

A Rocky Road

Exhibition Guide

A Rocky Road

An exhibition curated by Sean Lynch

Crawford Art Gallery, Cork

18 November 2011 – 14 January 2012



*An Roinn
Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta
Department of
Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht*

KENNELLY ARCHIVE

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Eilis O'Connell

The contemporary condition of The Great Wall of Kinsale

Archival photographs, 1987

Projected slides, 2011

After winning the National Tidy Town contest of 1986, the town of Kinsale was recipient of a public art commission sponsored by the Arts Council. Artist Eilis O'Connell presented *The Great Wall of Kinsale* on 22 July 1988, when over a thousand people turned up to an unveiling ceremony. Located at the town's seafront, the sculpture is composed of three tent-like arches linked together by a low winding form. Stretching 55 metres in length, the piece was then the largest of its kind in Ireland or the UK.

A small group of twelve protesters attended the unveiling, some holding placards. Among them, local painter Phillip French was quoted (*Cork Examiner*, 25 July '88) that children were 'trying to ride up it on bicycles,' and that someone would be injured due to the sculpture's presence. Local councilor Dermot Collins objected on the basis that the piece was not in keeping with the touristic 'old world' charm of the town. The group vociferously continued to lobby against the sculpture's presence through local petitions, articles and letters in newspapers, publicly criticising the sculpture's corten steel finish, then gradually turning from a rusted surface to a patina of deep red and purple.

In April 1989, a series of alterations suggested by an Arts Council delegation helped defeat a motion to have the sculpture removed by five votes to three at the local town hall. These changes, including the painting of the sculpture's surface rather than allowing the corten steel finish to mature, and the installation of ground level water pools are still seen at the location. Later additions of metal barriers, a memorial bust, bins and potted plants all directly conflict with the original artistic intentions and siting of O'Connell's work. Such detail is curatorially specified in *A Rocky Road* as a series of projected slides, with a scripted text, juxtaposed with the artist's original documentation of her work.

A tendency in much art criticism has seen large abstract public artworks considered as a dogmatic endeavour, where sculptures have a questionable contextual relationship to the site they are placed in.

Yet, little has been discussed around the desire for an artist to work with a modernist vocabulary, largely based around formal autonomy, in an accessible public arena to a large audience. In this case, any formal illusions in O'Connell's work to the seashore and local architecture were relegated in an argument taking the deficiencies of local politics as a basis. The fact the work remains, despite the invalidation of many of her original intentions, suggests abstraction on this scale can still be thought of as an active radical aesthetic in these debates.

Danny McCarthy

A Keeper of the Dust (for Joseph Beuys)

2011

Chalkdust spread throughout the building

Five photographs

Acquisition, Crawford Art Gallery

Joseph Beuys, an influential German artist who came to prominence in the 1960s, exhibited an expansive series of drawings collectively entitled *A Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland* at the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, in 1974. He also presented lectures in Limerick, Cork and Dublin.

At the Crawford on 26 September, he spoke of his ideas to establish a Free International School for creativity and interdisciplinary research. Isabel Conway reported (*Cork Examiner*, 27 September '74); 'Last night Mr. Beuys said that it was not the aim of the school to develop political and cultural directions, to form styles or to provide industrial and commercial prototypes. Its chief goal was the encouragement, discovery and furtherance of democratic potential and its expression. "In a world increasingly manipulated by publicity, political propaganda, the culture business and the Press, it is not to the named - but to the nameless - that it will offer a forum."' By 1975, a report was submitted to the European Economic Commission on the feasibility of the school to be sited in Milltown, Dublin, with Oliver Dowling named as the project's administrator.

Photographs of the Cork event, taken by Guardian newspaper art critic Caroline Tisdale, detailed two blackboards complete with Beuys' chalk drawings and written text, all related to his lecture. This material was erased directly after the lecture. At many other venues where Beuys presented talks, content drawn on blackboards was considered an important artefact of his presence and often assumed the value of an artwork.

