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Sticks from West Limerick Hedges

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

West County Limerick, the day after St. Stephens' Day, Sean Lynch and Michele Horrigan meet my West Limerick-born husband, our Belfast-reared son and I in the square of Askeaton. Locals, the "regulars", mend the roof of the pub with some makeshift plywood after the previous night's storms. We have a brief look around the "tourist information" in the square, containing not just a Civic Trust exhibition on the locals who had travelled on the Titanic, but also relics of several instalments of the Askeaton Contemporary artists' residencies, which Horrigan and Lynch initiated and curate. We drive a few hundred metres further and are taken, without explanation, to the back of a council house from the 1950s, where Seanie Barron greets us warmly. In his icy coal shed and a small lean-to green house behind it, he readily shows us a vast array of walking sticks in various states of completion.

It is as though the coal had been "sprouting", as if the local vegetation had claimed back the street of solid concrete council houses that give this part of the village an urban feel. Barron says: "You have to have a hobby". He has over decades honed the art of walking in fields and woods with open eyes, finding suitable branches, cutting, drying and modifying them sparsely, most often by enhancing their twists and turns with the carving knife, or by mounting knotted handles or antlers on them. This hobby has enhanced his status in the community. He takes commissions from hunters, from farmers who need a crook with which to pull a sheep out of a herd, or from walkers who appreciate the tiny hook at the base of a cane that will hold electric fences down when stepping over them. No doubt owing to trial and error and lengthy conversations in the pub, the creations have become versatile, bespoke. And they have become local collectables in "sets" that Barron compiles upon demand. Exchange happens, pints are bought, some money changes hands.

Organically, Seanie Barron's work is now stretching into the Civic Trust building, into Michele Horrigan's curatorial practice – and by association also somewhat into her and Sean Lynch's own practices, as their work has over the years been characterised by collecting (often local) stories that reveal and preserve otherwise untold histories, that practice (quasi-anthropological) attention to the inventiveness of people who do not feature in official accounts. They create asides or instructive footnotes to official history; unearth what would otherwise be forgotten. Such a collection by Lynch was exhibited at the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, in 2012, and memorable objects, collected by the artist, with stories attached to them, have been shown as centrally as Dublin's O'Connell Street – and of course abroad. Quite often the objects or stories refer to the fate of artworks in Ireland that reveal public understanding or otherwise: both pranksterdom and genuine care.

How can one grasp the sticks in an art context? Is Seanie Barron's hobby "outsider art"? It might be. An obsessive nature is certainly a feature, but Barron has no anxiety to engage with contemporary art. He began attending openings of exhibitions in Askeaton. Art has met him, and he has met art. In art-historical terms Documenta 5, 1972, comes to mind: Harald Szeemann's famous edition of this world-leading showcase of contemporary art, where, for the first time, art and non-art approaches were brought together under themed headings. Szeemann named his life's project the "museum of obsessions". Whether it is art or not is one of the least interesting questions. The context from which Barron's sticks emanate, the social connections and memories that they feed and the links they establish, are more revealing.

Whether that was originally intended or not, his “hobby” is growing the practice of meaning-making in the locality and for Barron personally – through visual and material culture. Memories of how grandparents could read the land, how they did not waste anything and made do and mended are conjured and simultaneously extended into the present. He is giving value. Barron links his life and that of West Limerick with traditions, with vernacular material practices. One may no longer have a range in the house or thatch one’s home, but when walking the dog or surveying the field, the stick connects one to the surroundings and to other times. Even the city boy visiting Barron’s coal shed on this occasion, my son, was amazed to see such accomplishment: he is himself undergoing the stick- and spear-making era of the hunter and gatherer in our own back garden, bridging the millennia with ease.

While this may be a particularly male fascination, it is the opposite of sensually deprived ways of living. It has nothing to do with x-boxes and i-pads. Simultaneously, Barron also does not indulge in the anti-intellectual, anti-art prejudice that can sometimes grow in rural and/or working class contexts, where hostility to contemporary art is sometimes taken to be a given. His sticks are also an apt antidote to the status-quo-preserving, elitist populism that pervades lives everywhere via the flat-screen TV and which paradoxically denounces as elitist the kind of care and sensitivity that Seanie Barron gives to the environment, to his friends’ needs for tools – because it does not exist for monetary purposes alone, because it doesn’t shout, is not made of plastic. His “hobby” is embedded in the local; it is a practice that arises from a (still) timeless system, keeping it alive. It also feeds it with imagination, care and attention for the future. Through Barron’s “hobby”, his enhanced position in the local community is extended into the material realm, to other “audiences” and into the future.

Barron’s sticks and tools have in some way self-selected to be part of Michele Horrigan’s curatorial practice, her project of being based in Askeaton and of living in a community that sees contemporary art and meets artists. Barron becomes part of a system that cares for the locale and both witnesses and participates in the analysis of its social and cultural mechanisms, which is usually only afforded to the densely populated geographical, economic and (thus usually cultural) centre.

