formalist work, is an underlying connecting threat [sic] in all the works in this exhibition, even in Nigel Rolfe’s destructive performances. There is nowhere a static structured approach; there is a commitment to process, to continuing, to recurring, which is endemic not only to modern Irish literature, (Joyce, Beckett, Flann O' Brien) but to ancient linear Celtic art.131

This comes as a rather surprising conclusion to this catalogue essay. However, Walker had been outspoken about her interest in the work of contemporary artists whom she saw continuing aspects of Celtic art three years earlier in an edition of the Irish critical

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130 Her mention of Brian O’Doherty’s Irish nationality perhaps leads us towards the conclusion that his ideas on the white cube might also spring from a certain Irish mindset. 131 (1980: unpaginated). Walker makes this explicit in an article published in 1984, where she includes five of the artists in a list of twenty-one artists carrying on a Celtic tradition: “So I insist that the abstract sculpture of John Aiken, Patrick Ireland... Brian King... Alanna O Kelly... and the abstract painting of Felim Egan, ... while receiving as much impetus from international sources as the atmospheric painters, are just as surely continuing a very much older tradition.” She further elaborated her thinking in a lecture on Celtic linearity and the head image (Walker 1985).
journal The Crane Bag. She described the need for Irish artists to “salvage[e] the hard and simply beauty of … [the Irish] vernacular tradition,” which she saw as derived from the simple linear beauty of Celtic art (1977: 135). In fact, on closer inspection, the work of each of the nine artists in Without the Walls manifested Walker’s quite specific conception of how Celtic art should look and be in material terms, suggesting that it was central to her curatorial selection. This included the artists’ engagement in “informal formalism” (artists using formless materials to create form) and their creation of “open-ended structures” and ambivalent spatial experiences.

Crucially, Walker’s propositions offered a strategic solution to the long-standing dilemma of postcolonial derivativeness within Irish art. Academic realism was seen to be inherently connected to British painting traditions brought to Ireland through colonialism. Identifying an existing continuity between modern abstract and Celtic art meant bypassing this colonial legacy entirely. Furthermore the Celtic golden age offered a legitimate source of cultural and symbolic capital from which postcolonial Ireland could draw confidence in its visual culture and a sense of authority on artistic judgement. Walker had developed her critical approach as an art critic associated with Scott Tallon Walker. This architecture firm’s championing of a kind of Celtic Modernism became exemplary for the Irish nation:

Through their promotion of non-figurative art, particularly abstract work that referenced prehistoric and Celtic civilisation in Ireland, Scott Tallon Walker solved one of the paradoxes of the Irish republic, in which the visual arts tradition of an ancient Celtic (and pre-Celtic) nation, cited so often as

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132 This journal edition was called A Sense of Nation. I would suggest that the similarity of the festival title A Sense of Ireland to the journal edition is not coincidental, given the importance of The Crane Bag as a critical forum in Ireland at this time. Walker’s essay examined the importance of vernacular culture in establishing a standard for contemporary Irish visual culture. She suggested that the Irish vernacular tradition was derived from the simple linear beauty of Celtic art. Comparing it to Japanese and Mexican cultures, she drew attention to how those cultures maintained an organic relationship between art and design, and urged Irish artists to follow suit (1977: 131-135).

133 Works by John Aiken and Nigel Rolfe can be seen as examples of “informal formalism.” Rolfe created abstract drawings with flour and then destructed them in a public performance by pushing his naked body across the surface. Aiken created grids from moulded sand, while King used water in glass pillars, both using a “formless material” to create form. Egan’s drawings, which used but broke away from the grid, embodied “open-ended structures.” Alanna O’ Kelly’s woven natural materials and simple forms connected her to the vernacular tradition. Michael O’ Sullivan’s installation centred on the Celtic horse goddess Epona. Ciarán Lennon’s interest in creating ambivalent spatial experiences and his use of a formless material to do so epitomised formlessness.

134 In an interview with Jill Nunn, Walker emphasized the legacy of Celtic art as a heritage which every Irish person and artist should be aware of and value (Nunn and Walker 1984: 15).
the exemplar of the new Republic, was almost entirely based on abstraction.135

Walker further noted that Celtic aesthetics united Irish art with other countries and cultures, creating international comparatives that challenged the marginalization of Irish art in international art discourses. She saw no reason why recourse to Irish historical roots should impede the production of cutting edge Irish work. These theories were put into action when, for example, she wrote to Joseph Beuys and invited him to apply to be head of the Irish National College of Art and Design, being keenly aware of Beuys’s interest in Celticism. The letter sowed the seeds for Beuys’s idea of a Free University and the two worked together to try to make it a reality in Ireland during Beuys’s later visits to Ireland.136

Considering the possible ways in which a postcolonial culture might take up the challenge of self-representation, postcolonial theorist R. Radhakrishnan has highlighted that such a return to an indigenous identity is a valid political choice. “There is nothing regressive or atavistic about people revisiting the past with the intention of reclaiming it” (2003: 758). This “return” is a narrative intervention, however. Problems arise when revisionist identities are held up as primordial and transcendentally sanctioned rather than historically produced. Walker implies the centrality of an “Irish mindset” to which the Celtic seems to act as a kind of unconscious. Here consciousness and the unconscious are understood with reference to a pre-psychoanalytic model, as if they belonged to a continuous system where the mark of good practice was to raise the unconscious into consciousness. Following Gayatri Spivak, I see this reduction of art and ideology to the conscious-unconscious opposition as a substitute for a concept of ideology in its broadest sense, in which the subject does not lose its power to act but is seen as irretrievably plural (2006: 122).