A similar incident occurred in Dublin. Following a lecture on 15 October, Beuys left blackboards, complete with chalk drawings illustrating his ideas, with the Municipal gallery. They were put in storage, until 1977 when curator Eithne Waldron decided to put them on exhibition. The display caused consternation at a meeting of the Cultural Committee of Dublin Corporation. The committee's concerns hinged both on the eligibility of the blackboards as works of art, along with the difficulties of conservation of the delicate chalk drawings. Councillor P.J. O'Mahony (*Irish Times*, 27 June '77) said, 'I have seen the piece of alleged art. If a piece had been rubbed out and a child added chalk marks to it, I doubt if the artist would know it.' Councillor Alice Glenn declared, 'I believe a man has to watch it all the time because kids are coming in from school and rubbing bits out and adding new bits.' The Committee called for the immediate removal of the blackboards. Dublin City Manager J.B. Molloy refused their request, and the blackboards remained on show.

After the erasure in Cork a young man in the audience collected some chalk dust off the ledge at the bottom of the blackboard and since kept it, as a relic of Beuys' presence in the city. I came across the anecdote in 2007 and photographed the dust - it subsequently appeared as part of a public commission made for the National Sculpture Factory. The right to remain anonymous was insisted on by the individual, and the story raised a few eyebrows about historical authenticity at the time.

For *A Rocky Road*, Cork artist Danny McCarthy has identified himself as a keeper of the chalk. In September 2011, he spread the remaining dust throughout the gallery spaces of the Crawford, placing it back into the building where he recovered the chalk in 1974. A series of photographs detail this action that, along with the dispersed chalk, now forms part of the Crawford's permanent collection.

Aurora
RTE television production
1971

In this excerpt from a longer interview, Sean Keating and a young Colm O'Briain walk through the RDS exhibition hall during Rosc '71. Keating, aged 82 and still a staunch believer in art as an academic realism, repeatedly voices his disregard for the modern artworks on show. Spurred on by O'Briain's inquisition, Keating vehemently criticises the work of pop artist Tom Wesselman and expressionist sculptor Eva Appli. Of praise for the exhibits, he only pauses to acknowledge a positive interest in Julio Le Parc's kinetic sculpture *Continuel Mobile*. Yet his statement on the piece, 'it's quite a pretty ornament, a nice thing in a conservatory or a fishpond,' conceals his view that modern art might only be a spectacle for an aspiring middle-class of the 1970s.

The Irish Daily Mirror
5 March 2008

An image details a stack of bricks, covertly removed from the ground and neatly piled on top of each other, at the centre of a roundabout in Wexford town. The structure existed for a few hours on a Saturday night and Sunday morning, and was photographed by an unnamed local man. An accompanying editorial recognized and endorsed it as being an unusual piece of public art. Wexford County Council engineer Eddie Taaffe said the incident "makes a change from the usual vandalism."

While the story did not feature in that day's UK edition, the report suggests an editorial shift in the Mirror's stance on the use of bricks in art. On 16 February 1976 the paper led with the headline WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH, reacting angrily to the Tate Gallery spending taxpayer's money and purchasing Carl Andre's sculpture *Equivalent VIII* for their collection. The artwork consisted of 120 bricks arranged in a rectangle. On the same day, London's *Evening Post* interviewed several bricklayers on the matter.

John Carson

A Bottle of Stout in Every Pub in Buncrana

1978-9

Pages of a publication

Digital print (made from a salvaged 1978 transparency of the ‘mock-up’ for a proposed poster. The original ‘mock-up’ no longer exists)

On 22 April 1978, Carson enacted a performative project in Buncrana, County Donegal. He wrote, ‘the purpose of the project was to drink a bottle of Guinness in every pub in Buncrana (22 pubs). The result was to be a colour poster with a picture of myself at the start of the venture, a picture of every pub in Buncrana, and a picture of myself under the influence of Guinness taken.’

Subsequently, Carson sent a series of letters to the marketing department in St. James’ Gate, attempting to obtain sponsorship of £550 for the mass production and distribution of the poster. Guinness refused, reinstating on three separate occasions that the project did not fit into the company’s policy of consumption of alcohol on a moderate basis. In a letter dated 18 January 1979, Carol Scott, secretary for the Stout Marketing manager, wrote ‘I cannot see any merit at all in the idea from anyone’s point of view insofar as it would seem to only perpetuate the myth of the drunken Irish man.’

