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

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## Distant Relations? Postcolonialism, Race and Irish Art

*Distant Relations: A Dialogue between Chicano, Irish and Mexican Artists* was initiated by independent curator and writer Trisha Ziff, who had been struck by parallels between Ireland and Mexico during travel in both countries. She recalls: “While driving through the back roads of the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca in the south of Mexico, my thoughts were constantly interrupted with images from earlier travels through the wilds of Donegal ... in the northwest of Ireland” (1995: 27).<sup>160</sup> This romantic beginning gave way to four years of preparation for an exhibition that opened at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in December 1995, before touring to the Camden Arts Centre in London, the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California in 1996, and to the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Carrillo Gil in Mexico in 1997. Ziff intended the exhibition to be “a dialogue to explore the parallels of these cultures in the context of their colonial experiences, rather than as a survey exhibition” (29). Her perceived parallels included the two nations having colonial histories, endangered indigenous languages, traces of large-scale emigration and an ongoing investment in religious and pagan beliefs.

In London, over thirty works by Irish, Mexican and Chicano artists were exhibited together in two large gallery spaces. Mexican artist Amalia Mesa-Bains’s installation *The Circle of the Ancestors* drew on Mexican folk culture in a tangible and referential way. John Valdez’s paintings engage with traditional stories as a means to reflect on his self-identity. Using a very different approach, Rubén Ortiz Torres made a tongue-in-cheek juxtaposition of cultural fragments in his series of modified baseball caps. The selected Irish artists were mostly well known for works which, uncharacteristically for Irish art, engaged with issues related to place and identity. Alice Maher exhibited a series of drawings entitled *Folt* that engaged with gender issues, while Frances Hegarty’s video *Turas* drew on her experience of emigration to England

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<sup>160</sup> All subsequent quotations from Ziff and exhibiting artists and authors are from this anthology, unless otherwise stated. The publication was intended as an anthology rather than a catalogue of the exhibition. Hence I refer to it as an anthology. However, critics and contributors also refer to the publication as a catalogue, so both terms will be used in this chapter to refer to the same publication. Ziff had previously published a book on contemporary Mexican photography (1990) and an anthology on the Bloody Sunday tragedy of 1972 (1998).

and subsequent loss of her mother tongue, Irish. The selection contained a large number of Northern Irish artists, who are generally speaking more inclined to engage with identity issues than their peers from the Republic. A mixed media installation by Philip Napier dealt with place names and their unraveling of historical narratives. John Kindness's *Ninja Turtle Harp* turned the iconic national symbol into a kitsch object adorned with fragments of pottery showing the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. The juxtaposition of works by Irish, Chicano and Mexican artists in close proximity invited viewers to tease out what Trisha Ziff proposed to be the artists' shared experience of being "marked by the experience of colonialism, whether as members of a dominant culture, whether they emigrated and became part of a minority culture far from home, or whether they were born into a country where the dominant culture was not theirs" (1995: 26).

The exhibition took place at the tail end of identity politics discourse, having been planned at its peak.<sup>161</sup> Ziff follows the norms of identity politics exhibitions by presenting the artists as representative of their place of origin. We are likely to see the exhibition recall at least some of the unresolved issues within identity politics curating. Let me revisit them briefly by way of a review of the 1993 Whitney Biennial by Charles A. Wright, which describes some of the most pressing issues well. Wright comments that the show offered "a representative selection of works by previously marginalized artists loosely professing an interest in 'questions of identity,' while at the same time neglecting to address the identity of the inquiring institution" (2004: 188).<sup>162</sup> Without this wider situating of identity issues within the institution of art itself, the emphasis fell all too heavily on the identity of individual artists. Furthermore, the notion of artists "having an identity" as such foreclosed the possibility of multiple positionality and identifications, resulting in a typically reductive reception of the work's critical content. As I suggested in the introduction, the overshadowing of the aesthetic and conceptual content of works by the all-too-heavy burden of "representing" identity further

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<sup>161</sup> Major theoretical touchstones on cultural identity within identity politics in art discourses included Gilroy (1993), Bhabha (1994), Hall (1997) and King (1997) as well as essays in the London-based journal *Third Text*. See also Jones, Sokolowski, Maharaj, and Gilroy (1991), Fisher (1994), Hall and Maharaj (2001), Rogoff (2000) and Fusco (2000) for some insight into art writing related to 1990s discourses on Identity Politics.

<sup>162</sup> This issue was approached within the exhibition catalogue by the museum director and critic Homi Bhabha, among others. Yet, as 1993 Whitney Biennial curator Elisabeth Sussman later agreed, the transition of this rhetoric to the physicality of an exhibition installation was problematic. For a reflection on the curatorial process see Sussman (1994).

entrenched an existing polarization within art discourse, with art-for-art's-sake positions being pitted against the politically inclined. Subsequently in the 2000s this became a polarization of mainstream art discourse and “culturally diverse” (inherently exotic and/or political) art.

By the late 1990s it had already become clear that the model of “identity” and the conflation of political and artistic forms of representation that are already evident in this brief introduction of the curatorial vision of *Distant Relations* were inadequate, given that the realities and exclusions they addressed were multiple and cross-cutting. The curatorial “avoidance” of representation that was a widespread response to the perceived failure of the project of identity politics exhibitions remains with us today. I have suggested in the introduction that the use of the global tag to overcome intercultural issues is a related strategy rather than a sign of the resolution of identity politics issues. Yet, as Alex Callinicos warns, “it is important to avoid a certain kind of rationalist error, which moves from the identification of certain serious, one might even say fatal, flaws in a particular theoretical discourse to the judgement that this problematic can produce no work of substantive value” (2008: 87). I want to consider whether a different response to the failure of identity politics exhibitions might not be equally valid. Is it perhaps possible to more productively engage with the gap between artistic and political representation by emphasizing rather than denying the status of the curatorial act as a representation of representations?

In this chapter I further address two issues emerging in my analysis of the exhibition that are general to the rhetoric structures of curating as such. The first is the problematic relationship between political representation and artistic/philosophical representation in identity politics exhibitions. The second is the locatedness of the art works in particular social, cultural, political and artistic discourses, and the tension between this multiplicity and the drive towards a unifying curatorial thread. As Radhakrishnan wrote in 1987 in an essay that considered ethnic identity and poststructuralist difference, the emergence of these multiplicities asks for a different kind of narrative intervention:

It is clear that the model of “identity” and its corollary, the representational algorithm, are inadequate when the realities, exclusions, and jeopardies that we are experiencing are, at the very least, multiple. ... These emergences are pressing for a different language, a different politics and temporality, for an

infinitely complex program of action that has to fulfill the following objectives: empowerment and enfranchisement of contingent “identities,” the overthrow of the general hegemony of Identity, and the prevention of the essentialization/hypostasis and the fetishization of “difference.” What is necessary, then, is a critical tactic that will call into question both the economy of identity and the axiology of binarity that underwrites the nomology of identity. (1987: 210-211)

I want to consider how the curatorial narrative of *Distant Relations* facilitates a rethinking of the tasks of curating to produce new signifying systems of difference. I will use *Distant Relations* as a departure point to consider how curators might further think the tasks of curating along poststructuralist lines to produce new signifying systems of difference in the present.

Despite the shortcomings *Distant Relations* shares with many identity politics exhibitions of the 1990s, the choice of nations provided a first impetus towards reconsidering the binary opposition of mainstream and other art. Neither Mexico nor Ireland spring to mind as immediate examples of postcolonial locations. Ireland’s contested status as both European and a former colony means that Irish art inhabits a multiplicity of contingent positions that expand or break down many of the binaries that informed identity politics discourses in the 1990s. The factors which are seen to undermine Irish postcoloniality – the nation’s geographic position, the predominant whiteness of its population, its historically divergent roles as oppressed and oppressor, and its contemporary participation in global capitalism – productively challenge a binary view of colonialism. In Mexico the term “postcolonial” tends to be associated with indigenous minorities and the Chicano movement. As such it is a relatively inoperative term in mainstream discourse. The specificity of the relations between Ireland and Mexico call attention to the multi-layered nuances of relationality, which draw on historic and contemporary discourses in dynamic and often conflicting ways, as I will later argue. Although Ziff did not explicitly address the possibility, the exhibition thus presents a potential model for sketching out the space between mainstream and postcolonial – a relational space that occupies the gap that has formed between the mainstream and other art discourses.

The term “postcolonial” has become associated with Mexico at large through Latin American Studies theorists in recent years, working mostly outside of Mexico. Yet it remains a term that does not typically evoke the mainstream within Mexico itself,

partly because of its racial implications. Similarly, Irish postcolonial studies are mostly undertaken within Irish Studies departments in American universities. Irish Studies academics in Ireland typically have a more ambivalent relationship with that status of Ireland as postcolonial. In Ireland the field of art has largely sidestepped the discourse, with the obvious exception of one exhibition held in 1994, which celebrated the otherness of Irish art through a postcolonial framing.<sup>163</sup> The question of whether the Irish rejection of postcolonial discourse also takes place on racial grounds is an important one. The colour line that is often the unspoken boundary line between mainstream and other art comes into view here.