136 For additional information on Beuys’s relationship with Ireland see Lerm Hayes (2003) and Levi Strauss (2006).
Walker embraces the Celtic to create a continuous line of cultural development between past and present, as if colonialism had never happened. By doing so, she crucially ignores the conflicting ideological uses of the term Celt in Irish and English history. This includes the historical construction of the Celt in the 18th and 19th centuries as a fascinating but inferior subjectivity as well as the subsequent entanglement of the concept of the Celt with both nationalist and unionist politics until the present.137

Spivak has theorized the impossibility of reanimating the native as an active speaking position in ways that can help us consider the deeper significance of the representational issues at hand here. She points out that the very role of “native informant” has been created by ethnography as a figure who “can only provide data, to be interpreted by the knowing subject for reading” (1999: 49). It was designed as a passive position in which the native could be studied, spoken about and read. It cannot be made active by will alone because it is embedded in the structural makeup of Western thought:

Indeed there can not be a more correct scholarly model for this type of reading. It is, strictly speaking, “mistaken,” for it attempts to transform into a reading-position the site of the “native informant,” in anthropology, a site that can only be read, by definition, for the production of definitive descriptions. It is an (im)possible perspective. (49)

As soon as one denies the impossibility of the “native informant” perspective, the existence of a native position is validated, which disavows the political by default, unless otherwise addressed. Spivak explains:

I think of the “native informant” as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man – a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation … [not] the self-marginalizing or self-consolidating migrant or postcolonial masquerading as a “native informant” … [but rather] Gramsci’s uncanny insight – the native informant(s) as a site of unlisted traces. (6)

137 Joep Leerssen traces this shift from the pre-18th-century denigration of the Celt or Gael as primitive and the early to mid-18th-century emergence of a field of Celtic Studies based on an idealized but condescending fascination to the late-18th-century transition to a politicized notion of the Celtic or Gaelic as the basis for a national idea (1996a). This becomes a fully fledged political movement with the Young Ireland movement, their failed nationalist uprising (1848) informing subsequent 19th- and early 20th-century independence struggles, which Leerssen deals with in a later publication (1996b).
To speak actively from this position in the present, as Walker tried to do, is to be faced with the impossible challenge of how to “fill in the gaps” of the centuries between the indigenous culture and the postcolonial present. Failing this impossible task, the threat emerges of not being cultured enough to be counted as a culture.

Kant’s coupling of aesthetic judgement with subject-formation leads to the implicit positioning of the “native informant” as a “raw man” at an earlier stage of human development, which makes an ethical relation impossible (Spivak 1999: 6). A similarly (impossible) ethical relation between the “raw man” and his civilised counterpart manifests itself in Matthew Arnold’s politically influential On the Study of Celtic Literature first published in 1867 (1916).  

Arnold was influenced by Friedrich Schiller, who synthesized Kant’s ideas in his own writings on aesthetic education, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, published in 1795. Drawing on an amateur knowledge of Celtic studies and philological research of the time, Arnold posited the Celt as above all else sentimental, emotional, over-sensitive (highly perceptive and quick-witted but therefore reactionary), spiritual and ineffectual in all matters requiring structure, such as the plastic arts (due to their dealing with the eye of the mind rather than that of the body) and for that matter, self-government. The delicate shyness of the Celt made the necessity of dealing with “the great world” an embarrassment (1916: 80). If we look again to Ruane’s and Walker’s Irish/ Celtic turn of mind, they display a number of these characteristics, such as being “not best at the hard fact,” thinking paradoxically, being engaged with the past and memory, being poetic in outlook, spiritual and sentimental.

Postcolonial theorist David Lloyd highlights the political dimensions of Arnold’s Celt. He demonstrates that Arnold’s concepts developed against the backdrop of Fenian terrorism in the 1860s and the growing parliamentary agreement on the ungovernability of Ireland that was paving the way for Home Rule. Through his writings, Arnold sought to seek a middle way between separation (through Home Rule)

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138 The text continues to influence how Celtic minorities define themselves to this day. See O’Driscoll (1982) for an account of Celtic consciousness written in the period of the exhibition.

139 Schiller synthesized Kant’s thought with that of Karl Leonhard Reinhold and developed the concept of the Schöne Seele (beautiful soul), a human being whose emotions have been educated by his reason, so that his duties and inclinations are no longer in conflict with one another. “Beauty,” for Schiller, was not merely a sensual experience, but a moral one as well: the Good is the Beautiful.

140 The history of these ideas is traced in Joep Leerssen’s Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael (1996a). He demonstrates how, in 18th-century Ireland, a pure Celtic Christianity was constituted as a bridge between Protestantism and Catholicism, before being renegotiated by Arnold in the 19th century.
and coercion, both of which were based upon the unassimilable difference between the Irish and English. Arnold’s goal was to rewrite Celtic identity in order to assimilate the English to the Celtic and the Celtic to the English both retroactively and projectively. He proposed that the Celt counterbalanced the Anglo-Saxon tendency towards level-headedness, measure and consistency. The feminised qualities of the Celt were presented as being in perfect communion with the Anglo-Saxon, whose masculine qualities were partly drawn from Germanic influence. Lloyd argues that by exceeding the immediate necessity of offering a solution for “England’s difficulty in ruling Ireland,” Arnold made the conclusion of Ireland’s inability to rule itself and the need for England’s rule self-evident. By doing so, Arnold moved Kant’s implication of an ethical progression of race and individual towards an ever-more harmonious condition, which would come to be defined as the natural state of culture (Lloyd 1985-6: 148).

Only three of the nine artists in Without the Walls, O’Sullivan, King and Rolfe, had explicitly expressed interest in ancient Irish art or archaeology and two had specifically referred to the Celtic. Even so, there is a distinct difference between Walker’s conception of the Celtic as a kind of unconscious well from which the work springs and the artists’ sense of an ill-understood history embodied in physical artefacts, which they could use as a source of knowledge and aesthetic inspiration. Walker’s Celticism is ontological, whereas for the artists it provides an alternative episteme. This is precisely the distinction which was later conflated in identity politics discourse. In fact, the ontological/epistemological distinction is crucial in considering viable possibilities for curatorial representation that move beyond the impasse of representations of fixed identity.

The possibility for developing a curatorial narrative along epistemological lines can be seen in the catalogue essay written by Lucy Lippard for West of West, a further exhibition of the A Sense of Ireland festival. It was curated by artist Nigel Rolfe, who, as we have seen, was represented in Without the Walls. Lippard writes:

One of the most interesting aspects of avant-garde art in the 70’s has been the contemporary artist’s deep attraction to ancient monuments … [T]he great Irish monuments … are the ideal receptacles for our longings and our fantasies, our nostalgia for a value system that reintegrates culture with nature … In doing so, they combine the two needs that have dominated the

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141 See for example Rolfe’s writings on his own work (1979).
anti-formalist art of the late 70’s: the need to return to a rapidly disappearing natural environment with ecological sensitivity; and an equally subversive need to communicate one’s esthetic values and be socially necessary to a broader audience than that imposed by the art market. (1980, unpaginated)

Lippard’s critical framing makes space for developments within the field and the ways in which they relate to changing habitus. She finds no reason to cover over the discontinuity from past to present, proposing rather the contemporary value of “speculative histories” of these rich cultural artefacts, which allow us to imagine other ways of being. Assuming that the native informant position can not be occupied, Lippard looks instead to relationships between the field and the field of power. She reinvests antiquity with political meaning in the present by referring in turn to ecological issues, the Women’s movement’s recuperation of the feminine goddess as an alternative line of thought. She also warns against a purist notion of cultures or identities, an argument for which she alleged the example of the way such a notion was used in the Nazi conception of a Volk. Her framing seems to go towards confirming Radhakrishnan’s proposition that a return to an indigenous identity is legitimate once the identity presented is historically produced and not held up as primordial and transcendentally sanctioned.