Carson wrote, ‘It is a fact that many people in Ireland do drink to excess; it is a fact that ‘the pub crawl’ is an activity which many people have indulged in; it is fact that drinking Guinness in all the different kinds of pubs to be found in Buncrana is a cultural tradition of this country; it is a fact that some people become very happy and sociable under the influence of alcohol; it is a fact that some people become dull and aggressive; it is almost inevitable that after an excessive amount of alcohol the drinker will become tired and incapable, which is what the last photograph in my Buncrana series depicts. These are all everyday facts with which a great deal of the population can identify – thus I hope that they might identify with my artwork.’

Gerard Byrne

Enosis

2011

Three photographs

Walker: You had that very good idea for an Irish pavilion?

Scott: That's right. You see, at the end of one island was England and at the end of the next island, separated by a canal, was Greece, and in those days England and Greece were fighting it out over Cyprus. Now, to get from one island to the other, you had to go down to the centre of the gardens and cross a bridge there, and it struck me that it would be a very nice idea to connect the end of the two islands with a gallery bridge – bringing England and Greece together – and the gallery would be Ireland's pavilion.

Walker: It was a marvelous idea, and so much in the Italian tradition.

Scott: That's right, and indeed I made out a very rough sketch of this idea: you would go up stairs to a big room over the canal, with glass on one side - which would have suited our sculpture and painting. It would have worked very well and it would have put Ireland on the map. Indeed, I went so far as to see if the authorities of Venice would approve of this, and if I could get the government at home to put up the money. I got the Venetian authorities to agree to this art gallery going over the canal. Well, why not?

So I came home and I talked to Frank Aiken, who was Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time, and I said,

'This would be a wonderful thing to do, Frank, if we could do it. If the government can put up £27,000, we can build this goddamn thing and it would be fantastic for Ireland to have.'

So he listened to me. He went away and came back and said:

'No. I'm afraid it is too expensive. We couldn't afford to spend that money in Venice. It would be quite absurd for the government to do it.'

Source: *Michael Scott Architect in (casual) conversation with Dorothy Walker* (Gandon, 1996), p.171

Jack McManus

Photograph published in the Irish Times, 20 September 1988

A large reproduction of McManus' image details then-Taoiseach Charles Haughey viewing *From the Animal Farm, Charles J. Haughey, 1988* by Tim Rollins and KOS. The artwork was commissioned and exhibited as part of Rosc '88. Haughey supplied Rollins with a collection of photographs prior to the exhibition, in anticipation of and to assist with the completion of his portrait.

Rollins, an American conceptual artist, established art workshops with teenagers from the South Bronx in 1986. The group, called KOS (Kids Of Survival), worked with him to produce a canine caricature of Haughey, painted upon pages of George Orwell's political satire *Animal Farm*. The piece was part of a series depicting the heads of various world leaders on top of animal bodies: Margaret Thatcher was portrayed with the body of a goose, and Ronald Reagan with a turtle.

The appearance of Haughey with a dog's body was jovially noted in the Irish media. The *Evening Herald* (17 August '88) described the work as having no disrespect to Haughey, but rather as being 'frisky and playful.' The *Irish Times* (20 August '88) reported that the artwork was discussed at length at the exhibition opening where 'nobody was sure if it was a wolfhound or a collie.'

Despite rumours of Haughey's dissatisfaction with the portrait, the decision to pose in front of the piece suggested he took this representation in his stride. If anything, his reception seems excessively gracious compared with the ruckus caused in 2009 when artist Conor Casby hanged two unflattering portraits of Brian Cowen in the National Gallery and Royal Hibernian Academy without authorisation. National broadcaster RTE publicly apologised to Cowen for covering the story. A Garda investigation ensued, involving the confiscation of both paintings and the possibility of the artist being charged with incitement to hatred.

Rollins' painting, a delicate arrangement of acrylic and graphite on bookpages mounted on linen did not sell to any collector in Ireland, and was shipped back to his New York studio. It was not possible to exhibit the work as it has now has been damaged beyond repair.