Richard Dyer observes in *White: Race and Culture* that both Irish and Mexicans belong in “a category of maybe, sometime whites, people who may be let in to whiteness under particular historical circumstances” (1997: 19). He describes how people in this category are “often excluded, sometimes indeed being assimilated into the category of whiteness, and at others, treated as a ‘buffer’... between the white and the black or indigenous.” There are further distinctions to be made, however. Dyer places Chicanos in the position of being neither black nor white, while indigenous Mexican populations are generally likely to be seen as “non-white.”<sup>164</sup> Ziff does not address race within the curatorial narrative of *Distant Relations*. However, I will take race as a departure point for this chapter with a view to identifying gaps and contradictions and thus locate possible lines for further curatorial development.

I will thus reread *Distant Relations* with the goal of teasing out some of its more radical propositions. However I will also examine its slippage towards a narrower nationalistic reading of postcoloniality and of the perceived parallels between Mexico and Ireland. My intention is to both deconstruct and problematize the curatorial narrative and show its validity, so that some of the limitations and potentialities of “postcolonial” curatorial framing emerge in the process. I will single out a number of representative art works here as case studies for further analysis that will allow me to unpack the range of artistic positions and their complex relationship to the curatorial concept. We will see that some works challenge the assimilative approach of the

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<sup>163</sup> Entitled *Beyond the Pale: Irish Artists at the Edge of Consensus*, the exhibition was curated by Declan McGonagle and held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1994.

<sup>164</sup> See Allen (1994) for further analysis of the construction of the racialised conception of Irishness. See Rodriguez (2007) for an extensive study of race in the Mexican context.

curatorial narrative but that the curatorial framing also points to foreclosures in the content of other works on display. My focus will be on the representation of Irish art within the exhibition, in keeping with the framework of my overall study. After a brief discussion of wider political and economic factors informing the background of the exhibition, I will focus my analysis on three separate but interrelated areas – race and Irishness, identity in Northern Ireland and Diaspora identity.

In the years leading up to *Distant Relations*, both Mexico and Ireland went through rapid and profound social, economic and political change. By 1995 the Peace Process had reshaped the political and constitutional relations between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain. When *Distant Relations* opened at its first venue, it was exactly two years since the *Joint Declaration on Peace* had been co-issued by British and Irish governments and almost one-and-a-half years since the IRA had declared a ceasefire.<sup>165</sup> In the same period Ireland became Europe's fastest growing economy and net emigration had been replaced by the influx of a multi-ethnic immigrant population. The Irish Diaspora was no longer a priority amid the pressing need to accommodate Ireland's new Diasporas. Debates about colonialism were now resurfacing in terms of potential discursive alliances between historic Irish identity and recently arrived communities, particularly in the context of the upcoming 150-year famine commemorations.<sup>166</sup> All of these changes combined called for a reconfiguration of Irish culture in terms of race and ethnicity. The most urgent emergences “pressing for a different language” within the exhibition therefore include the racial status of Irishness and how it intersects with sectarian identities in the Northern Irish context in particular, as well as with the diasporic identity of the Irish abroad and the identities of immigrants in Ireland.

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<sup>165</sup> The *Joint Declaration on Peace* is better known as the *Downing Street Declaration*. In an important shift in previous conceptions of national belonging, the 1993 *Declaration* asserted that “Irish self-determination” (a united Ireland) required the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland, and that the consent of the majority of the Republic would be necessary for unification. The IRA had declared a ceasefire in August 1994 and in February 1995 the Peace Process led to the issuing of Framework Documents including a proposal for a 90-member Assembly government to be elected by proportional representation. The Framework Documents included A New Framework for Agreement, which dealt with North/South Institutions and A Framework for Accountable Government in Northern Ireland, which included the proposal for an Assembly to be elected by proportional representation. The proposals were not welcomed by unionists. See *Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN)*. University of Ulster, Belfast <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>. Accessed June 2008.

<sup>166</sup> In this paragraph I draw especially on Moane (2002: 111-112). See Kelly (2010) for a cultural analysis of famine commemoration.

In the same period that Ireland was experiencing peace, the Zapatista declaration of war against the Mexican state in January 1994 had led to political instability. This sharp contrast in political situations was mirrored by economic developments. As the Republic of Ireland began to experience an economic boom, Mexico found itself in post-NAFTA economic chaos. In the anthology *Cuauhtémoc* Medina writes:

During the eighties and nineties, the Mexican government and its elites invoked, in ever more exalted terms, the idea that Mexico would finally be integrated into that bleached utopia called “modernity”... Modernity has a clear meaning in terms of the economic landscape: accelerated privatization, the dismantling of traditional communal land holdings in the countryside, the internationalization of capital ... Thus the collapse of 1994-5: the intensification of conflicts among religious and economic sectors; the eruption of political violence; the punctual return of the financial crisis at the end of 1994; the Indian rebellion in Chiapas and the zeal for drowning it in blood, even at the cost of consensus. (89)

Ziff commented on the subsequent fragility of the curatorial narrative, stating that “Ireland and Mexico are changing at such a rapid pace that perhaps what they share most in common is the experience of chaotic change” (43). Keeping in mind what she perceived as a sudden discrepancy between previously comparable situations, Ziff nevertheless insisted that “the parallels remain in place (although moving in opposite directions).” I am concerned here with the strain this puts on the curatorial narrative. I want to question how much capacity curatorial narratives have to shift in meaning and to be reinterpreted, following the demands of a situation like this and/or following the internal demands of the art works represented. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will consider how post-structural approaches to discourse might open up new rhetorical possibilities.

### **Race and Irishness**

Perhaps the most pervasive but unspoken tenet of arguments rejecting Ireland’s postcolonial status is the predominant whiteness of the nation’s population. The racial tensions inherent in referring to Ireland as a former colony bubble beneath the surface of *Distant Relations*, rather than provoking direct questions about the racial dynamics of colonialism, as, for example, a juxtaposition of art from Ireland with art from a former African colony might have done. In the mid 1990’s Ireland became a destination for

immigration for the first time in its history. The relatively small numbers of this first wave of immigrants resulted in a kind of moral panic evident in the press (Conway 2006). The general response was typically one of xenophobia, with over half of the Irish public defining themselves as racist in a poll taken in 1997.<sup>167</sup> Some saw Ireland's past experience as a crucial mediator of contemporary responses to immigration. This resulted in various moments of "remembering" a traumatic Irish past, particularly Famine emigration. What largely remained forgotten in public debates was the racial construction of Irishness through colonialism.

The outward forgetting might be taken as a sign that the historical racial experience is no longer relevant in the midst of contemporary prosperity. Yet, as Benedict Anderson has proposed, cultural forgetting is as formative to nations as cultural memories. His insight is partly drawn from Ernest Renan, author of *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (1882), whose readers were "obliged already to have already forgotten" the violent historic incidents that Renan's own words assumed that they, as Frenchmen, naturally remembered, despite the six-hundred-year gap (1991: 199-201). Following Renan, I would argue that Irish people have been obliged to forget the racial inferiority buried in the *habitus* of Irish culture. Yet its submerged presence appears to have manifested itself in the collective panic of the wider public when confronted with otherness in its midst.

In his essay for the *Distant Relations* anthology, postcolonial scholar Luke Gibbons elaborated on the kind of racial experiences Irish public discourse has been obliged to forget:

[F]rom the colonial perspective, the racial labels "White/non-White" did not follow strict epidermal schemas of visibility or skin colour so that, in an important sense, the Irish historically were classified as "non-White" and treated accordingly. The widespread question of the "mere Irish" with the native Americans in the seventeenth century served as a pretext for wholesale confiscations and plantations, and more ominous expressions of genocidal intent as in Edmund Spenser's advice to Queen Elizabeth that "until Ireland be famished, it cannot be subdued." The transportation of the Irish to the New World featured prominently in the "white slave trade" in the seventeenth century, and throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Penal code which systematically excluded Catholics from

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<sup>167</sup> (Lentin and McVeigh 2002: 47). This European Commission poll from 1997 found 55% of Irish people defined themselves as "racist." This says something not only about the level of racism in Ireland, but about the social acceptability of overt racism in Ireland at that time.

citizenship and political life rendered them, in Edmund Burke's phrase, foreigners in their native land. (61-2)

Gibbons's account makes clear that Irish whiteness offered no mantle of protection from the legitimisation of colonial imposition through implied racial inferiority.<sup>168</sup> Rather, as David Lloyd suggests elsewhere, the apparent visual anomaly of white-on-white racism in the Irish situation emphasized how the appeal to visual immediacy of discrimination is only the index of a prior constitution of available positionalities (1991: 77).

