

## FROM THE EDGE TO THE CENTRE

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## SUMMARY

This text was commissioned for the catalogue that accompanied IMMA's inaugural exhibition, *Inheritance and Transformation*, which opened in May 1991. It is the first of a series of revisited catalogue texts, from IMMA's extensive exhibition history, which will be reproduced in future editions of *IMMA|Texts*.

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In a catalogue introduction to the *Exhibition of a Selection of Works by Irish Painters* that was held in 1904 at the Guildhall in London, Hugh Lane made what was to become a celebrated plea for the establishment of a gallery of modern art in Dublin. 'We have in the Dublin National Gallery a collection of the works of the Old Masters which it would be hard to match in the United Kingdom outside London', he wrote:

But there is not in Ireland one single accessible collection or masterpiece of modern or contemporary art ... A gallery of Irish and modern art in Dublin would create a standard of taste, and a feeling of the relative importance of painters. This would encourage the purchase of pictures, for people will not purchase where they do not know. Such a gallery would be as necessary to the student if we are to have a distinct school of painting in Ireland, for it is one's

contemporaries that teach one the most. They are busy with the same problems of expression as oneself, for almost every artist expresses the soul of his age.<sup>1</sup>

Lane, a successful picture dealer and a Governor of the National Gallery of Ireland, took it upon himself to set this situation to rights. After the Guildhall show opened, he immediately began to plan another exhibition—to be held in the galleries of the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin during the following winter. This was to comprise about a hundred and sixty pictures and drawings lent by the executors of a certain J. Staats Forbes, an assiduous collector of 'modern' Continental paintings (which they were prepared to sell to any public body on 'special terms'); thirty or forty other modern Continental pictures that Lane borrowed from Durant-Ruel, the art dealers; and about a hundred other works of art which he and various friends and artists offered to present to Dublin. As Lane explained, 'We have here the nucleus for a Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art ... At this time we in Ireland possess the unique position of being the only country [sic] that cannot boast of a Gallery of Modern Art. There is hardly any great modern city (either capital or provincial), which has not such a Gallery.'<sup>2</sup> If Dublin were to seize the opportunity now presented to her, he suggested, such a gallery could be established with a minimum of effort and trouble. But Lane added an ominous proviso. 'The Corporation of Dublin has in every way shown its sympathy with the scheme', he pointed out. 'It is greatly to be hoped that they will now help it in a practical manner by granting a small annual sum, which will enable us to have the collection open free to the public - by day and in the evening. On this will depend many of the most

valuable gifts ... the small collection that I have formed myself will only be presented on condition that certain steps are taken to place the "Gallery" on a sound basis.<sup>3</sup>

From then on, trouble beset Lane at every turn—the well-known incident about the 'fake' Corot in the Loan Exhibition being only the first of many difficult problems he had to face.<sup>4</sup> And as soon as the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art opened at its temporary home in No. 17 Harcourt Street, there was controversy about the provision of a suitable site for the permanent gallery that Lane demanded—and which the Corporation had promised to provide. Lane, furthermore, frequently reminded the Corporation that only after the establishment of a permanent gallery would he formally transfer his 'Conditional Gift of Continental Pictures' to Dublin. The collection, by this stage, had grown in stature and scope, for it included thirty-nine works, among them first-rate paintings by Courbet, Degas, Manet, Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro.

Many and varied sites for the permanent gallery were suggested by Lane and his friends: a building in Lord Edward Street, another in Merrion Square, the old Turkish baths in Lincoln Place, a yard adjacent to the Mansion House in Dawson Street, a disused skating-rink in Earlsfort Terrace, a block of old buildings on Upper Ormond Quay, and another on an island-site in Essex Quay. Then, with Paris's Luxembourg Gallery in mind, Lane conceived the possibility of erecting a gallery in St Stephen's Green, and even commissioned Sir Edwin Lutyens to prepare a design for it. All these ideas were rejected by the Corporation.

Lutyens, who visited Dublin to assess the situation, came up with another possible solution. He proposed to construct a bridge with two flanking galleries across the

Liffey, in the very centre of the city. Lane was delighted by this plan and tried to insist on its implementation. If this scheme were not accepted, he said, he would immediately withdraw his 'Conditional Gift' from Dublin. But Lane's critics were just as determined to block the proposal. It was argued that Lane should not be provided with a personal monument at the city's expense, that the designs were ugly, and that the needs of Dublin's unhoused poor were of greater importance than those of wealthy collectors and art-lovers. The Corporation of Dublin wavered, faltered, and eventually decided to turn down the idea. So Lane carried out his threat. The British pictures were lent to Belfast; the remainder were sent to London. Everybody in Ireland knows the final outcome of the impasse: although the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art was eventually established in Charlemont House, and despite the codicil to his will that indicated a change of heart, the pictures that Lane lent to Belfast and London have never legally been restored to his native city. An ad-hoc arrangement, whereby the collection is partly shown in both London and Dublin, remains in effect to this day.