A few years later, Lippard included Rolfe’s body-drawings and Patrick Ireland’s Ogham sculptures, performances and labyrinth sculptures in her book Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory (1983). This inclusion is accompanied by ample attention to the prehistoric sites and artifacts Rolfe had highlighted through the West of West exhibition, as well as reference to traditional elements like the St. Brigit’s cross Walker had praised in her essay on vernacular Irish design. These works and their sources are placed in evident relationship with the works and artistic sources of international artists like Richard Long, Nancy Holt, Alice Aycock and Judy Chicago. All of this goes to suggest that the problem with national identity is a discursive one rather than inherent in the use of national referents as such.

There remained another issue of method to be resolved in the Irish context before an indigenous identity could be represented. Radhakrishnan warns:

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But before the launching can be initiated, there is a prior methodological problem to be resolved: how to deal with present history and its immediate prehistory? Should the location of present history be invested in critically, or should it be strategically bypassed and neglected? (1993: 758-9)

The *A Sense of Ireland* festival presented the exhibition curators with this challenge of how to deal with the relationship between the present moment and recent history. In fact, whether or not they presented Ireland’s relationship with Britain as a colonial one, and Ireland’s relationship to the Celtic as historically produced, questions would inevitably need to be answered about the relationship between the Northern Troubles and past history. As we have seen, the function of the festival was ambassadorial. In keeping with this context and with the general etiquette of professional curating, Walker seems to have sought to avoid a confrontation with the political as such in *Without the Walls*. Yet, having given a free hand to the artists to produce new work, she was arguably left with more overtly political works than she had bargained for.

We can see this most obviously when Walker writes about *Epona* (Fig. 3.4), a work that seemed to be designed to reinvest Celticism with political content. The installation was dominated by a life-sized horse jump, under which stood a figurine of Epona, the Celtic fertility goddess who protected horse riders. The walls of the room were hung with equestrian paintings that made references to Irish and international mythology, literature and politics. Although their precise visual content is difficult to determine from existing documentation of the installation, their titles included direct references to recent incidents in Northern Ireland: “The Belfast bombings of McCann’s Public House on Grand National Day” and “Maca, Studio, Castledawson bombing.” Walker appears to have wanted to recuperate the cultural nationalist value of *Epona* and discard its militant implications, but she had to rely on omission to do so.\(^{143}\) Her writings about the work in the catalogue make reference to:

\(^{143}\) This is not the only omission within the essay. Walker refers to Brian O’Doherty’s essays in *Inside the White Cube* as influencing the subject of the exhibition, but she does not mention that she had invited him to participate in *Without the Walls*. In 1972 the artist had changed his name from Brian O’Doherty to Patrick Ireland in protest against Bloody Sunday “until such time as the British military presence is removed from Northern Ireland.” He had declined participation in *Without the Walls* because he had vowed not to exhibit in England for the same reason. Walker discussed this issue in the *Art About Ireland* journal shortly after the exhibition, suggesting that she found it relevant to the exhibition but not suitable for discussion in the London context.
… an often disconcertingly wild, naïve way of presenting most complex environments involving the mythology and legends of Ireland, overlapping the mythologies of other cultures, and bringing them all up to date by unpredictable object/images.

There is no mention of visual content referring to the Troubles, even though Walker had selected the *Epona* installation after seeing it at the Project Art Centre in Dublin one year previously. Its political content was thus no surprise to her. However, two further artists had produced uncharacteristically political works for the show, charging the exhibition with more political content than Walker had surely intended. Acting as a kind of return of the repressed in light of Walker’s depoliticized Celtic framing, these works could scarcely be contained by the curatorial narrative.

![Image of Michael O’Sullivan's Epona installation](Image Source: National Irish Visual Arts Library, Dublin)

**Fig. 3.4** Michael O’Sullivan, *Epona*, as installed at the I.C.A., Image Source: National Irish Visual Arts Library, Dublin

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144 Notably, Walker felt no need to make the same omission in the Irish context. Writing for *Art About Ireland* Walker stated that the paintings “related the Epona myth to modern events, to both the Queen of England and her love of horses, and to the provisional IRA and their love of sacrifice, not necessarily self” (1980: 22).
Brian King, whose “formless forms” Walker had praised in the catalogue had produced his characteristic minimal structures for *Without the Walls*. Yet this time he used them to represent the political relations between Ireland and Britain. In *Ménage à Trois* (Fig. 3.5), the internally mirror-lined open cube structure represented a scale model of the land area of Great Britain at a scale of 1sq. inch to 1 sq. mile, inset with another cube representing the land area of the Republic, filled with turf briquettes. Suspended over this was a further Perspex cube representing the land area of Northern Ireland, and containing orange water (representing Orangeism, the ideology associated with Protestant domination over Catholics in Northern Ireland). On a pedestal beside the cubes, King placed a £20 note with the message:

Take the money if... You...Voted Conservative, or Accept the monarchy, or Went to public school, or Wash your car on Sunday morning, or Believe the BBC, or Could recognise an Old Etonian tie.

When a viewer took the note, a beam mechanism released a metal arrow that dropped through the Northern Irish cube and released the water into the turf beneath. After some days, the turf started to expand and to break its box, encroaching on the England box and threatening to break the mirrors over an extended time period.

![Image of Brian King's *Ménage à Trois*](image-source)
Noel Sherridan produced an even more visually confrontational presentation by lining the walls of the exhibition space with posters of political heroes from a militant Irish history in a manner that vaguely resembled the way they might be displayed in an Irish museum or school. A small embedded TV screen depicted a boy’s legs as he danced in traditional Irish style. The repetitive movements were slightly slowed down. A voice could be heard over the traditional Irish music in the background, giving the kind of instructions children receive as they struggle to perfect the national dance:


The image of the boy stamping out what is being drilled into him pointed to how the rigid nature of social reproduction forecloses thought.