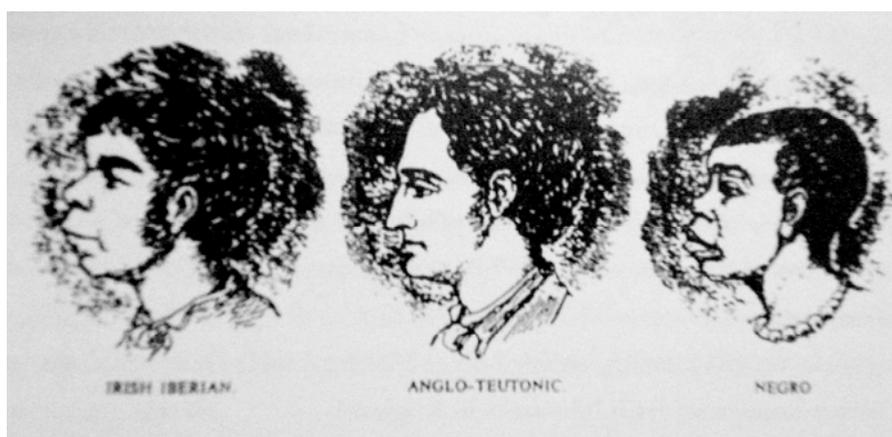
The placement of the Irish in a non-white or black category was politically motivated by British imperialism. With the rise of the Fenian movement for Irish liberation in the 1860's, British representation of the Irish as black intensified, notably through a comparison of the Irish with chimpanzees and gorillas. Such comparisons stemmed from the notion that the Irish were "the missing link" between apes and humans. In the near-absence of a visibly black population, Irish "blackness" was legitimated by scientific studies on eugenics, which emerged at the turn of the century. Using his "index of nigrescence," a formula to determine the racial components of any given people, physician John Beddoe concluded that the Irish "had traces of 'negro' ancestry in their appearances" (Dyer 1997: 52). This was evident for example in an illustration from *Harper's Weekly* from 1899 (Fig. 4.1) in which the side profiles of the "Irish Iberian," "Anglo-Teutonic" and the "Negro" are juxtaposed. The accompanying caption indicated that the so-called Iberians were "believed to have been" an African race that invaded first Spain and then, apparently, Ireland, where they intermarried with native savages.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Due to the political motivation behind the blackening of the Irish, the intensity of this racialisation was higher in Britain relative to other locations worldwide. For further examination of the visual representation of the Irish as black, see Curtis (1997). Curtis suggests that the Celt was a rung above his/her Negro and aboriginal counterparts in most British scales of racial development (15). Anti-Irish racism should be differentiated from the global perception of the racial inferiority of Africans, Native Americans and other ethnic groups, historically and at present. See especially Eagan (2006) for a comparative analysis of treatments of Irish blackness in academic and public education discourses in the U.S.

<sup>169</sup> The caption read: "The Iberians are believed to have been originally an African race who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain over Western Europe. Their remains are found in the barrows, or burying places, in sundry parts of these countries. The skulls are of low prognathous type. They came to Ireland and mixed with the natives of South and West, who themselves are supposed to have been of low type and descendants of savages of the Stone Age, who, in consequence of isolation from the rest of the world, had never been out-competed in the healthy struggle of life, and thus made way, according to the laws of nature, for superior races." This image was illustrated and addressed in the anthology by psychologist Garrett O'Connor, who addressed the issue of shame and healing in postcolonial cultural recovery (Ziff 1995: 133).

The story does not end there however. The Irish also co-opted this notion of the Irish as one race for their own political means. Mid to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalist movements made reference to the Irish as a Celtic race as a means of differentiating themselves from Anglo-Saxons in their drive towards national independence. As Gibbons writes elsewhere, the notion of race “secur[ed] the image of an embattled people surviving intact and maintaining unity in the face of two thousand years of upheaval, invasion and oppression.”<sup>170</sup> Irish nationalism thus accepted the homogenizing drive of imperial culture while redefining its purview (Lloyd 1991: 78). When the Irish Free State was formed in 1921, its constitution drew on Irish people as one race and translated that homogeneity into cultural rather than genealogical terms. This meant that Irish people made a transition from blackness to whiteness while maintaining a sense of pride in the otherness of their ethnicity, with complicated consequences, as we will see.



**Fig. 4.1** H. Strickland Constable, *Ireland From One or Two Neglected Points of View*, *Harper's Weekly*, 1899

One work in *Distant Relations* pointed to the power relations embedded in this transition and, by doing so, problematized the assumption of postcolonial solidarity underpinning Ziff's curatorial narrative. Rubén Ortiz Torres's work *Ejercito Mexicano*

<sup>170</sup>In a further essay focusing on race, Gibbons discusses competing models for nationalism that rejected using race as the basis for unity (1991: 103-105). The alternately positive and negative uses of the term “Celtic” in Irish and English discourses, and the fine line between the two produced its own problems. See Graham (2001: 36-40) for a contemporary perspective. See Leerssen for historical accounts leading up to the nineteenth century (1996a) and during the nineteenth-century (1996b).

(Mexican Army) (Fig. 4.2) consists of a baseball cap emblazoned with the slogan “Ejercito Mexicano, 1847, Fighting Irish” accompanied by a repeated caricature image of an Irish man raising his fists to fight. This symbol of the “Fighting Irish” appears to be a tribute to the Saint Patrick’s Battalion, a group with a distinctly Irish identity that fought on Mexico’s side during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, motivated by Catholic solidarity, opposition to slavery and promises of land. When the Americans won the war, 72 members of the Saint Patrick’s Battalion were charged with desertion and hung in public. They are still celebrated today as Irish martyrs in both Ireland and Mexico (McGinn 2003).



**Fig. 4.2** Rubén Ortiz Torres, *Ejercito Mexicano (Mexican Army)*, 1992  
*from Modified Baseball Series, 1991-3*

Ortiz’s work appears to commemorate Mexican-Irish solidarity during the Civil War, but this gesture is complicated by the American connotations of the baseball cap. Irish emigrants had in fact made up one quarter of the American soldiers invading Mexico. The rate of their desertion was the highest of any army in American history. As well as being due to solidarity with the Mexicans, the massive desertion probably resulted from the mistreatment of Irish soldiers by nativists within the army. Nativists resenting immigrants coming into the U.S. had consigned the Irish to the status of “blackness,” or at best, to a race whose social position lay between black and white

(Ignatiev 1996: 76). This compounded the British colonial framing of the Irish as a black race as partial justification for ongoing rule.<sup>171</sup>

While the Saint Patrick's battalion was predominantly made up of Irish and other European deserters from the American army, it also contained men who had settled in Mexico. The Irish had in fact a special agreement with Spanish colonists to be allowed to colonise land. Between 1823 and 1835 a number of Irish became "empresarios" (entrepreneurs), recruiting hundreds of Irish families to move to Mexico. Of the few successful colonies, the best known were in latter-day Texas: *San Patricio de Hibernia* and *Refugio*. There are accounts of mixed loyalties during the Mexican-American war; many settlers staying on the Mexican side, others asking for American troops to facilitate their relocation.<sup>172</sup> This splitting of colonial roles calls attention to the differentiated power relations associated with the Irish within global colonialism and points to the need to create space for these contradictions within the curatorial narrative of *Distant Relations*. This raises the larger question of how to incorporate contradictory power positions within curatorial narratives in general, which have been traditionally designed to convey linear histories.

In the U.S. context the Mexican-American war was associated with the expansion of slavery with Whig opposition and widespread support by the Democratic Party. Northern abolitionists criticized the war as an attempt by slaveholders to expand the grip of slavery and thus ensure their influence in the liberal government. Many Irish immigrants aligned with the Democrats, whose vision for a society polarized between black and white included the promise of Irish whiteness and therefore social mobility. Irish immigrants saw that their chance of success lay in fighting for racial supremacy over Afro-American labourers, with whom they competed for menial work. Indeed the Irish willingness to work for lower wages quickly prompted the organization of labour along racial lines. From the beginning, strict segregation was essential for the Irish to continue to be considered as white rather than black workers.

In his seminal book *How the Irish Became White* labour historian Noel Ignatiev explains:

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<sup>171</sup> (Hartmann 2004). See Ignatiev (1996) and Allen (1994) for further elaboration of Irish identity and race in the Northern American context. See McGinn (2007) for an analysis of the Mexican-Irish relationship.

<sup>172</sup> For an annotated bibliography on the Irish in Mexico and links to numerous related publications, see McGinn (2007).

To be acknowledged as white, it was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found. (1996: 112)

Significant Irish participation in lynching mobs and draft riots attests to the extent to which the Irish have simultaneously inhabited the identities of oppressor and victim. The Democrats' promises of social mobility for the Irish drowned out alternative appeals by Irish nationalist politician Daniel O'Connell, who asked the Irish in America to support abolition and anti-slavery, as part of widespread anti-slavery activity in Ireland motivated by a sense of solidarity with oppressed peoples based on Irish colonial experiences (Rolston and Shannon 2002: 77). This assimilation of Irish Americans into whiteness at the cost of cross-racial solidarity is almost completely ignored in the present (Eagan 2006: 37).

Ortiz's *Ejercito Mexicano* called up a history of solidarity, cut through with racial tension, yet it also raised questions about the current racial status of Irishness. Commenting on the mid 1990s, Diane Negra observed Irishness to be "the ideal guilt-free white ethnicity of choice" in the U.S. context, "offering a means of being both white and ethnically differentiated" (2006: 10-11). The cap was one in a series which, in the artist's words, "comment[ed] on the relation between aesthetics and history; mass media, culture, politics, etc." (Ziff 1996: 32). The cap's status as a consumer object and art work seemed more specifically to comment on the commercial viability of Irishness as a buy-in category supporting a massive industry within the U.S. in particular. Negra observes that in the North American context the celebration of Irishness is implicitly also a celebration of whiteness, which would otherwise be rendered problematic. She argues that the contradictory but concomitant celebration of "the romance of the Irish-black connection" allows recent representations to "veer dramatically between liberal and conservative impulses in their racial thought processes" (2006: 6). As Catherine Eagan observes of Irish signifiers generally, Ortiz's cap might be read to "support a subtext of Irish-black solidarity by glossing over Irish-black conflict" and/or to undermine it by drawing attention to the racial history it suppresses (2006: 35).