The story of Lane's Gallery is of more than mere anecdotal interest. It prompts us to remember just how long the idea of an Irish Modern Art Gallery has been mooted and discussed. (The Lane pictures, then modern, are now, to all intents and purposes, 'Old Masters'.) It reminds us, too, that the controversy surrounding the siting of the new Irish Museum of Modern Art has had a much more dramatic precedent. And, no less importantly, Lane's individualistic entrepreneurship, together with his assumptions about the nature of a national gallery, provide vivid contrast to the ideas and strategies on which IMMA will be based.

The controversy about the siting of IMMA can briefly be summarised. Some years ago, when the foundation of a national gallery of modern art was once again the subject of serious discussion, two buildings were considered as possible locations for the institution. The first was a large disused Victorian warehouse on the quays, near the new Financial Centre – the so-called ‘Stack B’. This had several advantages. It was in a central city location, could readily be converted into a flexible gallery space, and, it was surmised, would be in a position to attract sponsorship from international businesses located in the area. The other alternative was the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham. The Royal Hospital was then regarded—not for the first time in its post-colonial history—as something of a white elephant, for a great deal of money had been spent on its restoration (about £22 million, most of it provided by a European fund), and although it was called a ‘National Centre for Culture’, the place was under-developed and under-utilised. By Dublin standards, though, Kilmainham is far from the heart of the city, and the Royal Hospital’s rooms, judged by normal criteria, are less than ideal for the exhibition of contemporary art. Rapidly, however, and at the highest ministerial level, the decision was made to house the new Museum in Kilmainham. There was little public debate on the subject.

But it remained difficult to see how a retirement home for old soldiers, built in 1684, could be turned into a contemporary art museum without making radical alterations to its architecture. Preservationists, especially, felt that it was absurd to restore a fine seventeenth century building to something approaching its old grandeur, and then proceed to dismantle its interior. From one point of view, they were right. The Royal Hospital isn’t an ideal

building for the exhibition of modernist art. Inspired by Les Invalides in Paris and a sister institution to the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, the RHK’s facade was conceived in a grand classical manner, while its interior is akin to a barracks: most of the rooms, excluding the chapel and main hall, were designed as bedrooms for retired and disabled soldiers. Besides, part of the main front was once the official residence of the Commander-in Chief of the British Army, and it once served as a temporary Vice-Regal residence. In short, the Royal Hospital has none of the adaptable ‘neutrality’ of a purpose-built contemporary gallery—or even the industrial functionalism of Stack B.

Clearly, then, some imaginative ‘lateral’ thinking was going to be necessary to overcome the apparent architectural limitations of the Royal Hospital. And other limitations were just as plain, for Ireland simply doesn’t have the resources with which to establish a substantial collection of modernist masterpieces. An alternative, less conventional, attitude to the project seemed to be called for—an attitude less focused on acquisition and ownership than on the idea of art as a form of activity, process, and transformation. If IMMA were to make sense, and for there to be any chance of it achieving a degree of excellence, traditional museum methodology would have to be replaced by a strategy that was at once pragmatic and more in keeping with current critical thinking about the nature of such institutions.

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The act of collecting, it has been said, is an attempt to achieve identity by pursuing an activity superfluous to the process of acquiring an occupational and social

profile. An obsessive desire to acquire works of art, for example, can be regarded as a form of psychological ‘compensation’ because ‘successful’ artistic activity, in our society, tends to be elevated to an inordinately high status. The acquisition of the fruits of such activity thus carries with it certain echoes of that status, particularly if the artwork, as has always been the case until relatively recently, bears the traces of the hand of its maker. The desire to own a work of art, therefore (as opposed to the desire to experience it), is a means of ‘possessing’ the artist’s mental and spiritual energy. So, depending on the collector’s individual motives, the act of collecting can be construed either as a desire to surround him/herself with meaningful objects, often because of a supposed personal lack, or as a reflection of his/her power and social status.

A museum, viewed in a particular light, is a monumental manifestation of the urge to collect and an index of power, authority, and wealth. Its status is established by what it contains, and also, to a lesser degree, by its architecture. (It is not coincidental that museums have often been housed in neo-classical buildings, which are considered to be appropriate reflections of the state and its patrons, as well as of the ‘quality’ of their collections). And as Daniel Soutif has observed in a recent article,

As long as it shows things, the museum must show itself showing ... From the work outward, the museum forms a multi-dimensional syntagm that begins at the frame of the painting or the base of the sculpture and continues with the wall and all its labels and decorations, the floor, the room, and so on up to and including the entire building.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not it is consciously acknowledged, this organisation is deliberate and directly influenced by the aesthetic and philosophical of the museum’s curators and patrons. As such, it has important social and political implications.

