

The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy is commissioned by IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art) Dublin, with co-commissioners Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, and Western Front, Vancouver.

This new work has been made possible through the support of the commissioning partners, and the Irish Film Board, the IFI Irish Film Archive, Creative Scotland, Nakba Filmworks, Fastnet Films, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Matheson, who proudly support New Art at IMMA.

The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy is part of the official Ireland 2016 programme and is one of the three major new works that have been commissioned by IMMA that reflect on the legacy of the commemoration of the Irish State.

This commission is presented as part of an exciting on-going initiative, New Art at IMMA, proudly supported by Matheson, which allows IMMA to continue to support artists' vital work in a strand of programming that recognises and nurtures new and emerging talents, new thinking and new forms of exhibition-making.

IMMA would like to thank our valuable Members and Patrons, all of whom have made this exhibition possible.

Curated by Sarah Glennie, Director, with Karen Sweeney, Assistant Curator.

This exhibition is supported by:



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FIRST FLOOR, WEST WING GALLERIES

25 NOVEMBER 2016 – 7 MAY 2017

Duncan Campbell

The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy



Front Cover:

Duncan Campbell,
*The Welfare of Tomás Ó
Hallissy*, 2016 (film still).
Courtesy the artist and
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Photo courtesy Rina Yang.

Following his first major exhibition in Dublin at IMMA in 2014, Irish-born artist Duncan Campbell (Turner Prize Winner 2014) presents his first film based in the Republic of Ireland, *The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy* (2016). Originating with research undertaken in the IFI Irish Film Archive, Campbell's new film commission takes as a starting point a 1960's UCLA anthropological film study of rural Kerry to investigate and reframe contemporary Ireland.

As with many of Campbell's films *The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy* is underpinned by extensive research into archival and documentary material, in this instance Paul Hockings and Mark McCarty's 1968 documentary film, *The Village*, and three influential anthropological studies: *Inis Beag* by John C. Messenger, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland* by Hugh Brody, and in particular *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

The Village was filmed mostly in Dún Chaoin, a remote village on the Dingle Peninsula, declaring its intent in its opening credits:

'The village of Dunquin and the offshore Blasket Islands were once a secluded preserve of traditional Irish life. Now the dole is replacing earnings from the land; commercial trawlers have destroyed the fishing; families are broken when the young people emigrate... This film documents the changing culture as it appeared in the summer of 1967; no scenes were staged; the camera's influence is part of what is observed.'

Following a tradition of visual anthropology, the camera is used in Hockings and McCarty's film to record the 'reality' of village life. Like many villages in the west of Ireland at the time, Dún Chaoin was faced with the decline of its Gaelic speaking culture and crumbling family and social structures caused by a collapsing agricultural economy and extensive emigration from the area. The filmmakers are rarely featured in their

footage of day to day life in Dún Chaoin, positioning themselves instead as the observers of a community on the brink of disintegration. The film was praised by John C. Messenger (author of *Inis Beag*, an earlier anthropological study also referenced by Campbell) as being an 'accurate depiction' of the community. Messenger compares *The Village* favourably with American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's renowned 1934 film *Man of Aran*, which he perceives as coloured by Flaherty's romanticised view of the 'noble savage'.

The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy is set against a visit by two American anthropologists to Dún Chaoin, mirroring the approach taken by Paul Hockings and Mark McCarty in *The Village*, and Campbell directly integrates footage from their film with newly scripted material also filmed in and around Dún Chaoin. Campbell's material echoes key scenes from *The Village* that captured the day to day routine of the village: the creamery, turf-cutting, rabbit hunting and gatherings in the local pub. In revisiting these scenes Campbell looks at some of the assumptions, ethics and misconceptions that frame the relationship between the filmmakers and the villagers.

Campbell himself says of the work 'the film is set at the interface of the activist perspective of the two American anthropologists and their focus on individual minds to be saved, and the communal but conservatively Catholic perspective of the people they are studying. The main character in the film is a speechless 10 year-old boy, Tomás, who is seen in the light of the tension between these two perspectives.' At the heart of the film is the question of Tomás' welfare and, if he is in need of salvation, whether this lies in tradition or modernity.

The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy takes into account the long history of ethnographic study in rural communities in the west of Ireland. In particular, Campbell is interested in the moment when the revered Gaelic speaking peasant-culture society of places like Dún Chaoin came to be seen as an

obstacle to progress. In various ways, the anthropological studies he draws on link the increasing predominance of the 'bachelor farmer', sexual repression, the breakdown of the traditional family structure and conflicts over farm inheritance as contributing to the high levels of mental illness in rural Ireland at the time. In Campbell's film the rural traditions continue, but are coloured by a sense of the subjects either acting out or resisting the roles expected of them by their visitors. The depiction of village life is mediated by attempts by the anthropologists to say what is not said, and a simmering anger and impotence that fleetingly appears in a drunken scuffle that closes the film.

The depiction of rural Kerry life is interrupted by two scenes that bring the position of the filmmakers into focus. A shot of the sky is the background to a conversation between Valerie and Walter, the anthropologists, in which Valerie questions the validity of a film that 'politely records the death rattle' of the community. Valerie candidly acknowledges the impossibility of their perceived impartiality, claiming with exasperation 'our presence has consequences'. In a later scene a male villager is shown a series of images and asked to tell a story about them. The male subject's responses highlight how all viewpoints are formed by background and experience. Valerie's questioning of their position echoes the soul searching by US academic Nancy Scheper-Hughes following the publication of her seminal 1979 book *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics*. The villagers of An Clochán on the Dingle Peninsula felt betrayed by her representation of their sexuality and family relations, and questioned her right to study them at all. In later editions of the book Scheper-Hughes attempted to reconcile her responsibility to honest ethnography with respect for the people who shared their homes and their secrets with her.

As with many of Campbell's works, *The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy* questions the validity of documentary form as historical representation, blurring fact and fiction, recording and interpretation. His extensive

research into a specific time and context uncovers the unknown and unexpected in a representation of Ireland that at first seems familiar. On one level *The Welfare of Tomás Ó Hallissy* represents the uses and misuses of the past as the implications of the societal shifts and misrepresentations it explores still resonate and inform contemporary Ireland today.

About the Artist

Duncan Campbell (b.1972 in Dublin, Ireland) lives and works in Glasgow. He completed the MFA at Glasgow School of Art in 1998 and a BA in Fine Art at the University of Ulster in 1996. Campbell was the winner of the 2014 Turner Prize (Duncan Campbell, Ciara Phillips, James Richards, Tris Vonna-Michell) and was one of three artists representing Scotland at the Venice Biennale as part of *Scotland + Venice 2013* (Corin Sworn, Campbell, Hayley Tompkins). In 2012 Campbell took part in *Manifesta 9* curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Katerina Gregos and Dawn Ades, Belgium and in 2010 he took part in *Tracing the Invisible*, Gwangju Biennale. Recent solo exhibitions include *Arbeit*, Kunstthall Oslo, Oslo (2015); *Duncan Campbell*, Irish Museum of Modern Art; *Generation*, Common Guild, Glasgow; *Bernadette*, G-MK Gallery, Zagreb, Croatia (all 2014), *Duncan Campbell*, Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; *Arbeit*, HOTEL, London; *Make it new John*, Artists Space New York (all 2012) and Chisenhale Gallery, London, touring to Tramway, Glasgow (2009 – 11).

For a full programme of **associated talks & events to take place in early 2017** and to listen to past talks on the IMMA Soundcloud channel, please see www.imma.ie