The heavily ironised form of authenticity present in Ortiz's work is absent in the work of the Irish artists on display. Although John Kindness uses the Teenage Mutant

Ninja Turtles to decorate a statue of a harp, its symbolic resonance as Ireland's national symbol seems to remain intact, despite the incongruity of the juxtaposition. In his use of the baseball cap as a physical support for the icon, Ortiz draws closer to the potential loss of its political functionality. The possibility that such a popularized representation of Irishness may have agency in terms of the real political weight of notions of Irish-Americanism and its role in the racial make-up of the U.S. today is not foreclosed. But, while I have emphasized the cultural significance of the icon in *Ejercito Mexicano* until this point, its potential meaninglessness is also implied. The housing of the icon in an object of popular consumption points to the achieved transition from socio-political agency to consumption as agency that Coleman had seen emerging in 1980.

This brings us to the juncture between postcolonialism and postmodernism. It suggests the relevance of curatorial discourse addressing the nation as a real place and a signifier. In the Irish context, the diverse signifying functions of the nation would not be teased out theoretically until Colin Graham's *Deconstructing Ireland* appeared in 2001, too late for Ziff's curatorial purposes. As I have mentioned briefly in relation to Coleman's work, Graham refers to the range of signifying possibilities inherent in "Ireland" as "the anachronistic sign, the overinterpreted sign, the repletion of signs, the ironic sign; the sign made meaningful in place by a pastiche; the sign, above all, which promises to mean fully, not now, but at some future date" (2001). Yet Ortiz's work was arguably ahead of the curatorial discourse that framed it. The funny little leprechaun who stands for Irish identity on Ortiz's baseball cap points to the currency of Irishness as a marketable sign of value, despite relying on the most racist of stereotypes. In the most playful manner, it highlights how 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" (Lloyd 1991: 88).

I have mentioned in the introduction that it has never been in the interest of the Irish art world to consider postcoloniality, detracting as it might from the cultural and symbolic capital Irish art accrues through its association with European art discourse. Having never been confronted with the issue of race in relation to Irish colonial history, Irish artists have securely inhabited their white privilege to date and avoided teasing out any contradictions inherent in the racial construction of Irishness that might position them contingently in relation to dominant cultural discourses. Yet, there is

simultaneously a visible desire on the part of some artists to embrace the otherness historically associated with being Irish. I want to tease out some problematic aspects of this double occupancy. Let me consider the relationship between whiteness and the work of artists represented in *Distant Relations*. Taking into account that all of the represented artists from Ireland are white, I want to first consider whether we can see this whiteness in the works of the artists. Is it apparent at all? It may not even be visible in the art works because, unlike other racial constructions, whiteness has been constructed as infinitely variable rather than associated with fixed images or stereotypes. Richard Dyer explains why in *White: Essays on Race and Culture*:

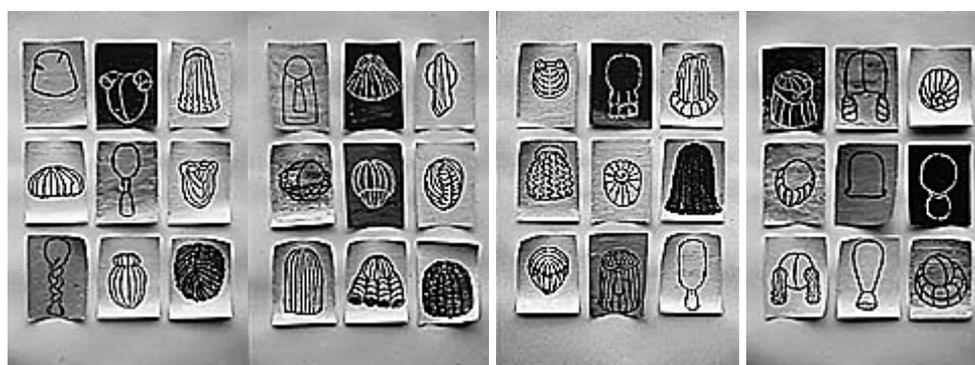
The claim to racial superiority resides in that which cannot be seen, the spirit, manifest only in its control over the body and its enterprising exercise in the world. Moreover, the ultimate position of power in a society that controls people in part through their visibility is that of invisibility, the watcher. (1997: 45)

The specificity of white representation thus resides in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception or what Dyer calls a “non-located and disembodied position of knowledge” (4). If we look now at how Irish artist Alice Maher treats identity in her work, we will see that her narrative structural position reflects this white speaking position, but in her further artistic choices she embraces Irishness as an “other” identity. I want to use her work as a departure point to untangle the complex relationship between whiteness, privilege, race and Irishness.

In *Folt* (Fig. 4.3), the mixed media work by which Maher is represented in *Distant Relations*, a series of small drawings on paper depicting various hairstyles are presented in five wall-mounted cases, together with a sixth case containing a plait made up of fragments of human hair from hundreds of heads. The drawings are diagrammatic in their simplicity, presenting painted outlines of hair against monochromatic painted backgrounds of black, white and grey. In the anthology, the artist translates the Irish language title *folt* as “abundance, tresses, forest of hair.” She explains that she intends the work to act as a kind of “catalogue of identities, values, personae, imaginings and choices that girls and women continue to adopt in order to operate within a world that continually sites them outside of understanding” (123). Joan Fowler observes in her essay in the anthology that “the graphical hairstyle is a sign of both woman and

commodity and woman as commodity” and suggests Maher’s interest in “the ideal models of femininity represented in all aspects of the mass media” (87). When *Folt* was first exhibited, the accompanying catalogue contained two illustrations of advertisements of late nineteenth-century women’s hairstyles and examples of the instruments required to construct them.

Maier also mentions the relationship between childhood fantasies of womanhood, tied up with fairytales and myths. This imaginary child-like quality returns in the simplicity of the drawings themselves and the almost haphazard way they are attached to their mount. Yet, this imaginary is not as innocent as it first appears. Maier also emphasizes in the anthology that the hair drawings depict “many different eras and cultures” (123). Although it is not the artist’s intention, the ordering of the hair on paper in this intimate yet taxonomic manner is equally reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropological drawings which catalogued and thus accumulated knowledge. The position of the artist, as invisible watcher and enterprising cataloguer of different eras and cultures, is one of omniscience and implicitly of power-holding. It is here that the whiteness of Maier’s narrative structural position becomes apparent. In contrast the real plait of hair has a disruptive presence relative to the contained images of femininity embodied in the graphic images of hair. Through its raw physical presence as detritus of bodily hair and its troubled containment in a frame too small for it, the plait’s presence becomes corporeal and takes on an abject quality in the process. In contrast, as Dyer proposes, whiteness depends on notions of being able to transcend the body and of not being defined by corporeality (1997: 20).



**Fig. 4.3** Alice Maher, Drawings from *Folt*, 1993

How is one to read this juxtaposition of civility and abjection, evoked by the use of the Irish language in the work's title? The abundance implied in the word *folt* conjures up loose hair in contrast to the contained hairstyles depicted with childlike simplicity in the drawings. The closest representation therefore lies in the wayward plait of real hair. The artist's addition of "forest of hair" to the more everyday translation (abundance or head of hair) of *folt* belies a romanticised relationship to the Irish language. Maher explains that the title is meant to suggest how "[t]he language of Irish and the language of hair are both embroiled in a dense thicket history which involves the construction and loss of identity, as well as vast entanglements of shifting meanings." She comments on the "strained position" that *Folt* occupies and on the contradictory and ambivalent relationship of Irish people to their language, and by extension, their culture:

The use of Irish in the title also addresses the questions of communication and loss. It is our own language, yet we do not speak it; it is despised and loathed while at the same time elevated to a high cultural plateau. We know its sounds, we recognise its shapes, yet we cannot bring these together to communicate meaning. English strains to denote the nuances that are everywhere in this familiar language that we recognise but we cannot speak. It is this strained position that *Folt* occupies. (123)

*Folt* is thus an attempt to reclaim or reconstruct the "semantics of remembrance," which, Maher's alienation from the Irish language shows, are impaired in the Irish context. She intends to work against cultural amnesia, looking for "an inherited reservoir of meaning" that might be found in the language itself (Palmer 2001: 1).

Yet Maher does not pursue the complex racial history that she introduces through her coupling of Irishness and late 19<sup>th</sup>-century women's hairstyles. We have seen the Irish secure whiteness through dis-association from black immigrants in the American context in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until the end of the century that the racial status of Irish women in particular was reconsidered in the British context. Ireland's growing insistence on Home Rule led to the British government promoting intermarriage between British men and Irish women to support content political co-habitation. Irish women were suitably "whitened" and promoted as marriage material, as we have seen in the display of the "spick and span" colleens at the Franco-British exhibition of 1908, addressed in chapter one. The Irish woman's role as objectified

commodity in political transaction is absent in *Folt*, even as the signifiers of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman as commodity are present. Obscured by a romanticized notion of otherness and by the marginality of postcolonial discourse in Irish art discourse, the historico-political significance of female Irishness in the postcolonial situation is, I propose, outside of Maher's frame of thinking. Although the work engages with feminism, it reflects the wider silence regarding race in Irish feminist discourse in the 1990s, observed by cultural critic Ronit Lentin, among others (1998: 15).