Surrounded by visual references to the political history associated with the dance, however, the work pointed more specifically to the difficulty of breaking out of the mindset of political struggle. Walker observed that the teacher’s instructions recalled the ethos of a republican upbringing. The teacher’s voice can be heard to reprimand:

Don’t forget, Stay tense. Don’t lose the tension. Clench your hands. Make a fist. Stay tense.

On closer inspection the work thus recoded nationalistic Irish visual material culture in a manner that asked wider questions about the ethics and means of sustaining nationalist discourse per se. Even though there was an implicit critique of nationalism, Sherridan also felt that “the set, rigid dancing marked a threshold at which the homogenising powers of the culture industry must falter” (2001: 120). The potential value of nationalism was thus not foreclosed, but subject to radical renegotiation in the contemporary context.

Sherridan’s far-sighted ideas were not recognized by most viewers of Without the Walls, however. The work’s oversight in reviews of the exhibition suggests that critics were dismissive of what at first glance must have seemed to be a mere

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145 Sherridan became head of the National College of Art and Design in the same year, bringing a new respect for conceptual and experimental art forms into the institution. This followed his period as founding director of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, Australia, from 1974 until 1980.
accruement of nationalist emblems. In some ways the work was ahead of its time, drawing as it did on semiotic readings of visual culture. The year 1980 marked a cusp between the social and contextual production of art in the 1970s and what is often referred to as the semiotic or linguistic turn of the 1980s. Yet Sherridan was unable to subvert the militant nationalist reading of his referents. I want to turn now to another work which did successfully manage to subvert this chain of signifiers, anticipating much of the conceptual trajectory of the 1980s. I will demonstrate here that James Coleman’s *The Ploughman’s Party* negotiated a post-representational representation of Irish culture. In doing so, he also offered strategies that moved beyond the impasse of indigenous approaches we have seen in the other curatorial and artistic narratives, without reverting to cultural nationalism. I propose that Coleman’s partial emancipation of representation from the aspirations to culturally or politically constructed identity in *The Ploughman’s Party* offers a source of alternative strategies that may be recoverable for curatorial purposes.

**Towards Post-representational Representation**

Let us recall the installation’s components: a felt-lined room with a golden curvilinear form emanating blue neon, upon which a slide image of the same form is projected. The title, *The Ploughman’s Party*, appears to make sense of the audio narrative of preparing to attend a party. It also reveals the visual double entendre in the sculpture’s allusion to a physical labouring plough and the constellation of the same name. Furthermore, the curvilinear sculpture is both physically present and projected in the form of a slide, demonstrating from the outset that we are busy with representation per se, rather than solely aesthetic experience. Joan Fowler observes that the language of high modernism was concerned with the concept of presentness as a desire for a “transcendent condition,” trying to make art an “ontological category” (1984: 19). The whiteness of the space and the sheen of the gold seem to promise us transcendence, but we are not only interrupted by the incessant locutions of the tape; the performativity of the artwork as re-presentation is also brought home to us by means of projecting an image of the work onto itself, which interrupts the sense of an enclosed visual.

As Lynne Cooke notes, Coleman’s use of indexical reproductive media refers *beyond* the realm of aesthetics. They draw attention to the act of representation:
If all forms of picturing are intrinsically discursive, if all images require being read, and read in ways that involve and engage psychic, social, and institutional “texts,” Coleman in this and related ways is able to bypass the self-referential restrictions underpinning the high modernist concept of visuality …. (2003: 127)

Coleman’s use of the projector to co-create the visual aspect of *The Ploughman’s Party* is both literal and metaphorical. It asks us to differentiate between what we see and what we project onto the image; a projection that takes place in our attempts to complete our perception by adding at least some of what is missing between the lines of the image as well as through our visual desires.146

Coleman completed a further work in the same year, *Connemara Landscape*, in which the cultural significance of this confrontation with representation comes more readily to the fore. This installation was made up of a projected negative drawing of curves and lines, which vaguely recalled an image of the West of Ireland. We have seen in relation to Orpen that the West of Ireland stands in for Irishness itself following the Cultural Revival. This metaphorical role comes into play here in relation to the fact that, even on longer viewing, the image never fell into place to offer the image promised in the work’s title. In the catalogue accompanying a re-exhibition of the work at the R.H.A. gallery in Dublin in 2009, Luke Gibbons highlights that the most notable feature of *Connemara Landscape* is not its desire to set the record straight – to provide us with an accurate representation of the West of Ireland – but rather to question the critical role of landscape itself, and its processes of representation. It is an exercise in vision itself, offering a reflexive turn in eluding “the necessary frame,” “the essential outline,” so central to historic schemes of representation” (2009: 51).

*The Ploughman’s Party* is more precisely an exercise in the history of vision. It operates as a dialectic between this moment of viewing and the history of vision that informs it. Gibbons observes of *Connemara Landscape* that the baroque lines that make up the drawing evoke the pleasures of the 18th-century “picturesque.” In particular they recall artist William Hogarth’s proposition of a return to nature and to a basic “line of beauty” modeled on the undulations of a curvy sinuous line (2009: 51). Gibbons notes

146 My observation is informed by image and film aesthetics scholar Jacques Aumont’s observation that, being forced to complete the perception of an image by adding at least some of what is missing between the lines, the role of the spectator is projective (qtd. in Gibbons 2009: 52).
wryly that subsequent “lovers of the uninterrupted view” were “not averse to a little
ethnic or rural cleansing,” seeking to remove eyesores from the countryside “such as
surplus population and habitations” (51). Similar observations can be made about the
plough-like form in *The Ploughman’s Party*, which also suggests the baroque, and by
association, a drive towards cultivation.

If we return to the audio text accompanying *The Ploughman’s Party*, we will
find that many of the double entendres made by the man preparing to attend the party
refer directly to culture and to cultivating. Yet, in this work too, we are refused a fully
decipherable subject-matter. Instead, the man’s constant use of punning undermines the
act of naming as such and pushes the viewer towards recognition of the discursive
nature of the text. In addition, his fragmentary disclosures are interrupted by a constant
slippage from English to French and a change in register from a discourse that appears
to be self-disclosing to a seductive and commercial discourse echoing the language of
perfume advertising. This is not a moral critique of the commodification of the personal,
but rather the convergence of various discursive regimes, which produces a discursive
complexity that undermines the teleological aims of normative discourse.147