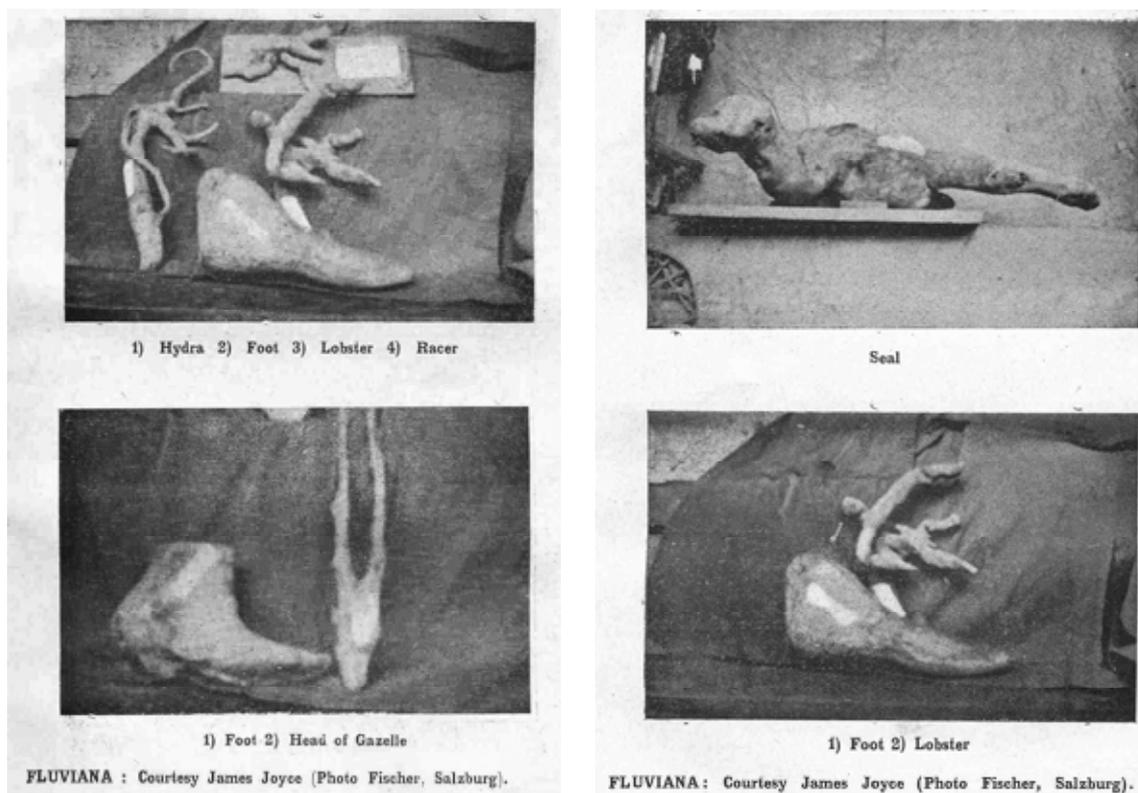
Seeing how it is not so useful to separate local vernacular culture and contemporary art in this case, Barron’s works become indistinguishable from the stories both Lynch and Horrigan collect in and as art and as things to curate, to exhibit to a local and – through visits and publication – to an international audience. Authorship is also not the most important aspect of what happens. The project of showing the walking sticks in exhibition, accompanied by this publication with professional photographs of the sticks in front of neutral background, satisfies all categories – and none. Classification doesn’t matter beyond providing a background to help with the meaning-making. Even funding departments’ remits, notoriously relying on classifications of all kinds, are becoming used to being stretched: Lynch and Horrigan profit from their track record of delivering excellent projects in an otherwise “deprived” cultural environment. If such under-representation and deprivation is in one way the reason for it being funded, the project works to subvert such lowly expectations by proving for all to see the riches to be found. The exhibition and publication are clearly spaces where several systems of reference and value, as well as timeframes play into one another.

In order for the system “art” to be satisfied or rightfully to be claimed, i.e. in order for us to know whether we are wasting our time trying to pay attention and make meaning or not, it is not sufficient to point to the enhancement of Barron’s status or the existence of pristine photographs in a contemporary art context. I will need to try out if the work – even its material manifestation, not just its social traction as a “relational” bringing together of people – is possible to be interpreted as art. Does it help us to make sense?

The stick bears in itself more than embeddedness in nature: it carries in its history aspirations to authority and status.¹ Thus, it is not just a vernacular object, a tool, that may even have the associations of “disability”: historically it is part of Royal regalia, a sign that even when devolved to courtiers and society’s upper echelons still stands for status and class. In an Irish context, i.e. a post-colonial context, sticks cannot but contest (colonial) power and point instead to one’s own stick-carrying potentates: druids, bishops – and, questioning even that authority, latterly refer to dandies and artists.

Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz² in their influential investigation of artists’ curriculum vitae since Vasari’s *Lives of Artists* (1550), when studying the underlying patterns in the biographies of those who would be discovered as great artists, found that shepherds feature very prominently: they were observed by those who we would now call curators, while using their staffs to doodle in the sand; their sign of authority, the stick, already in place. Discovery was waiting to happen.