Furthermore, Maher's intervention in *Folt* raises questions about her perception of the relationship between abjection and Irishness, which she elaborated in a later interview with art historian Fiona Barber (2003). The interviewer addresses this subject in relation to a later work, *Necklace of Tongues* (2001), in which the artist had strung sheep's tongues together and worn them as a necklace. A photograph of the necklace against the artist's naked chest is presented as the finished art work – a gesture which recalls the Celt, who was said to have strung the skulls of those he had killed in battle on his belt as a display of his ferocity. Maher's observations on the juncture between Irishness and otherness in this work are also of direct relevance to how we might read *Folt*. Hence, I will cite them here at length.

When Fiona Barber questions Maher on the connotations of the abject and the primitive in her use of animal parts, she answers:

There is something quite empowering about identifying yourself as the "Other", in speaking from a position of that which is repressed and denied and demeaned. Of course, Ireland was considered as primitive within British colonialism – and probably still is within some sites of power. But major changes have taken place in this area, with the shifts that have occurred in Ireland's economy and cultural identity since the beginning of the 1990's, bringing it well in from the periphery. So it is with a sense of irony that I embrace a notional primitivism. (2003: 420)

Barber challenges the artist with the remaining potential danger of readings of Irishness – particularly female Irishness – as primitive. She adds that a constant feature of Maher's work seems to be a kind of flirtation with and performance of the primitive. Maher responds:

Yes, I think that just about describes it. It's important to me to have some kind of distance, something that evolved also with my gradual move away

from expressionism, because it opens up more questions about identity and issues of representation. Putting on the *Necklace of Tongues* was very much about assuming an identity; there's a sense, when one is wearing it, of being given properties, like when I used to imagine wearing the *Bee Dress*. So it is about taking on an identity as "primitive" in some way, which was actually quite empowering – but this is not who I am, something I enact; in a sense I am performing the primitive here. It's also only one aspect of what I do among many, something incorporated in the hybridity that I constantly embrace in my work. (420)

The artist concludes the interview by stating that she embraces the contradictions of what her work implies. Yet, the problematic is more complex than a mere acceptance of contradiction. Maher is an Irish artist working in a period of privilege, for whom blackness, subalternity or oppression are far from everyday reality. She is free to "perform primitivism" against the backdrop of her whiteness, doubly secured by the economic wealth of the Celtic Tiger context of the interview. In the interview Maher reveals her desire to "re-become the 'other'" as a kind of enhanced whiteness (Eagan 2006: 23). She acknowledges that the ability to be ironic about primitivism or to perform a primitivism that isn't her stems from a positive shift in global perception of Irishness. Yet she seems to overlook the significance of her appropriation of primitivism (as a privileged white woman artist) for others. Her uncomplicated otherness collapses the complexities of Irish ethnicity and erases the existence of non-white Irish women. The critical challenges inherent in negotiating the flexible and changing racial status of Irish womanhood in relation to Europeanness and primitivism are foreclosed and with them an opportunity to disrupt the continuous chain of signifiers they evoke.

Postcolonial discourse was well established within the Irish literature by the mid 1990s. Given the contrasting near-absence of engagement with postcolonial discourse within the Irish art world, Maher's oversights are perhaps not surprising. Moreover, they suggest the wider relevance of *Distant Relations* in raising the question of what postcoloniality might mean for Irish art. Lacking self-reflexive analysis, however, Maher's gesture is less of a discursive displacement than an affirmation of the status quo. On the one hand, the artist subordinates her differentiated womanhood to a monolithic conception of the universal woman and blocks possible identification with critical feminist discourses. On the other hand she creates an incipient female "other," who, to borrow a phrase from Spivak, is "not even a native informant, but a piece of

material evidence” that, by default, seems to reinforce the “sameness” of the universal woman-as-such.<sup>173</sup> In this binary set-up, Maher crowds out the elusive subjectivity of Irish womanhood, which is absently present in the gap between the romanticized translation of the word “folt” and the depicted images. She knows that Irishness is “embroiled in a dense thicket history which involves the construction and loss of identity,” yet she stops short of letting her awareness reconstitute her understanding of her own subject position and in turn her artistic departure point.

At the Camden Arts Centre, Maher’s work was hung across from a work by Mexican artist Silvia Gruner (Fig. 4.4) that drew attention to exactly these kinds of conventional and romantic ways in which the relations between past and present are construed. The viewer is confronted with a series of sixteen photographic prints showing video stills in which a pair of hands can be seen to play with *tepalcates*, which Gruner describes in the anthology as “these little pieces of clay that can be found everywhere and that cannot be reconstructed.” Though self-made, the *tepalcates* are highly suggestive of their pre-Columbian agrarian origins, and more generally of fragmented histories that cannot be reconstructed. Gruner expresses a similar sense of alienation from the past to Maher in her explanation of *Folt*. However, instead of appropriating the traces of a culture she no longer has real access to, as Maher does, Gruner interrogates the aggrandising that tends to fill the gap between lived culture and a “glorious past.” She shows her refusal to accept the monolithic untouchability of that past. By creating replica *tepalcates*, she hints at the almost unrecognisable border between history and fiction. The title of the work, *Don’t Fuck with the Past, You Might Get Pregnant*, suggests the potency of precisely this malleability of meaning.

Gruner tells us that her work “addresses a parallel, both looking at culture and at what we are taught – what we are allowed to know.” She crosses taboos by trying to be “on both sides of one place.” As she plays with the clay fragments, it is unclear whether the territory invoked by the figures belongs to her or not. “The play with the figures becomes an act of violation of the space, a kind of auto-rape.” Gruner also conceives of

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<sup>173</sup> Spivak discusses this phenomenon in relation to women publishing: “When publishing women are from the dominant ‘culture,’ they sometimes share, with male authors, the tendency to create an inchoate ‘other’ (often female), who is not even a native informant but a piece of material evidence once again establishing the Northwestern European subject as ‘the same.’ Such textual tendencies are the condition and effect of received ideas [*sic*]. Yet, against all straws in the wind, one must write in the hope that it is not a done deal forever, that it possible to resist from within” (1999: 113).

this relationship as gendered, as a game in which she is acting both masculine and feminine roles; her hand often acting as phallus in a kind of “auto-rape.”



**Fig. 4.4** Silvia Gruner, *Don't Fuck With The Past, You Might Get Pregnant*, 1994

Through her evocation of “auto-rape” Gruner also evokes the centrality of rape in the often forced intermarriages between indigenous Indian Mexicans and 18<sup>th</sup>-century colonialists and the *mestizo* or mixed race they engendered. She refers to “Spanish colonialists” in the anthology, yet given that the Irish also colonized in Mexico, the work also undermines the solidarity implied in Ziff’s overall framing of the parallels between the two nations. Gruner’s eroticization of history is subversive in relation to the patriarchal sexual order of the state and its historic predecessor, the imperial body politic. The anarchy of Gruner’s “rape,” where the distinctions between who is raping and who is being raped and what the possible outcome might be are unclear, goes against the history of highly structured social codes regarding interracial sexual relations that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial Mexico as a means of securing order

within the increasingly confusing mixing of social positions.<sup>174</sup> In the anthology, Cuauhtémoc Medina observes that Gruner also avoids the typical feminist trap of personifying tradition, which has allowed artists like Frida Kahlo to be mythicized just when the model of national cultural identity is in crisis, since women are associated with the irrational essence of culture (98).

Gruner's refusal to use images of herself or of her people demonstrates wariness about representation, an unwillingness to be pinned down into a fixed (racial) identity. Gruner shows that gender relations are intimately inscribed with power relations, territory and the construction of historical narratives; in which no-one's role or identity is fixed, and some are interchangeable at various narrative moments. She refuses to ground the possibility of identity in the recovery of origins, a strategy that evokes a critique of that narrative paradigm associated with the nation. These are intentionally mediated images of photographs of a screen, suggesting how media mediates our relationship to narratives of the nation, the self and the history of both. Medina proposes that "the isolated, anxious gestures of [Gruner's] images are a metaphor for the tentative pursuit one would like to make of identity and history once the official narrative has expired" (99). This pursuit can only be tentative, given the lack of secure reference points on offer when one steps outside of official national narratives. The juxtaposition of *Folt* with *Ejercito Mexicano* and *Don't Fuck with the Past, You Might Get Pregnant* pushes for a renegotiation of Irish art beyond the official narrative – whether that be the dominant Anglo-centric approach of the mainstream art world or the Grand Narratives of postcolonial discourse as they have been constructed to date. It begs for a curatorial narrative that can address its multi-layered engagement with the relationship between artistic representation and the representation of identity.

### **Postcoloniality and Identity in Northern Ireland**

In chapter one, we have seen that a negotiation of postcoloniality in the Irish context brings the close relationship between the field of art and the field of power to light in

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<sup>174</sup>These positions were charted in Casta paintings that illustrate biological and social stratification in the taxonomic manner that Maher's *Folt* drawings unwittingly recall. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century Casta paintings charted racial types in visual tables, which illustrated both the biological results and social stratification of people of mixed race in up to twenty variations. An extensive exhibition of Casta paintings entitled *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America* was held at the Americas Society Art Gallery in New York from Sept. 26-Dec. 22 1996. See Katzew (1996).

unusually direct ways. When Ziff presents her curatorial concept, the statements she makes about art thus directly lend themselves to political readings of culture. Crucially in this respect, Ziff motivates the commonality of Mexico and Ireland through an emphasis on Irish identity as Catholic. Independent Ireland was conceived as a nation of Catholics; people who shared one race, one religion and one language. Protestants have traditionally been seen as racially other in differential relation to this normative state culture. Ziff's emphasis on Catholicism has political repercussions because it denaturalizes the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland. It recalls the distant origins of that majority in a history of 17<sup>th</sup>-century plantations of Scottish and English families, intended to secure British rule. Seen this way, contemporary politics have their roots in the colonial period and are strongly informed by ethnic conceptions of national belonging. This chain of signifiers leads us to see that, although sectarian and racial issues are not identical, they have common roots and are cross-cutting phenomena in Ireland (Chan 2005: 2). It becomes evident that race is in fact "constructed in differential relation to the normative culture of the state" (Lloyd 1991: 87). In her articulation of the normative culture, Ziff appears to support an exclusionary conception of Irishness.