Discourse here no longer relates to the primary ground of experience, as
philosopher and historian Michael Foucault says of postmodern knowledge production
in general (1972: 79). It is rather a self-reflexive act that draws attention to its own
existence within particular epistemic paradigms. I want to draw on Foucault’s analysis
of discursive formations in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in order to better tease out in
what way, exactly, Coleman subverts discourse itself. I want to look at how, in doing so,
he challenges the teleology of representation, which, Spivak has demonstrated, takes
place in every act of reading a work. Foucault is concerned to expose how power is both
most manifest and hardest to identify in discourse itself. However, while Foucault might
be seen as assuming that a deconstruction of representation in theory is also a

147 I draw here on Judith Butler’s observation that in Foucault “the possibility of subversion or resistance
appears (a) in the course of a subjectification that exceeds the normalizing aims by which it is mobilized,
for example in “reverse-discourse” or (b) through convergence with other discursive regimes, whereby
inadvertently produced discursive complexity undermines the teleological aims of normalization” (1997:
92-3).
deconstruction of the historical practice of representation, Coleman uses similar observations to different ends.\footnote{Reading their work from a postcolonial perspective in an essay entitled in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1996), Spivak critiques Foucault and Deleuze for this assumption.}

Foucault partly wrests discourse from its normal trajectory by breaking down all of the internal unities and examining the often discontinuous relationship between the parts and the way they are assumed to function within the whole. One aspect of Foucault’s analysis that is particularly relevant to Coleman’s use of discourse is his analysis of the relations between words within the statement. Foucault observes that even if sentences are taken collectively at an enunciative level (as opposed to their grammatical and logical levels) as non-sensical, they do not lose meaning as such:

The relation of a sentence with its meaning resides within a specific, well-stabilized enunciative relation. Moreover, even if these sentences are taken at an enunciative level at which they are meaningless, they are not, as statements, deprived of correlations … A sentence cannot be non-significant; it refers to something, by virtue of the fact that it is a statement. (1972: 90)

The same may be said of the monologue in *The Ploughman’s Party*. Through the use of double entendres, the puns and shifts in languages, we are unhinged from the position of assuming that these correlates are grounded in experience. Coleman's statements thus reveal themselves as almost free-floating signifiers.

Foucault observes of the enunciative function of statements that “generally speaking, it would seem, at first sight at least, that the subject of the statement is precisely he who has produced the various elements, with the intention of conveying meaning” (1972: 93). Yet, he warns that things are not so simple:

For a series of signs to exist, there must – in accordance with the system of causality – be an “author” or a transmitting authority. But this “author” is not identical with the subject of the statement; and the relation of production that he has with the formulation is not superposable to the relation that unites the enunciating subject and what he states.” (92)

The non-localizable slipperiness of Coleman’s discourse similarly disallows us from making the presumption that the subject is the one intending. The “I” in Coleman’s narrative does not collapse into the subject of the work. Not only is the “I” a discourse-producing function rather than a real person or even a fictive character, but we can not
even assume that the “author” of the work, Coleman, is identical with the subject of the statements. In this sense, Coleman succeeds in stepping out of the position that the teleology of Kant’s and Schiller’s trajectories insist must be occupied by any individual if he is to be subject of it.

Spivak highlights that space for change must be preceded by such discursive displacements; changes in sign systems that not only underpin but co-produce social relations (2006: 271-2). Although art’s effect on wider discourses is diffuse and indirect, the agency of Coleman’s change to the signification-function of his representativeness as an Irish artist is not to be underestimated. Yet it has to be recognized as such to have further agency within art discourse. In one of the few existing critical engagements with *The Ploughman’s Party*, art historian Benjamin Buchloh suggests that both the phonetic and sculptural grotesque of the work “deploy[ed] the allegorical strategy of a simultaneous devalorization of all accepted linguistic and artistic conventions to induce the experience of a semiotic field run amok, and the travesty necessary for a cathartic emancipation from the aspirations to culturally or politically constructed identity in the present” (2003: 102). Buchloh’s recognition of Coleman’s strategies is incisive, but I would suggest that his proposal of Coleman’s “cathartic emancipation from the aspirations to culturally or politically constructed identity in the present” makes too hasty an assumption that Coleman seeks emancipation from identity. This shows Buchloh’s personal identification with a wider intellectual climate of post-representational thinking which Coleman does not appear to fully share, despite the deconstructive drive of his work. Through this small but significant misrecognition, the perspective of major art is imposed on minor art in a way that makes its difference from dominant paradigms invisible.

In fact, Buchloh overlooks the conclusions he comes to in relation to *Box: Ahhareturnabout*, the work which he suggests *The Ploughman’s Party* intensifies. *Box: Ahhareturnabout* consists of a projection of found footage of a boxing match for the U.S. heavyweight championship title that took place between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey in 1927, interspersed with black film leader and a soundtrack of an interior monologue, scripted by Coleman. Tunney is the struggling protagonist who, the monologue makes clear, is trying to save his sociopolitical identity as an Irishman as much as his boxing title. Buchloh suggests that the work marks a major departure point
from post-minimalist aesthetics, since the bodies of Coleman’s performers do not appear as neutral or universal subjects, but as referents to a conflictual socio-political narrative, woven as they are into a complex set of historical references. Buchloh writes:

Box operates clearly within the demarcations that the critiques of modernist practice themselves had articulated, since these restrictions of representation are the focal points of Coleman’s analytical approach as much as his resuscitations of figuration and narrativity emerge as the subversive strategy aiming to dismantle these restrictions. (2003: 98)

To fully understand the agency of Coleman’s strategies, it is necessary to consider the processes of subjection involved in the discursive making of identity in more detail. Judith Butler’s observations in The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection can be a helpful reference point here. Drawing on Althusser and Freudian psychoanalysis, she explains that social discourse contains the power to form and regulate subjects through the imposition of its own terms. The terms of social discourse “institute a linguistic life for the ‘one’ who speaks prior to any act of agency” on their part. The terms themselves remain both irreducible to the individual person who speaks and to the necessary conditions of such speech. The only way out of this bind is to make the terms fail:

[I]nterpellation works by failing, that is, it institutes its subject as an agent precisely to the extent that it fails to determine such a subject exhaustively in time. The inaugurative scene of interpellation is one in which a certain failure to be constituted becomes the condition of possibility for constituting oneself. (1997: 197, emphasis added)

Coleman brings about this productive failure through an excess of the kind of circuitous talking associated with Irish stereotypes, including the Celt. He thus re-inhabits the stereotype and brings it to and beyond its limits in order to exhaust it. Rather than deferring authenticity, he frustrates the very demand for authentic identity.