Rosc '67 and '71

Media coverage

The first attempt at a comprehensive exhibition of international modern art in Ireland, Rosc is translated from Irish origins as 'the poetry of vision,' or 'a gleam in the eye.' First presented in Dublin in 1967, subsequent exhibitions were held in 1971, 1977, 1980, 1984 and 1988. A selection of responses by the Irish media to the early Rosc exhibitions presented here suggest that contemporary art was viewed as an exotic avant-garde, distanced from Irish society of the time. Furthermore a sense of representational unease can be seen, with the media's conventions and formats of interpreting art still being established and experimented with.

Excerpts from the RTE archives features a camera roaming around Rosc '67. An accompanying soundtrack combines electronic sounds and atonal improvisations that react to the formal attributes of a selection of artworks. While focusing on a wall relief by John Latham, the camera rotates 180 degrees, implying the stereotypical idiom that Latham's work, due to its abstract nature, might have been hung upside down. Artworks by Mary Martin, Manolo Millares, Lee Bontecou, Gunther Uecker and Alberto Burri are also subjected to the camera's zooms and pans. Lacking an introductory sequence, narrative voiceover or credits, it is unlikely this material was ever broadcast.

Another RTE production, *Rosc '71 The Poetry of Vision*, features a boy, watched yet unreprimated by a security guard, pushing a Pino Pascali sculpture making it sway. Abbey actor Bosco Hogan loiters around the exhibition hall, and a camera operator is seen reflected in the polished steel finish of a Michelangelo Pistoletto artwork. Works by Alexander Calder and Oyvind Fahlstrom feature alongside a Gershwin-like musical score by the RTE Light Orchestra that further induces a sense of slapstick into the proceedings.

Jack McManus' photograph, reproduced from the feature *Young Visitors to Rosc '71* (*Irish Times*, 10 November '71) details a teacher and pupils all appearing to look away from Wayne Thiebaud's *Nude Back View*, a painting which prominently featured a woman's buttocks. It is difficult to know if this disaffection was staged, or if McManus carefully cropped his image, cutting out a view of another artwork the group could have been gazing upon.

David Lilburn

Towards from the Forceps to the Chains of Office
1984

Monoprint

Private collection, United States

Owen South

Photographs taken on 2 & 7 November 1984

David Lilburn's print was featured in 1984's ev+a exhibition in Limerick. British curator Peter Fuller selected the show from over three hundred entries, made by open submission, and awarded Lilburn a £500 prize for graphic art. By the artist's own admission, *Towards from the Forceps to the Chains of Office* alludes to a desire to be free of personal constraints that inevitably arise from membership of society. Pictorially, the print depicts the artist, naked, lying on his back, with an erection. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Fuller criticised the tendencies of much Irish art of the time towards the style of neo-expressionism, before complimenting Lilburn who, in his juried opinion, was "conspicuously using the figure itself – and not just the substances and processes of painting – as a means of expression."

On 2 November 1984, a phone call was received by local newspaper the *Limerick Leader*, alerting the newsdesk to an imminent attack upon the artwork. Local café owner Richard Coughlan was enroute to Limerick City Gallery of Art to destroy the drawing, which he considered pornographic. Reporter Conor Keane and photographer Owen South were dispatched to the gallery. Around 5pm, Coughlan arrived and proceed to smash the glass on the artwork's frame. Hugh Murray, chairman of the exhibition committee, pushed him away from the drawing as he was about to spray it with paint. The ensuing struggle between the two men, as they fell to the gallery floor strewn with broken glass, was photographed. A gallery attendant came to Murray's aid, and a shouting match occurred between the two men. Coughlan demanded to be arrested on a charge of causing malicious damage so that he might be able to bring to the notice of a judicial court the reason for his act.