The exhibition was not presented as having a particular political bias. When Ziff includes republican politician Gerry Adams as a writer for the catalogue, she justifies this decision by insisting on the importance of free speech.<sup>175</sup> Yet there is no voice through which the unionist alternative to republicanism might be expressed. Moreover, it is Adams, not Ziff, who addresses the importance of sustaining cultural diversity within Ireland. There is furthermore at least one occasion when a postcolonial framing becomes co-opted for overt republican sympathy with no attention to the ethics of the complex interrelationship between artistic and political representation. I refer here to a mural carried out by Ortiz in collaboration with well-known republican muralist Gerard Kelly during an artistic exchange organized in conjunction with *Distant Relations*. In the mural image an IRA volunteer is juxtaposed with an image of James Connolly, a principal figure of the 1916 Rising and a committed socialist, together with a Brown Beret in front of whom stands revolutionary Mexican leader Emiliano Zapata. In this

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<sup>175</sup> Correspondence between Trisha Ziff and Jenni Lomax, director of Camden Arts Centre, held in Camden Arts Centre archives.

image, the complexities of the Irish-Mexican encounter are reduced to a celebratory solidarity between the I.R.A. and Mexican rebels.<sup>176</sup>

The mural was addressed only once within the anthology by Mexican writer Juan Arturo Brennan, who emphasized the convincing message of the republican West Belfast festival that provided its context. Curiously, however, there seemed to be little relationship between Ortiz's attention to the complexities of national narratives in the *Modified Baseball Series* and the politically reductive image depicted in the mural. There is no commentary on the mural by the artist in the anthology, but Ortiz later referred to the occasion in his artist's blog as an incident of "forced muralism."<sup>177</sup> It is difficult in retrospect to ascertain the precise relationship between the mural, the artist's original intentions and involvement, and the extent to which the situation was conceived as part of the *Distant Relations* project. In the worst case scenario, the popular allegation that Irish postcolonial discourse is an alibi for militant republicanism might be true in this instance. At the very least, it raises questions about the relationship between the postcolonial framing of the exhibition and nationalism.

David Lloyd has articulated that to assert that Ireland is a former colony equates with a rejection of the legitimacy of British government in Northern Ireland (2003: 48). Yet, crucially, he suggests the range of critical positions this rejection may prompt. These positions may be both nationalist and critical of the ethics of nation making or they may be anti-nationalist or post-nationalist (as we see for example in Richard Kearney's postcolonial scholarship).<sup>178</sup> Some of these positions come to light if we look at differing critical interpretations of Philip Napier's works, *Ballad No. 1* (Fig. 4.5), which had been installed over the stairwell at the Camden Arts Centre. On climbing the stairs, *Ballad No. 1* could be heard before it is seen, sending a groaning discordant sound through the gallery. Up close, it appears that a picture of a man's face has been attached to an accordion. He is recognizable as Bobby Sands, an Irish Republican prisoner who died in 1981 following a hunger strike in which he tried to gain the status

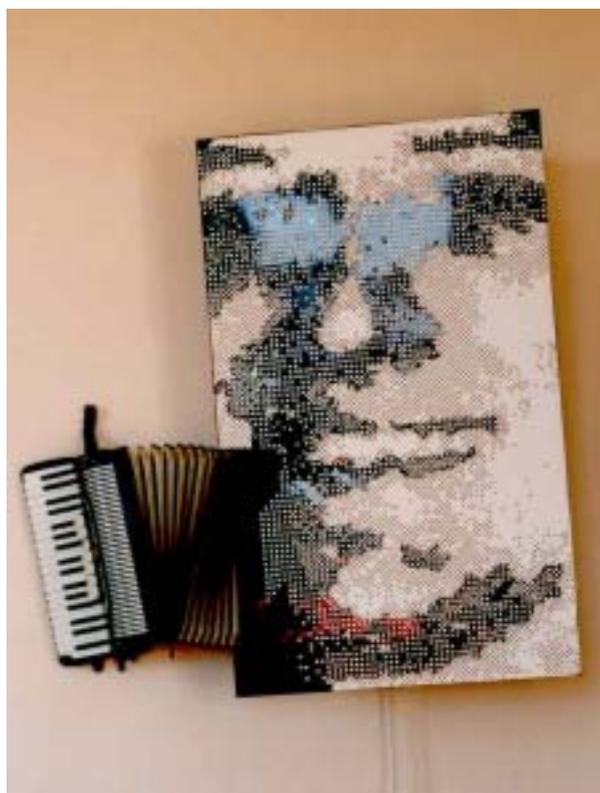
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<sup>176</sup> Brown Berets are Chicano nationalist militants, named for the berets they wear, who in the 1960s organized to support the Chicano civil rights movement.

<sup>177</sup> Ortiz explains that, having been invited to spend the summer in Belfast in 1993, he declined the invitation to collaborate on a mural in advance of his arrival. On arrival in Belfast he found himself nevertheless in a situation in which his refusal could only be read as cowardice or sectarian expression. Moreover, according to Ortiz's blog, there was no space to approach the mural's content in an unconventional manner; hence the result (2007).

<sup>178</sup> See especially Richard Kearney (2006).

of political prisoner. The artwork itself is ambiguous in its political standpoint. Napier invokes collective memory because the source photo achieved an iconic status in Irish politics in the early 1980's due to its symbolic resonance. Yet the discomfoting sounds of the accordion disturb a nostalgic reading of the image.



**Fig. 4.5** Philip Napier, *Ballad No. 1*, 1992-1994,  
Arts Council of Northern Ireland Collection

Luke Gibbons, who addresses the work in his catalogue essay, stresses the importance of *Ballad No. 1* as an act of reclaiming cultural memory. He describes how “the blown-up photogravure effect of the image is achieved through small nails, a reminder of the aura of martyrdom surrounding Sand’s death on hunger-strike in 1981” (58). The lung-like accordion “link[s] the famished body with mourning and collective memory, the off-key image becomes, in effect, a living monument for the Famine and the dark shadow which it cast on the lung of the Irish body politic” (59). The instrument itself signifies traditional music, particularly the street singers and the popular ballads that were repeatedly targeted by the authorities as cultural expressions of insurgency. To

support this interpretation, Gibbons illustrated his essay with an image of a ballad singer from the *London Illustrated News* of 1881. His emphasis is on the collective memory he sees inherent in the image.

In an article ironically titled “Race Isn’t an Irish Issue,” artist and critic Daniel Jewesbury questions Gibbons's observations and provides an alternative reading of the work:

[T]he image of Bobby Sands is composed not of “small nails” but, crucially of accordion buttons. . . . Furthermore, given Napier’s background as a Northern Irish Protestant, and the fact that his work is produced in Belfast, it would be reasonably important to point out that the piano accordion is synonymous in the North with loyalist marching bands, rather than being reminiscent of Irish traditional music. Far from being a one-dimensional lament for Bobby Sands, the piece is much more layered and interrogative. (1998: 26)

Jewesbury highlights how finely the line is drawn in Napier's work between Catholic and Protestant communities. He argues that the presence of the piano accordion, associated with Loyalism, next to the portrait made of accordion buttons, associated with “traditional” Irish music, leaves the relation between conflicting icons unresolved. In what could be read as a subaltern reading of Irish postcoloniality, Jewesbury draws attention to the presence of identities that are written out by the homogenising drive of national narratives. He emphasizes that, despite its counter-hegemonic drive, Gibbons’s situating of the work within the collective memory of a Catholic Irish majority makes little space for Napier’s Protestant identity or other recalcitrant cultural identities within the postcolonial state.

Rather than singling out Gibbons’s account, Jewesbury goes on to conclude that Protestant Irishness and other minority positions have in fact frequently been overlooked by what he calls the “Great Narrative of Irish Postcolonialism.” He writes:

The over-reliance on iconography (whether they be icons of “Irishness” or of “British oppression”) has meant that it has been difficult to develop a more subtle imagery, an imagery that might do justice to investigations of the interstices suggested by the “hybrid” examination of Irishness. (1998: 26)

From my perspective, this observation poses a challenge to the conceptual underpinnings of the entire exhibition in terms of its understanding of the artists as

necessarily subordinate, rather than acknowledging that a single individual can be the bearer of a multiplicity of relations of subordination; being dominant in one relation while subordinated in another (Mouffe 2006: 77).