The lack of an economical use of language in The Ploughman’s Party makes it impossible to isolate one significant line with which to represent this process. The puns and double meanings emerge in relation to the whole, with the constant slippage from English to French and back to English, and the repetition of elements communicating that the “I” has become a discourse-producing function. It is through the accumulative
effect of these excesses, combined with references in the content to self-presentation in the form of advertising and fashion, that Coleman creates an alternative to a metaphysical use of language, exhausting the limits of legitimate representativeness in the process. In *The Ploughman’s Party* Coleman does not so much emancipate the subject from aspiring to cultural or political identity as achieve a situation in which interpellation (the hailing to identity) fails productively.

In *The Ploughman’s Party* Coleman takes up the question of representation on the cusp between the two senses of representation as “speaking for someone” on a political level and/or re-presentation in art or literature as a form of subject predication.¹⁴⁹ His general interest in the conditions for the production of discourse is not the only reason to suggest that Coleman addresses the challenge of postcolonial self-representation in this work, however. The use of the plough and stars symbol is the most obvious manifestation of a more specific political engagement. Yet knowledge of Irish culture and history is required to unpack the specificity of this symbol, making it act like a hidden layer of meaning in the international context. Art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann comments likewise on the “vague, regionally specific, coded manner” of Coleman’s historical and local anchoring of *Box* (2010: 32). It is clearly a deliberate strategy on Coleman’s part that offers us a connection to history that is both located and tenuous.

The dual symbol of the plough as a farming implement and constellation had in fact been central to the flag of the Irish Citizen Army (Fig. 3.6). This small armed militia of workers briefly became a socialist movement in the early 20th century under politician James Connolly before moving towards the ideals of the radical nationalist group The Irish Republican Brotherhood. It later co-organized the Easter Rising with them in 1916, the most significant Irish insurrection aimed at freedom from British rule since the 1798 rebellion. The flag remains in use by political groups until the present day, its early socialist aspirations being overshadowed by mainstream republicanism.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ For this differentiation of the two sense of representation, see Spivak (1999: 257, 263).
¹⁵⁰ The Irish Citizen Army was a small armed militia of workers, formed for their own protection against the State following violent clashes with the police in the Great Lockout strike of 1913. Its transformation into a socialist organization followed James Connolly’s rise to leadership in 1914, after which it proposed “to sink all differences of birth, property and creed under the common name of Irish people” (O’Casey 1919).
Its presence in Coleman’s work thus hints at the political complexity overshadowed by the binary presentation of Irish politics in recent history.

The image of the plough and stars is further associated with major Irish playwright Sean O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). As we have seen, Coleman elaborated that *The Ploughman’s Party* deals with the power of propaganda and merchandizing in a society where a symbol of labour, the plough, may be transformed into a purely decorative tool of the cultural system. This reading acquires additional meanings when it is reread in light of the socialist aspirations prior to the Easter Rising period. Rather than being a lament for socialism in the Irish context, which never recovered its momentum after the Rising, the allusion to O’Casey’s play suggests the impotence of socialism.

Fig. 3.6. Flag of the Irish Citizen Army showing “the starry plough”

O’Casey had been involved in the Irish Citizen Army just prior to the Easter Rising and the play gravitates around an unsuccessful rebellion for independence in that period. Despite the playwright’s personal affiliations with socialism, the authority of

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151 In his footnotes Buchloh comments: “In the early 1970s – resonating with Fried’s condemnation – nothing would have appeared more disqualified as a point of departure than a programmatic reconsideration of the conventions of theatricality. Coleman’s decision to engage precisely with those conventions seems to have alienated audiences both in Europe and the United States, keeping his work in relative historical ineligibility and delaying its recognition” (2003: 108, ff. 11). Two important essays have been written that give ample attention to Coleman’s theatricality in relation to an Irish context. See Fowler (1984) and Gibbons (2003).

152 Each act is set at a different stage of the rebellion. In the first act Jack and Nora work out their marital differences in relation to Jack’s choice of whether to stay at home or go off with the soldiers of the Irish Citizen Army. In the second act, the Citizen Army is being addressed by a speaker, just prior to their assault on the General Post Office. In the third act, the fighting has started and can be heard off stage. The
young socialist Covey is repeatedly undermined in *The Plough and the Stars*. The nationalist characters fare little better. Writers are unanimous in agreeing that the play showed the Rising in an unfavourable light. Most nationalists and patriots are minor characters, while the large majority of the main characters oppose the rebellion. Coleman’s reference to the slippage of the symbol of the plough and stars, from socialist icon to nationalist icon to decorative tool of the cultural system, similarly tracks the demise of utopian aspirations of the emerging Irish state. Yet, they are not presented in any hierarchy. Ireland becomes rather a sign with a variety of signifying possibilities and a “sign, above all, which promises to mean fully, not now, but at some future date,” that date forever suspended (Graham 2001:154). O’Casey’s use of language in *The Plough and the Stars* marks a turning point in his oeuvre. Although it was still very much based on real, everyday speech, it manifested a new tendency towards elaboration and decoration. This slippage from discourse grounded in experience to aesthetic complexity is echoed in the discursive slippages in the audio recording of *The Ploughman’s Party* but renegotiated by Coleman in a manner that highlights its significance for subjectification.

In *The Ploughman’s Party* Coleman recognizes that in the present the aesthetic is firmly entrenched in the circuits of global capitalism, all of the political choices appearing as mere commodities. As he plays with the relationship between desiring and social production, recoding both in the process, we come close to Deleuze and Guattari’s despotic state:

The despotic State ... forms a new deterritorialized full body; on the other hand it maintains the old territorialities, integrates them as parts or organs of...
For Deleuze and Guattari, the essential task of the socius is to code the flows of desire and material. The essential mechanism of the despotic state machine is that it introduces a system of overcoding. The capitalist state represents a transformation of earlier apparatuses of overcoding in that it is now a key mechanism for the co-ordination and control of the decoded and deterritorialized flows which are co-extensive with capitalism. The despotic state shares its horror of decoded flows with the traditional state form (Patton 2007: 91, 98).

In a groundbreaking book examining the juncture where Irish postcolonialism meets postmodernism, literary scholar Colin Graham presents Ireland involved in a similar process of transformation. He argues that territory and utopian desire are only two ingredients in a constant flux:

At the meeting point of the particular, ambiguous colonial circumstances of Ireland and Irishness … the teleological anticolonialism of Irish nationalism is cross-hatched with an archaism and a western modernising drive, and one “result” is … deferred utopianism …. This utopianism finds itself accommodating modernisation, industrialism, the mystical, the visionary, the exilic and the frankly lunatic, never committing itself to any, but always offering to redefine its space and its time for each. (2001: 24)

Graham sees the recognition of this transformation of Ireland as signifier as having the potential to utterly transform national discourse. Coleman plays with a comparable oscillation between archaic and contemporary references to culture and cultivating as well as between “authenticity” and consumer identity. His intention appears to be to disrupt the embedded teleology of cultural evolutionism that is present in all linear accounts of history and in the structure of all normative discourse. The power of The Ploughman’s Party lies partly in Coleman’s refusal to answer the demand for authenticity, while fulfilling the need for hegemonic representation.