An antagonistic relationship between the gallery, artwork and protester continued in the days after the attack. The front page of that week's *Limerick Leader* reported on the scene, prompting the exhibition committee to issue a statement: 'The violent intolerance implicit in this incident has far deeper implications for our society than the alleged offence of which the artist is accused. The committee also regret the role of the Limerick Leader in the incident... is art fair game for this kind of treatment and if information on a different kind of crime came to the Leader's notice would the same strategy of set-up, watch and photograph, be employed?' The newspaper responded: 'Mr. Coughlan informed a Limerick Leader reporter of his intention to deface the drawing. This placed the newspaper in a dilemma. Prior disclosure of Mr. Coughlan's identity would have been a breach of confidentiality. Yet the Leader's duty to the community demanded that the newspaper warn the exhibition organisers. The editor resolved this dilemma by instructing the reporter to inform that the attack was imminent, but not to volunteer the name of the informant.' Lilburn's print was reframed and placed back into the exhibition. A protest, organised by Coughlan, was held in front of the gallery the following Wednesday. Two small holes, punctured in the drawing by the broken glass, can still be seen today.

Pierre Restany

A quote from the Irish Times, 29 August 1981

An excerpt from the Arts Digest column of the *Irish Times* is featured as a vinyl text on the gallery wall. It details a quote from French curator Pierre Restany, who once studied in Ireland and subsequently became an important writer and curator associated with the Nouveaux Realistes movement and artists such as Yves Klein, Christo and Arman. With his surname repeatedly misspelled, the Times describes Restany, then in Limerick to judge 1981's ev+a exhibition, 'Grizzled and heavily bearded with a Smithwick's drinker's silhouette and tiny feet and ankles, Rastany has a raunchy line in artistic rap and can talk longer and harder than almost any other swain in the arts... What of Irish art, then, we asked Monsieur Rastany?

*It is not so much a problem of isolation as a problem of identity.
How can you be Irish and Catholic and also a great artist?*

Given that you are inserted into the UK and USA communication systems, your information about art is quite speedy and accurate... But there is something secondhandish. Art here is up to date, but derivative and spiritless. This is strange: by nature the Irish are neither uninventive or cold. Yet through an inner filter of self-castration they deny their good qualities. Maybe the country needs to integrate other motivations, because it looks like the essential motivation of belonging to the Irish mind and genius is not being transferred.

Every painting looks like a compromise between the US and UK traditions. I don't want to be negative but it is just kind of constipated, but I am just asking myself questions. Maybe Ireland has not yet come to terms with a negative history, as Poland has done, say?

Despite his harsh words, Restany pointed to Limerick artist Tom Fitzgerald as a marvelous exception. Fitzgerald's reply quickly dispelled Restany's national criticism – he was quoted, 'we must see ourselves as global beings; in the light of Reagan's neutron bomb we are all in this together.'

The Tau Cross of Killnaboy
Projected images, courtesy of the Kennelly Archive
A 1967 Rosc catalogue
Newspaper reports
Videos

The Rosc '67 selection jury, comprising of James Johnson Sweeney (Heuston Museum) William Sandberg (director of Amsterdam's museums) and Jean Leymarie (Louvre, Paris), were impressed by the relationship between ancient Irish art and modern paintings. As part of the show five early-Christian artefacts would be transferred from sites around the countryside to be exhibited in Dublin, including the Tau Cross, a T-shaped piece of carved limestone located in Killnaboy, County Clare. Some experts of the time believed the cross to be from the late Celtic Iron Age of 200BC, while others suggested it to be 12th century Romanesque. Standing two feet six inches high, two carved heads appear upon the transom. They look in opposite directions, a

Janus-like arrangement peering simultaneously into the future and to the past. Such symbolism appealed to the sensibilities of the Rosc jury, and a plan was announced to move the cross.

The *Clare Champion's* editorial (21 October '67) considered the idea as cultural imperialism, and deplored the removal of the cross from its location in a field to be seen 'in synthetic surroundings by the cocktail party set in Dublin.' The situation escalated to frontpage news with the disappearance of the cross from its location at Roughan Hill in early November, when a group of three local men removed and hid the cross, preventing its transportation to Rosc. A statement from them (*Irish Times*, 15 November '67) read: "We had to use a chisel to prise it loose but we were very careful and we moved it to a sand-pit nearby... we felt that our parish is having a rough time with migration to the cities." Fearing similar reactions nationwide, a Garda presence was placed on the Carndonagh Cross near Buncrana, another artefact proposed to be moved. After thirteen days, the Tau cross was returned to the site by the men, a scene documented by press photographer Padraig Kennelly. The men commented (*Connaught Tribune*, 17 November 1967), 'We have decided to replace it because national opinion will prevent it from ever being removed again.' The cross was swiftly dispatched to Dublin the next day.