A number of works in the exhibition also point to the need to perceive the conflict as a media battle as much as a territorial one. Willie Doherty, for example, presents images of nondescript stretches of road and land that resemble journalistic photographs in his *Untitled (At the Border)* series (1996).<sup>179</sup> Through the title's association with the Troubles, the viewer is prompted to complete the narrative and locate the images within it. Doherty's strategy crucially emphasizes the photograph's (and implicitly the media's) failure to provide the viewer with access to the "real." In her anthology essay Joan Fowler explains that this involves a battle of representation of the Troubles as "either a war for freedom against imperialism, or as a need to defend citizens against terrorism." Fowler suggests the relevance of shifting to a Baudrillardian account of reality in understanding the recent development of the Troubles, in which the concept of fiction and representations as mere adjuncts is inadequate (81). Doherty's photographs were displayed together with twelve baseball caps by Ortiz, presented in four glass display cases. Although visually disparate, the two works meet in their interest in the logic by which nations, and specifically, Ireland and the "Ireland" offered for media consumption, are constituted, exposing their fault lines.<sup>180</sup>

In a later essay, Daniel Jewesbury commented that by the mid 1990s the Troubles had actually outmaneuvered artists' ability to "portray" them (2005: 529). He suggests that this was due to a shift towards the bureaucratization of the political process and the cynicism of the so-called peace that replaced the troubles and underwrote the post-Troubles political dispensation (2005: 529). The difficulty of representing such a complex situation through curatorial means is not to be underestimated. In my perspective it begs for the development of new strategies that can create more space for the inevitable gaps between representation and the represented. I will go on to discuss the possibility of developing such strategies at the end of the

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<sup>179</sup> For an in-depth consideration of how O'Doherty uses representational strategies, see also O'Brien (2003), Bennett (2005) and Alcobia-Murphy (2005: v-x).

<sup>180</sup> I paraphrase Colin Graham, who comments that his book *Deconstructing Ireland* follows Derrida "in the interest it has in examining the logic by which 'Ireland' and the 'Ireland' of Irish Studies constitute themselves, looking for underlying forms of thought and conception, and reading through their fault lines" (2001: x).

chapter. First I will turn to the question of representing Diaspora identity within the exhibition, which had provided an important early departure point.

### **Diasporic Mediations**

A similar level of attention to the representation itself was called for if diasporic relations were to be unpacked in a manner that did justice to their differentiated nature. In her catalogue essay, Ziff refers to “a common experience of discrimination, politically, economically, culturally, and linguistically” among Chicanos in America and the Irish in Britain (29). Various aspects of this commonality are addressed by other authors in the anthology. Richard Rodriguez recalls Mexican and Irish influences on his childhood. Rubén Martínez writes about the US-Mexican border. Fionnula Flanagan recalls her youth as a young emigrant to England. Mary J. Hickman addresses the assimilation of the Irish in Britain. Yet, as Breda Gray has argued, the concept of “diaspora” veers towards an essentialist usage if the political, historical and economic factors that underpin emigration are not addressed (2006). In the years leading up to *Distant Relations*, Ireland went from being an emigration country to a destination for immigrants, as I have mentioned. This raised the question of how to do justice to the way that the historic oppression of the Irish had given way to differentiated levels of privilege and power holding in the present.

Ziff found the clearest parallel between Chicano artists of Mexican descent and Irish artists in Britain. Her framing of Irish artists in Britain as members of an Irish Diaspora was also pioneering.<sup>181</sup> While emigrant Irish artists had been over-represented in exhibitions of Irish art, attention had rarely been drawn to their expatriate status, while the same artists were usually framed unproblematically as British in the British context. We have seen this with Orpen in chapter one and I will look at this issue in more depth in the next chapter. The reluctance of Irish artists to identify themselves as diasporic has partly to do with the dominant perception of the Irish Diaspora in Britain as working class, which is at odds with the mostly upper middle-class class basis of the art world. In her essay for the *Distant Relations* anthology, Mary Hickman states that in

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<sup>181</sup> Its sole precedent was *Diaspora Project* (1991-4), the first large-scale curatorial project engaging with an Irish contemporary art diaspora. Unfortunately, this project ran out of funding mid-way, leaving the project unfinished and poorly documented, despite its noteworthy level of research, its insightful commissioning of new works and its ambitious plans for long-term engagement. See Hardy (1994).

fact a range of social classes have migrated from Ireland to Britain for over 200 years, including both Protestants and Catholics. She argues that the process of constructing the Irish minority as working class Catholics extends the predetermined problematised place for the Irish in Anglo-Irish colonial relations. Irish artists' distancing from a diasporic status offers a way out of this problematisation, while also protecting them from the potential loss of cultural capital we saw affect Le Brocquy's reception.

Ziff's reference to linguistic discrimination is suggestive of how, in the absence of any defining visual features, the most obvious markers of Irish racial difference in Britain are Irish accents and dialect vocabulary. Hickman elaborates on how the Prevention of Terrorism act of 1974, created after the Birmingham pub bombings, fuelled anti-Irish racism, with police advocating to "watch out for Irish accents" making the whole linguistic community a suspicious political community. In a less explicitly political vein, Ziff chose to include *Turas*, a work by Sheffield-based Irish artist Frances Hegarty which addressed the inter-generational transfer of language. Having grown up in Northern Ireland speaking the indigenous Irish language (Gaelic, Irish), the artist had lost her fluency when she immigrated to England at the age of eight and the work addressed the resulting sense of loss. I will look at this work in detail in the next chapter in relation to *0044: Irish Artists in London*, an exhibition that took place in 1999.

For now, I simply want to suggest that *Turas* is a powerful work, engaging as it does in historical and contemporary cultural and political narratives in a highly personal way. Yet, in itself, it could not represent the range of experience that might adequately address emigration within the exhibition at large. Ziff's emphasis on the Irish Diaspora in Britain meant omitting Irish American artists from the exhibition – partly for the pragmatic reason of the show's over-ambitious scope, but apparently also because of their privileged social position. She writes:

After much discussion in the early stages of the development of this project, I chose to limit the group of artists to four geographic centres: Ireland, Mexico, California (Chicano) and England (Irish diaspora). The obvious omission was the exclusion of Irish American artists .... The majority of Irish American artists have through time become absorbed into mainstream American culture, and while individual artists like Mark Alice Durant, Patrick Ireland, and Michael Tracy reveal through their work a conscious relationship to their Irish heritage, their experience as Irish Americans today does not place them outside the dominant culture in the way in which

Chicana/o artists have systematically been excluded or Irish artists in Britain have been marginalized. (29)

The asymmetrical relations between the Irish and Chicanos in America were obscured in the exhibition by this omission. In the process the very different dynamics of the low cultural capital of Irishness in Britain and the high capital of Irishness as an identity of choice in the American context are homogenized. The fixed association of Irishness with marginality and oppression is confirmed by the curator's justification for the exclusion. Finding all non-American-based Irish artists' work inherently transgressive, Ziff heralds them for working outside of the mainstream. Writing about the participating artists in *Distant Relations*, she comments: "It is precisely this [colonial] experience that places these contributors outside of the mainstream." Ziff overlooks the contradiction that her selection for the exhibition is mostly made up of some of the most validated artists in mainstream Irish art discourse. Dramatic discrepancies in levels of status and privilege in the Mexican context are obscured by heavy reliance on the discourses of the less privileged Zapatistas and Chicanos and an assumption that Mexican artists are outside of the mainstream, regardless of their class or social positions.

The absence of even a passing reference to the immigrant population in Ireland in the mid 1990s validated the narrative of "migrant Ireland" over "immigrant Ireland" (Chan 2005: 5). In fact, more justice could have been done to the range of Irish diasporic experience through the inclusion of one further work by Frances Hegarty alone. Her video *Gold* (1995) had taken up precisely the subject of the differentiated positions Irish emigrants have held by cross-referencing two locations; the artist's native Donegal, seen through images of the artist cutting turf, and the desert of Australia, where the artist is pictured engaged in a mesmeric scooping of red sand. The voice-over places the second image in personal and wider political contexts, quoting male and female emigrants' letters from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that echo the imperialist spirit and the toils of domestic life in a harsh new world. The artist is both colonized and colonizer, occupying positions of subordination and power simultaneously. A further image, recorded with a concealed video at a checkpoint in Derry, shows the place of the artist's departure. It raises questions about the relationship between these postcolonial scenarios and contemporary politics but it draws no conclusions, except to frustrate the possibility that the emigrant's home might offer an untroubled sense of place.

*Gold* can furthermore be singled out for its implicit engagement with Irish whiteness in a postcolonial context and, as Suzanna Chan has highlighted, its opening up of a discourse on the relationship between whiteness and gender. Chan writes:

Reading Frances Hegarty's *Gold* involves tracing the contingency of gendered whiteness, and its socio-political (re)construction across geographical territories, which carries an implicit undermining of essentialist notions of identity or "Irishness". Hegarty does not claim a simplistic otherness, but acknowledges a historical context of Irish participation in the white settler colonization of Australia. But in critically examining the figure of the female colonizer, the work does not suppose to "speak" for the colonized other. (2004: 13)

Hegarty's exploration of comparative locations echoes the wider narrative of *Distant Relations* but it points towards the use of this narrative intervention for different ends. It suggests the potential for containing conflicting narratives within one rhetorical structure, and shows the relevance of doing so in relation to postcoloniality as a subject.

### **Curatorial Significance**

The narrative framing within *Distant Relations*, like many identity politics exhibitions, presupposed a one-on-one relationship between what was represented and what it represents. It can only achieve its ends by suppressing the gap between artistic and political representation. Although insightful and provocative juxtapositions were set up within the exhibition, Ziff's curatorial concept does not do justice to the complexity of individual artistic approaches to the relationship between artistic and political representation that we have seen in Napier's, Ortiz's and Gruner's work in particular.<sup>182</sup> An alternative engagement with the ways in which the two nations were developing differently might have pointed to aspects of postcoloniality that break the conceptual container of "the postcolonial" as an undifferentiated category of the marginal and subordinate. In the process, the perceived separation of postcolonial art discourse from mainstream artistic developments could have been much more definitively challenged from within, had this been Ziff's intention.

