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

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**Summary:**

Curating, Cultural capital and Symbolic Power:  
Representations of Irish Art in London, 1950-2010

In the aftermath of 1990s identity politics discourse and following the globalization of the art world, most international curators today perceive identity issues as passé and largely irrelevant to their daily practices. Yet recent research points to the significant disjuncture between the prevalent image of the art world as a place which has been thoroughly globalized and the continued power of a select few geographic centres to steer the financial, conceptual and formal interests of art discourse. The deep structural inequalities associated with unevenly accumulated levels of symbolic and cultural capital are difficult to shift, despite current developments. As I see it, the central issue in the present is no longer the inclusion of global artists in the cultural field, as it was in identity politics discourse, but rather how the value of cultural production is defined and determined and in whose interest. I am concerned with how professional curatorial practices engage in this process of value-making.

Rather than addressing exhibitions as isolated curatorial acts, I articulate a long-term vision of how the internal dynamics and values of the norms of professional curation interweave, problematise and fundamentally clash with art's complex imbrication in the cultural and political functions of representation. I address these issues in relation to the representation of art associated with one nation in one location in order to make visible how the underlying drive towards prestige demands the reproduction of certain discourses. I show how the re-articulation and transformations of those discourses are related to wider cultural, social and political shifts, and with them, renegotiations of sources of value (both critical and economic). The case study in question is the representation of Irish art in London from 1950 to the present. As a European country and a former British colony, Ireland provides a unique perspective from which to question the binary axiology that underpins identity politics and cultural diversity discourses. It is precisely in its holding of multiple levels of subordination and dominance that Ireland prompts a more complex approach to colonialism and to the binary understanding of power and otherness that underpin art discourse. Thanks to the long duration of my case study, we observe shifts in the cultural and symbolic capital of

Irishness and the relative value of Irish art as the nation goes through economic recession in the 1950s and 1980s and an economic boom in the 1990s, known as the Celtic Tiger economy.

I set out to rethink issues surrounding representation in a manner that bridges the gap between postcolonial discourse's emphasis on the cultural basis of history (which informed identity politics discourse) and globalization theory's highlighting of the cultural basis of the economic. This leads me to take a sociological view of the art world, drawing on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who developed a series of terms – *habitus*, field and field of power – to articulate the dynamic relationship between artistic dispositions, art discourse and the politics of culture. In my analyses I use these concepts to supplement notions like “identity” and “representation” which cannot fully cover the multi-layered operations at work. I sketch out the complex relationships between the artist and other artists, and beyond them, the spectrum of individuals involved in the production of the social value of the art work – with a focus on curators.

Following Bourdieu, I present curators as being occupied with increasing artists' cultural and symbolic capital in order to ensure their success in the art world, but show that “the exchange rates [of cultural capital] vary in accordance with the power relation between the holders of the different forms of capital” (2006: 125). As curators underplay aspects of artists' work or identity that decrease symbolic capital and emphasize aspects that add prestige, they thus tend to favour dominant artistic narratives over minor narratives and less familiar artistic paradigms, of framing emigrant and second-generation artists in ways that overlook the complexity of their identities, and of presenting Other artists of a high social standing as being intellectually above and therefore outside of their country of origin. Although these professional norms are not intended to misrepresent particular cultures or identities, the colonially inscribed definitions of value lends these representational practices a culturally hegemonic character.

A shift in focus to the relative exchange rate of different national identities in terms of cultural and symbolic capital enables me to consider the play of identity in a transactional art world. I look at artists' role in highlighting and underplaying aspects of their own identity construction in collaboration with the curator with a view to greater

success in the field. We see that artists' self-understandings in terms of their national identity affect their art production. Moreover, curators' understandings of an artist's identity are seen to inform fundamental aspects of their representation of the work. I demonstrate that, rather than being of ethical interest alone, challenging received readings of national identity can bring about very different understandings of artists' oeuvres.

My case studies show the tension between artists' multiple belongings and the contingency of their self-identifications and the inability of the norms of curation to make space for that complexity. I point to ways in which ambivalence surrounding national identity and authenticity inform artists' and curators' activities, self-perceptions and the conceptual and aesthetic content of their art work or exhibitions. I examine how art's structural denial of its social and cultural origins facilitates and justifies this status quo. Emigrant artists are seen to inhabit the art discourse and circuits of their country of origin and residence differently, becoming complicit in contradictory curatorial framings that play havoc with national canons. National art canons are seen to continue to operate along the ideological lines of the unitary subject, and while the immediate solution might appear to lie in the dissolution of national canons, I show that even apparently post-national conditions in the art world shore up the privileges of the national legacy that this condition of 'post' implies.