This history, despite appearing on the front pages of many newspapers of the day, is rarely recalled either in terms of progressive forms of exhibition making in Ireland, or in discussions of how cultural property is utilised. In *A Rocky Road*, the incident is presented through a selection of artefacts, stressing the Tau Cross not simply as an object, but as a recurring motif in the frictions between centre and periphery, and tradition and progress. It is seen through newspaper cuttings, photographs, and video footage of the cross, now in a local museum in Corofin with two replicas existent in the Killnaboy field and the Burren Centre of Kilfenora. At the time of going to press with the exhibition guide it was still unsure if the original cross, now property of the Department of the Arts, could be transported to be exhibited in Cork, due to the fragility of a large crack in the limestone.

Nigel Rolfe
Into the Mire

2011

Projected HD video, sound
Acquisition, Crawford Art Gallery

**Documentation of a solo exhibition, *Various Works*,
at the Funge Arts Centre, Gorey, Wexford, 1977.**

Nigel Rolfe, then a 27-year-old sculptor, presented a solo exhibition in Gorey in 1977 featuring five freestanding sculptural assemblages, each involving the careful arrangement of pieces of wood on top of each other. Rolfe described these artworks as a collection of ‘balancing structures,’ and was part of his artistic thinking around ideas of gravity, structure and material at that time. Local response to the show in the *Enniscorthy Guardian* (22 July ‘77) saw Sean Dwyer reporting, “It was a most unusual thought-provoking exhibition and I am sure that it left many people wondering what it was all about. I know I felt like that.”

A scene discovered by Paul Funge, the founding director of the centre, was subsequently reported in national and local newspapers. The *Irish Times* (25 July ‘77) read that the centre, a large shed at the back of a clothes shop, was broken into and the exhibition attacked, ‘Timber from the exhibits was strewn around the centre, and the vandals left a note saying ‘Take this rubbish out of Gorey – we don’t want it.’ The artist drove from Dublin to Gorey the next day to survey the damage, which appeared to be somewhat exaggerated by media reports. He recalls, ‘only a couple of the balance pieces were knocked over. I saw it of course and rebalanced them next day.’

Often, such negative incidents and the significance they might hold for the reception of art are glossed over and quickly forgotten about as an artist progresses in their career. However, the Gorey event was discussed at length throughout 2011 during the development of *A Rocky Road*, and became an important departure point for a new videowork. Shot on location at the Bog of Allen, it sees Rolfe collapsing from a standing position onto the muddy surface. Documentation of Rolfe’s balancing sculptures from 1977 is displayed in an adjoining corridor, leading up to a room where his 2011 projection is exhibited.

A Rocky Road is an exhibition investigating artistic production and its reception in Ireland. With an emphasis on the social realities that cultural invention has encountered in the country, several topics repeatedly arise: conservative reactions and protest to the growth of modern art, vandalism of artworks, and the newsworthy character of artists with their many creative ideas and schemes are all prominent.

Through existing artworks, artefacts, and new commissions, the exhibition considers the underlying attitudes of what could be termed an 'aesthetics of reception.' Public response and the subsequent afterlife of an artwork are considered as themes of enquiry, as relevant as the creative intentions that bring the artwork into being. Populist reaction to exhibits, media coverage and reactionary politics have often opposed various forms of artmaking in Ireland over the last forty years. By focusing on and gathering together a selection of such instances into a common heritage, they can be considered more than occasional oddities in the progress of history. Instead their presentation might be viewed as a recurring antagonism that evidences the challenges art has posed to the public realm and Irish society at large.

This publication, freely distributed as part of the exhibition, presents further information about each exhibit.