The gap between intentionality and outcome is an important issue here. Ziff had stated at the outset that the *Distant Relations* exhibition "was not intended as a neat and

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<sup>182</sup> Reviewers of the exhibition also battled with the challenge of drawing out the complexities and, despite the potential richness of the juxtaposition, felt nonplussed. See for example Masterson (1996).

tidy package of similarities” but rather “a platform for discussion” about the art works and their associated (postcolonial) histories (1995: 43). Yet at times the outcome diverged from this vision in significant ways. For curators of contemporary art, it has become the norm to emphasize the provisionality of their readings in this way. They often refer to their curatorial vision as a mere proposition. Yet, although representation is always only a proposition, this observation should not stand in the way of acknowledging the very real difficulty for viewers to see the work outside of the curator’s spatial and textual framings. Even if the curator “pretend[s] to be as self-effacing as the narrator of nineteenth-century realist fiction,” their framings are nevertheless fully present (Bal 1996: 158).

Many curators today feel that they can solve this problem by entirely rejecting the possibility of making exhibitions about a subject. Thematic shows are often seen to be repressive per se because they too readily reduce possible interpretations of art works by forcing its viewers to examine the work in question through a thematic filter (Rugoff 2008: 47-8). This black-and-white solution overlooks the extent to which the curator’s perspective can bring about comparable effects in non-thematic shows. Furthermore, given the persistence of exhibitions about a subject in museum curating in particular, we might better ask how curatorial narrative might *incorporate* this awareness of its own representational limits.

We have seen in this chapter that the exhibition concept functions as just one representation within the exhibition as a whole. Others are contained within individual art works, which, as we have seen with for example Ortiz’s work vis-à-vis Ziff’s curatorial narrative, can contradict, extend or turn upside down the central tenets of the exhibition concept. They furthermore negotiate each other’s meanings, creating a multiplicity of representations. As my case studies here and my previous analysis of Orpen’s retrospective might have suggested, the process can get to the point where the entire meaning of the exhibition narrative can be rendered unstable. If, as we have learned from poststructuralism, the production of meaning is always relational and conditional and not solely inherent in the object, surely it is necessary to foreground the impossibility for a curator to remain in full control of the meanings produced by the exhibition. Yet not through stating this intention alone.

I wonder whether curators might find themselves in a position to more actively interrogate the impossible seamlessness expected of the standard exhibition narrative by explicitly engaging with the representative component of the curatorial act. In chapter three I emphasized the relevance of curators taking an epistemological approach, rather than an ontological one, in relation to national exhibitions. But the same can be said of monographic and thematic shows. I am concerned with how curatorial narratives might be developed to draw attention to their own existence within particular epistemic paradigms. I want to consider how they might additionally create space to bear a multiplicity of meanings and relations from within, especially when they are in symbolic conflict with one another.

Deconstruction suggests the need to gather the multiplicity of meaning created by a work or a subject; appealing to all networks of significations, thereby presupposing an almost infinite expansion of meanings. Clearly, infinite meanings cannot be represented in an exhibition narrative. But I wonder whether, if the curatorial “I” was more explicitly presented as a discourse-producing function, rather than an authorial “I”, the viewer might be invited to more actively consider the act of knowledge production undertaken within the exhibition.<sup>183</sup> Asja Szafraniec reflects on Derrida’s engagement with the “literariness” of a text in a manner that I find suggestive for this kind of self-reflexive curatorial practice:

It is through such self-reflective iterations (and as one of them) that the author’s signature inserts itself into the work. From then on, the signature is both, and undecidably, a “receptacle” assuming responsibility for the (hyper-)totality of textual events produced by the work, as well as just one of the infinity of the gatherable singular items. It attempts to embrace the textual event of the work as a whole but is at the same time itself embraced, put *en abyme*, by the latter. (2007: 54)

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<sup>183</sup> Of late, there has been much attention to knowledge production in art discourse and in curatorial presentations. Recent exhibitions like *Bringing Up Knowledge* (2010) explore the construction of knowledge in relation to memory and history through a display of artistic works that engage with this problematic. Yet the knowledge construction inherent in the curatorial act does not come into question in such endeavors. *Bringing Up Knowledge* was curated by Octavio Zaya and held at laboratorio 987, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León and Museo de León, in Leon, Spain from April 10-June 6, 2010. See [http://musac.es/index\\_en.php?ref=28500](http://musac.es/index_en.php?ref=28500). Accessed May 2010.

I wonder how the curatorial narrative might similarly become a container that assumes responsibility for the proliferation of meanings the exhibition generates but that, while bearing the curator's signature (his/her vision or thinking), acknowledges his or her reading as just one of these meanings. This might open the space for more symbolic conflict and create a less hegemonic approach to narrative construction.

This approach might include a more explicit acknowledgement on the curator's part of how the initial concept had become implicated by the additional, and possibly contradictory, knowledge conveyed by the art works it frames. Textually, it might mean naming some of the questions raised by the art works vis-à-vis the curatorial departure point and leaving them unanswered. It might mean juxtaposing conflicting readings and inviting the viewer to take their own position. It could entail explicitly addressing the curator's own doubts about the seamlessness of the exhibition concept, without undoing its validity as a thesis. All of this requires a more dedicated engagement with the wall texts accompanying the exhibition. I wonder if it is possible to develop writing strategies specifically for wall texts and labels that can bear the weight of this acknowledgement.

The additional meanings generated by the art works are likely to be partly different from and partly similar to the curatorial departure point, rather than entirely incongruous, as we have seen in *Distant Relations*. These multiple discourses might additionally provide a stronger point of connection to other sites of social, cultural and political discourse so that curatorial self-reflexivity might open out at an angle to reality rather than being undertaken as an interiorized institutional discourse.<sup>184</sup> This is a different proposition than the kind of self-reflexive institutional critique that has become the norm in museums over the past five years or so, which is largely self-contained.

Not all exhibitions use wall texts or words to convey their underlying curatorial thinking or vision, as we know. Many exhibitions tell stories solely through spatial means in their juxtapositions of works in relation to each other and in relation to the

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<sup>184</sup> In my formation I draw on Szafraniec's discussion of Derrida's understanding of critical literature: "One cannot just introduce a self-reflexive moment into a literary work, if what one wants is to give it the force of a genuinely critical experience. The self-reflection stages here is not face-to-face – which would make literature closed in upon itself and indifferent to the outside world – but at an angle, *à l'écart*, which means that in differing from itself, it is also open to what is beyond it" (2008: 13-14).

architecture of the exhibition space. Curators are used to creating walking paths that encourage a flow of movement through the exhibition and sometimes take advantage of the idiosyncrasies of their institutional architecture to unexpected effect. We have seen how architecture was used to physically lead the viewer to Upstone's curatorial conclusions about Orpen in chapter one. I wonder whether the signifying effects of the standard exhibition route could be rewired spatially to undermine the teleology that is characteristic of the standard exhibition narrative. I am imagining spatial equivalents to the circuitous talking of Coleman's installation, which brought about discursive displacements to disrupt the chain of signifiers associated with Irish art.

Paul Basu suggests that Daniel Libeskind's famous design for the Jewish Museum in Berlin brings about an inevitable decentring of curatorial control, which "widens participation and opens access in other ways" (2007: 68). He describes its architectural structures as "materializations of the process of rethinking" (2007: 67). This hints at the narrative potential of space within the exhibition itself, whatever the form of the museum building. Curator Ydessa Hendeles explored a comparable possibility in her exhibition *Partners* (2003-4). She placed art works in such a way that visual discontinuity and conceptual cul-de-sacs might occur at physical dead ends in the exhibition space's walking route to encourage the viewer to spend more time with this inconclusiveness.<sup>185</sup> We might also look to the ways in which artist Daniel Buren challenged the powerful conventions of the retrospective in his exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2002. Buren undermined the convention of linear historical representation by staging the entire show as a gesamtkunstwerk in which everything was compositionally related to the same idea.<sup>186</sup> Although it may be too radical a strategy for standard use in monographic and thematic exhibitions, it reminds us that contemporary artists use the museum space in ways that might be channeled back to innovate the range of strategies available for curators in the making of exhibitions.

I proposed in chapter three that an understanding of culture-as-such must often be "presupposed" for an explanation of an individual work or an individual artist's

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<sup>185</sup> See Bal (2007) and Hendeles (2004 and 2009).

<sup>186</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann noted that "The essential artistic strategy through which Buren denied the show's effect as a retrospective was the experience of aimless walking ... No matter how far one walked, there was neither a beginning nor an end to this exhibition; no progress and no development, only the constant differentiation of the same" (2010: 107).

oeuvre, even when the demand for representation as such is not explicit.<sup>187</sup> In the next chapter I want to examine the issue of how representations of the national become relevant to individual artists on occasions which are not explicitly nationally representative. My intention is to further examine the value of language and specifically the value of the artists' and curator's production of discourse within artistic production and within speech, which embodies cultural capital in specific ways.

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<sup>187</sup> Hamacher refers to Friedrich Schleiermacher's observation that an understanding of the whole must be presupposed for an explanation of the part (1993: 30).