The complexity of the overinterpreted sign “Ireland,” its lack of secure foundations, its existence as a metaspace and as what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community” (1991) point to other ways of conceiving the national.156

156 Anderson suggests that the nation is imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each
Coleman demonstrates the possibility of representing the national as something other than a continuous signifier; other than the product of linear history. By doing so, he negotiates a path beyond the stigma of postcolonial derivativeness without embracing a native informant narrative. *The Ploughman’s Party* suggests that the variety of signifying possibilities of the national can be embraced for other critical purposes and in ways that suit contemporary cultural conditions in which the cultural and economic merge. I turn now to the significance of this operation for curatorial purposes.

**Towards Post-representational Curating**

There exists a deep structural complicity between the cultural evolutionism embedded in Western philosophical teleology and the logic of the exchange rate of cultural capitals. This is the question of Value that Spivak points out is so difficult to conceptualize because the gap between the economic and cultural history is so difficult to bridge (2006: 229). The function of curating in increasing the critical (and therefore monetary) value of the displayed work suggests a further structural complicity between the inner logic of curatorial norms and the hegemonic narratives of dominant nations. I wonder whether Coleman’s strategies to get beyond derivativeness and the impasse of low cultural capital might be recoverable for curatorial purposes.

Dorothea von Hantelmann has drawn attention to how Coleman often “sets up relationships between the portrayal and the creation of history” and gives expression within his work to a discontinuous understanding of history (2010: 47). She contextualizes these strategies in relation to Coleman’s emergence in the context of Minimal Art; an art which “shift[ed] the meaning of artworks onto the essentially general and indeterminate level of effect” (51). Against this, Coleman “operates with a (Benjamin-like) dialectic between the fragmentary presentation of a historical figure and a present experience” (52). Von Hantelmann points out that this strategy puts pressure on the normative function of the museum as a space in which the individual experiences his or her own formation as a historical process and as a process rooted in history. But

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lives the image of their communion” (1991: 6). The “deep, horizontal comradeship” Anderson speaks of continues in a contemporary form among migrants who, although they may not share the same physical territory as their national peers, continue to feel that they are part of the same community. Sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis refers to this relationship as a form of cultural deterritorialization (2000: 208).
we might ask how this strategy might be taken on board by the museum itself to represent otherwise.

Crucially, Coleman offers a way out of the impasse of the positionality of the postcolonial subject specifically, who can find no ground from which to enunciate the self within discourse. His contradictory approach comes close to the double loyalty Spivak proposes is necessary in the creation of postcolonial subaltern representation. Radhakrishnan has summarised this position well:

Here is Spivak’s classic presentation of her politics: to be part of the subaltern solidarity and read subalternity against the grain, engage in hegemonic representational practices in the interests of political scrupulosity and undertake a radical and indeterminate deconstruction of representation as such; rigorously mark out the historical terrain of subalternity for all to see and realize subalternity as the allegorical vanishing point of representation as such.157

It is because Spivak acknowledges the political and economic value of representation as well as the death of representation in theory that she finds it necessary to both represent and undo representation simultaneously. I wonder what it might mean in curatorial terms to do likewise; to inhabit “the allegorical vanishing point of representation as such.” What might it mean in practice to fully accept the theoretical breakdown of representation, yet to continue to represent in a manner that incorporates this awareness?

I wonder especially what it might mean in curatorial terms to inhabit what Spivak calls “the allegorical vanishing point of representation” (2003: 115). What might it mean for curatorial practice to fully accept the theoretical breakdown of representation, yet to continue to represent in a manner that incorporates this awareness? In theory, post-representational representation is as unnecessary as it is oxymoronic. In his writings on multiculturalism, cultural theorist Werner Hamacher is representative of the paradigmatic shift of postmodern thought when he recalls that “culture” is an ideal and as such cannot be achieved or demonstrated:

157 (2003: 115). I do not wish to collapse the distinction between the postcolonial and the subaltern here. As Radhakrishnan has pointed out, “Theorists of indigency would point out that subalternity is not an inherent state of being or a historically objective condition, but very much a matter of narrative production. In other words, the alignment of postcoloniality with subalternity is not natural. A so-called subaltern text may well be an indigenous text that warrants a different historiography” (1993: 759).
We … use the word culture to talk about the highest personal ideal: the ideal of being a “cultured” or a “cultivated” person. No culture is Culture, culture itself, no culture can measure up to its claim to be culture. … It is, therefore, not a possession, this culture, but a projection and a reproach, an attempt to reach a goal – itself, that other – that is by definition unattainable: ever another culture, and each time guilty of not being the other culture and of not being whole. (1996: 284)

As a result of the impossibility of representing culture as such, representation per se is often seen as an oppressive act which reinforces other oppressive social relations. This has had two direct repercussions in curatorial practice since the 1990s: firstly, nationally framed exhibitions have been largely discredited and secondly, curators have insisted that artists only represent themselves and not a particular identity when they appear in individual and group exhibitions.

Logically speaking, this response makes sense. But it underestimates the somewhat illogical role played by the *a priori* of dominant national cultures in the production of (art) discourse. Hamacher comes close to unraveling this paradox in his other writings on Western philosophy. Examining Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*, he looks at the necessity of an *a priori* in order to bring the hermeneutic circle to its point of closure, without which there will always be misunderstanding or absence of understanding:

*Dasein* is “free for its possibilities”…. “What it is *not* yet in its ability-to-be, it *is* existentially”…. And by understanding in this way *Dasein* is already its own “not-yet”: it stands ahead of itself where it does not yet stand, and it thus understands in its “not” each time itself, each time understands in another *its* other, and each time understands possibilities as *its* possibilities. There is no “there” of being-there that would not be a “before,” and there is no “before” that could not be its own “before.” *Dasein* does not therefore make any presuppositions; rather as understanding, it *is* “the most primordial ‘presupposing’ in which it ‘relates solely to itself.’” (1996: 27)

I consider the notion of culture (as authentic being) to operate in a rather similar manner. Even though the demand for culture is truly hyperbolic, the notion of a culture-as-such is nevertheless productive in defining the existence or non-existence of a culture. Without being seen to operate as an *a priori* like this, the *a posteriori* effect of an act of production comes into the spotlight at the expense of cultural authenticity.
The seamless representation of a national culture as a consolidated “us” that is authentic in a manner that is both achievable and demonstrable cannot happen. Post-structuralist theorists have made this clear. Yet Coleman and Spivak lead us towards realizing that it is possible (and politically called for) to be true to both the possibility and the impossibility of representation, this double move being necessary in contemporary cultural conditions. Such representation would necessarily acknowledge the impossibility of its own seamlessness and disrupt the notion of historical continuity and thus actively disrupting the hermeneutic circle and its unstated teleologies.