Chapter one opens with an on-the-spot analysis of a retrospective of 19<sup>th</sup>-century painter William Orpen held in the Imperial War Museum, London in 2005 and travelling to the National Gallery of Ireland. I examine the discrepancies that emerge between curator Roy Foster's art historical accounts in the exhibition catalogue and the curatorial narrative within the London exhibition. Drawing on the work of Homi Bhabha and David Lloyd, I reread Orpen's oeuvre from a postcolonial perspective and examine how the incalcitrance of his oeuvre to one identity or national canon plays havoc with curatorial norms. I subsequently make a comparative analysis of the Dublin version of the same retrospective, which exposes conflicting curatorial narratives, each one designed to suit the ideological needs of the local context. I examine how understandings of the artist's oeuvre become affected in the process of this curatorial framing and reframing. What appears to be a mere issue of national identity offers the means for an aesthetic reorientation of the retrospective as a whole.

In chapter two, I look more specifically at the relationship between curating, identity formation and the art market. I follow the early career trajectories of two Irish-born London-based artists, Louis Le Brocquy and Francis Bacon in the post-war period. I examine the trajectory of their early careers in the 1940s and 1950s to map out how their increasing fame affected the curatorial articulation of their national identities. Le Brocquy went on to be claimed as “Ireland’s greatest artist” while Bacon became “the greatest British artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” Rather than being a matter of national interest alone, I examine how the founding myths of their artistic reputations, which are closely connected to national discourses, affect readings of their work in the present. I look at how both national tags obscure some frames of reference and highlight others. This chapter deconstructs the assumed naturalness of artists’ assimilation in particular national canons and tracks a general curatorial bias towards the accumulated cultural capital of dominant nations. I question how much leeway there is in curatorial practice to go against the normative drive towards the accumulation of prestige and sketch out possibilities for curatorial alternatives.

In chapter three, I examine whether nationally-framed exhibitions offer the potential for a redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital. My case study is *Without the Walls*, a group exhibition showcasing nine Irish artists working outside of traditional art forms. It was held at the I.C.A. in the spring of 1980 as one of three contemporary art exhibitions in the *A Sense of Ireland* festival, which I briefly compare. All three curatorial narratives attempt to solve the problem of derivativeness associated with displays of postcolonial cultural production by different means, but come to an impasse of some sort with regard to the narrative production of Irishness. Turning to James Coleman’s work for inspiration and drawing on Gayatri Spivak, I suggest the possibility of having a double loyalty to the national survey exhibition as a form – that it can be used to engage in hegemonic representational practices in the interests of political scrupulosity (of decolonising and new nations in particular), – while simultaneously and however paradoxically also functioning as a departure point from which to reinhabit and problematise the very notions of identity and of representation.

In chapter four, I examine a comparative exhibition of Mexican, Chicano and Irish contemporary art, held in London in 1996 at the tail end of identity politics discourse. The artists are presented in terms of potential postcolonial commonalities. I

re-examine the show from the unaddressed aspect of race, looking to theoretical analysis of Irish racial discourse by Luke Gibbons, Richard Dyer and Noel Ignatiev. I reflect on the contingency of Irish whiteness due to the British framing of Irish as black in the nineteenth century, an issue which re-emerges around the time of the exhibition when definitions of Irish culture as white are confronted due to a sudden influx of immigrants during the Celtic Tiger economic boom. My analysis enables an examination of the often unspoken colour line that informs definitions of otherness in art. It appears that many of the contradictions of the racial construction of Irishness derive from the capacity of any one individual to be at once “inside and outside,” “subject and object of racist discourse,” a situation which poses the challenge of how to address multiplicity and contradiction in curatorial discourse (Lloyd 1991: 88).

In the first four chapters, it becomes evident that the symbolic power relation between individuals or institutions engenders the social conditions of the possibility of establishing (artistic) discourse. In chapter five, I specifically negotiate the interplay between the authority of the curator, social opinion and artists' own reflections on their practices and identities. My point of departure is an exhibition entitled *0044*, representing the work of Irish artists resident in London, which was held in 1999. I look especially at embodied aspects of cultural capital, focusing on the voice, informed by Bourdieu's analysis in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991). I draw on the artists' interviews from the catalogue, the curatorial essay, a related interview with the curator and wider critical response to issues surrounding Irish emigration to Britain. I examine the uneasy transition from national to transnational art discourse in practice in relation to the curatorial concept.

In the course of my research, I use Deleuze's notion of *minor literature* to develop the notion of *minor curating*, which I define as curatorial practice that deterritorializes the historical norms of curation from within. I consider how space might be created for a redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital in the art world through curatorial practice. In the conclusion I elaborate on the relevance of channeling the current aspiration to create new curatorial forms into the transformation of traditional exhibition forms, including the monographic exhibition, the retrospective and the national survey exhibition. I sketch out tentative ideas for the further development of post-structural and post-representative forms of curatorial representation.