Staffs are also more than drawing tools. As strangely formed branches or roots they were the first sculptures, used by early human societies in religious rites and as objects to be venerated. Barron thus settled on a hobby that historically bears all the conditions for discovery, all the hallmarks for the elevation of his practice to the realm of art and for latent status gain. And that does not just concern his standing in the pub, the “relational” exchanges that are now most easily recognised as features of contemporary art.



transition magazine, 1929

In an Irish context in the 20th century, walking sticks might first have been associated mostly with the landed gentry, but soon artists usurped that accessory: most prominently James Joyce (and his alter ego Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). When the later Joyce needed to explain to a puzzled readership the merits of the fluid language of *Work in Progress* (later to be called *Finnegans Wake*), he chose not to use words that would inevitably have narrowed meaning and explained the readers’ experience away, he chose to visualise what he meant: he published photos of driftwood pieces from a collection of strangely shaped wood, gathered by what in Ireland would be called a “mountainy man” in Austria, Johann Baptist Pinzinger.³ Joyce had visited his cabinet of curiosities, which the collector obviously took

seriously enough to have selected items photographed. Joyce in turn saw the potential of the photos he had bought, possibly owing to his friendship in Paris with the sculptor Constantin Brancusi, himself an avid wood-collector, and he published what he called “Fluviana” under his own name (merely acknowledging the photographer) in the leading avant-garde magazine of the time, *transition* in 1929. They here appear alongside Brancusi’s photographs of his studio: a very central and advanced location for interdisciplinary Modernist art. The readership would have understood such wooden pieces to be ready-mades, according to a strategy Marcel Duchamp had pioneered a decade earlier. Documenting “ready-mades” photographically soon became an important strategy with Brassai and Man Ray presenting their “involuntary sculptures” in the magazine *Minotaure*, 1933.

Photography took on the task of elevating strangely shaped roots and branches to objects deserving viewers’ attention – Karl Blossfeldt and Paul Nash would provide examples. In an almost anthropological manner, objects can be classified – similar to how in the early 20th century August Sander had documented people. Branches take on human qualities, and the issue of class that was Sander’s focus, while naturally being complicated when branches are concerned, still holds: staffs and canes conjure multiple associations and ascriptions of status, as has been observed. Contemporary photographic practice shares with the documentation of Barron’s sticks the anthropomorphic and anthropological bent: in Taryn Simon’s work even the white background is present (as opposed to Sander’s dark scenography).

Sculpture as conveyed through photography: this project thoroughly mixes – in good contemporary, but not narrowly post-modernist, manner – what one would have called “high” and “low” art forms, the vernacular and the refined, the “culchie” hobby and the royal cane. They are so thoroughly intertwined in fact that Barron’s immediate environs again need to be considered: they come into renewed focus. Askeaton features a Franciscan Friary, a Norman Castle and a Hellfire Club building (all ruined): staffs were the regalia in all these historical contexts. Producing instead less refined or precious canes retains the theme of staffs, but differently. Our attention turns to where the wood for the canes has been found, the fields at the end of Barron’s street and surrounding Askeaton. In this part of the world the higher status (than predictable, institutionalised aspirations to authority) is to be found in the landscape: here, the seat of learning, the location of the preservation of Greek and Latin knowledge – including more than likely Vasari’s texts on artists’ lives – was historically to be found in hedge schools. These were wide-spread in Ireland over many centuries, but particularly constituted a response to the Penal laws from 1723 to 1782, when Catholic schools were forbidden and the community was educated to read and write and calculate by hedge school teachers. However, the bardic tradition that kept classical learning alive also flourished in them occasionally.⁴ Locals learned literally in and from the hedges. It is logical to take from the hedge what would materially remind one of one’s origins as the “sons and daughters of kings”, as the cliché goes.

Finding the material for canes in these hedges then is at once post-colonial understatement and the “cheek” (chutzpa elsewhere) that claims the highest authority for nothing more elaborate than a hedge-grown stick, a sign of authority that was – or is – more found than made or bestowed, and thus also more ancient, more valid. It is entirely in keeping with a context in which the highest learning was sustained in nature and against prohibition by the coloniser that West Limerick should contribute to international contemporary art Lynch’s and Horrigan’s unearthed, curated and re-valued local (hi)stories – and Seanie Barron’s sticks.

¹ Catherine Dike. *Walking Sticks*. Shire Album 256. Princes Risborough: Shire 1990.

² Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz. *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist. A Historical Experiment*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press 1981

³ Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, *Joyce in Art: Visual Art Inspired by James Joyce*. Foreword: Fritz Senn, envoi: James Elkins, design: Ecke Bonk. The Lilliput Press Dublin 2004, pp. 11-18.

⁴ For an essay on hedge schools that already reaches into contemporary art in relation to Ireland see: Ullrich Kockel, “The Celtic Quest: Beuys as Hero and Hedge School Master”. *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques. Critical Forum Series vol 2*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, Tate Gallery Liverpool 1995, pp. 129-148.