A post-representational national curating might be possible in terms of Benjamin’s reading of Kafka: “there is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us” (Benjamin, 2007: 144). Writing also on Kafka, not coincidentally the inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor literature,” Hamacher notes:

In Kafka’s prose, literature and the historical continuum of transmission it helps produce transform themselves into an “ill” tradition, into a giving and giving-over that no longer gives a content, no longer offers a gift, but only gives this giving itself. … What is maintained is a history … that releases itself from history as a normative continuum in which meaning is mediated and transmitted, and a history that opens itself onto another one – but not onto a history “for us.” Having been freed from this continuum, history is likewise freed from its anthropological determinations and directions. … There is hope always only for another – and for an “us” only when there is, so to speak, no “us,” when “we” stop being “ourselves” and begin to be another. “Plenty of hope, therefore, “but not for us.” Hope, rather, case by case, for others, for another literature and another history.158

If we can consider the national exhibition as an “ill” curatorial tradition, as I do, we might find unexpected potential in embracing its failure to transmit authentic culture. Leaning towards this failure, it might be possible to develop a kind of “minor curating” that would seek to undermine the uneven weight of cultures from within the norms of curating national art production. What might it mean in practice to represent the national while breaking down the terms of national representation?

Aspects of this possibility can be found in Be(com)ing Dutch in the Age of Globalization (2008), an exhibition devised by curators Charles Esche and Annie

Fletcher at the Van Abbe Museum in the Netherlands in terms that represented the national but sought to break down the norms of national representation. It culminated a two-year project that examined how the Netherlands (“or any country”) could shift from the static idea of nationality as a fixed identity rooted in place and ancestry to the notion of nationality as a process. The project involved artists, theorists, writers, curators and cultural activists in various phases of research, events and artists’ activities in the two-year lead up to the exhibition; optimal circumstances for innovation. The curators had set up an interesting set of perspectives by inviting artists for the exhibition who were neither necessarily “Dutch” nor in the process of gaining Dutch citizenship. A considerable number were not even resident in the Netherlands. This highlighted the role of the nation as a meta-space in the global imaginary as much as a territorial space. It emphasized the currency of Dutch political questions to worldwide debates surrounding the culturalisation of politics.159

Other possibilities for this direction are evident in recent responses to the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, where a number of curatorial and artistic projects have been designed to both fulfill the remit of national representation and simultaneously undermine the inherent ideology of this demand. At the 53rd Venice Biennale held in 2009, the most literal engagement of this sort took place at the first ever United Arab Emirates pavilion, curated by Tirdad Zolghadr. Entering the pavilion, the viewer was struck by the sleek interior design, models of ambitious museum complexes and a select display of contemporary photography. The tone of the presentation was somewhere between conceptual and corporate, echoing received notions of the UAE art world as a kind of national display feature. There were two further elements of the installation that served to undo this appearance, however. One

159 In spite of the excellent concept and the rich possibilities forged by the project, the exhibition itself was somewhat disappointing. Although there was an additional programme of artistic works in public space, the content of the exhibition inside the museum did not greatly differ from standard exhibitions showcasing works dealing with cultural diversity issues. This was all the more surprising, given that most works had been commissioned especially for the show. I wonder whether Be(com)ing Dutch did not block some of its own potential for innovation through the curators’ ambivalence about representation. Esche and Fletcher had insisted that the artists “only represented themselves” and not a particular culture or identity. Knowledge created by the artists’ differentially located positionalities was thus implicitly undervalued from the outset. This departure point possibly foreclosed the question of how the differentiated positions of the artists vis-à-vis cultural diversity discourse might set limits to the free play of dispositions within the exhibition and how this may be subverted. There were also queries in the national press regarding the curators’ approach to “the national” within the overall project, with, for example, keynote lectures by foreign intellectuals not being unpacked in relation to the domestic context, and few Dutch speakers. For insight into the project, see http://www.becomingdutch.org.
was a video work in which the curator himself was questioning the ideology of the pavilion through a critical and playful deconstruction of the scenario in which it was embedded. The other was a hand-held audioguide which offered a tour that similarly deconstructed the naturalness of the display, element for element.

A more powerful image, albeit less easily translatable for curatorial purposes, lay in the work that artist Roman Odák made of the Czech and Slovak pavilion. Removing the doors of the building, filling the pavilion with trees and plants, and covering the stairs in front of the entrance with soil and gravel, Ondák effectively extended the Giardini walking path through the pavilion. Read in terms of its representative role, the work posited the obsolescence of the nation. From afar it looked like an abandoned house that may or may not be restored and brought back to use in the future. Yet it was also a structure that could be passed through en route to elsewhere.

The necessity to rethink the representation of national culture is not only relevant for representations of national art as such, but also comes up in passing in the individual instance. Werner Hamacher points out that an understanding of culture-as-such must often be “presupposed” for an explanation of an individual work or an individual artist’s oeuvre, even when the demand for representation as such is not explicit (1993: 30). Rather than aiming to recover identity-as-such, Radhakrishnan points to Judith Butler’s (1992) formulation of “contingent foundations” as a way forward: arguing that “all realities are nothing but inventions, and yet it is crucial to invent one’s own realities, for if one didn’t one would become the prisoner/object of someone else’s invention” (2001: 118). In fact, we have seen through Hamacher that it is precisely contingency that enables the hermeneutic circle to function, even in the case of dominant countries. I will examine the burden and functioning of the individual instance of representation more clearly in chapter five, observing how contemporary artists try to actively step outside of their representational role as “Irish artists” in London. I will first examine the critical challenge offered by the notion of Irish postcoloniality in more detail in chapter four, through analysis of an exhibition that juxtaposed Irish and Mexican contemporary art.