Most museums do not interrogate their conventional role in society, which is that of an archive and structure for the preservation and presentation of cultural artifacts—objects that have been selected as being representative of the high, or nodal, points of a particular culture or cultures. In the majority of museums, moreover, cultural artifacts are treated like set pieces on a stage: they are more or less arbitrarily manipulated into configurations that exemplify certain aesthetic and historical standpoints. The museum’s collection thereby forms an organic whole that develops its own set of dynamics, which are usually (and falsely) assumed to be ideologically neutral. But as a complex index, the museum necessarily raises questions about the ways in which it articulates the objects it contains. ‘Take away the museum’s function as an index’, Soutif observes, ‘and away with it inevitably goes the museum’s theoretical foundation, supposing it had one. What is left, then? ... bric-a-brac ...’<sup>6</sup>

These ideas aren’t new. Hans Haacke, an artist celebrated for his subversive attitude towards cultural institutions, remarked about twenty years ago that ‘works of art’ are simply objects that have been singled out as culturally significant by those who have the power to do so. And a statement he once made with regard to museology is worth quoting at length, as it encapsulates the views of many radical artists of his generation. ‘Irrespective of the “avant-garde” or “conservative”, “rightist” or “leftist” stance a museum

might take, it is, among many other things, a carrier of socio-political connotations', Haacke wrote. He went on:

The question of private or public funding of the institution does not affect this axiom. The policies of publicly financed institutions are obviously subject to the approval of the supervising government agency. In turn, privately funded institutions naturally reflect the predilections and interests of their supporters ... In principle the decisions of museum officials, ideologically highly determined or receptive to deviations from the norm, follow the boundaries set by their employers. These boundaries need not be expressly stated in order to be operative. Frequently museum officials have internalised the thinking of their superiors to a degree that it becomes natural for them to make the 'right' decisions ... [But] the potential for confusion is increased by the fact that the convictions of an 'artist' are not necessarily reflected in the objective status his/her work takes on the socio-political scale and that this position could change over the years to the point of reversal. Still, in order to gain some insight into the forces that elevate certain products to the level of 'works of art' it is helpful—among other investigations—to look into the economic and political underpinnings of the institutions, individuals and groups who share in the control of cultural power ... There are no artists, however, who are immune to being affected and influenced by the socio-political value system of the society in which they live and of which all cultural agencies are a part, no matter if they are ignorant of these constraints or not.<sup>7</sup>

There were other artists who asked awkward questions about the structures of the art world during the 1970s. Daniel Buren, for instance, made work that demonstrated how architecture articulates the nature of museums, which he saw as a privileged place that plays a tripartite role in society. The aesthetic aspect of a museum, he observed, frames and provides an effective support for works of art. Its economic aspect (usually hidden or repressed) enhances the monetary value of the works it owns, and, by extension, of others. And its 'mystical' aspect promotes to 'art' status whatever it exhibits with conviction. Donald Judd, while not so radical in his critique of museums and galleries, has expressed strong views about their 'decontextualizing' function. A 'bad' location or insensitive placing of a work of art, he suggests, tends to reduce understanding of the work to mere information about it. 'A museum is the collection of an institution and it's an anthology', he has written.<sup>8</sup> And while there is nothing wrong, in principle, with such anthologies, there is a real danger of anthologised art becoming an excuse for the existence of the building that houses it. A plausible alternative, Judd believes, is to give artists the opportunity to make work that will remain forever in one place—in other words, permanent site-specific art. The ideal museum, in his view, would feature permanent and substantial installations of the work of the 'best' modern artists, not a collection of disparate 'masterpieces'.

Brian O'Doherty's witty and incisive critique of the conventional role of the modernist art gallery—a subspecies of the museum genus—also did much to further debate on these issues. In three articles first published in *Artforum* in 1976, O'Doherty argues that the modernist gallery space is a place where the outside world is

excluded. Windows are usually sealed off, walls are painted white, and the ceiling becomes the source of light, in order that the art should be 'free ... "to take on its own life"'. This kind of space, which he refers to as 'The White Cube', has certain characteristics in common with religious buildings, for the artworks, like religious icons, are intended to appear untouched by time and its vicissitudes. And this, he says, implies a claim that the work already belongs to posterity—which is tantamount to an assurance of good financial investment. Like Haacke, O'Doherty proposes that behind this situation lie the political interests of a class or ruling group attempting to consolidate its grip on power by seeking 'eternal' ratification. In this space, he adds, we give up our humanity and function on a reduced level of life and self, for transcendental values speak of another world, not of this one. With the onset of postmodernism, O'Doherty argues, the gallery space is no longer 'neutral', for 'neutrality' can now be seen to be an illusion. And, 'If the white wall cannot be summarily dismissed, it can be understood. This knowledge changes the white wall, since its content is composed of mental projections based on unexposed assumptions.' As Thomas McEvilley has put it, O'Doherty's essays are a defence of the real life of the world against the sterile white cube' – they are defences of time and change against the myth of the eternality and transcendence of pure form.<sup>9</sup>

Douglas Crimp, in 'On the Museum's Ruins', pushes this argument further into postmodern discourse. He prefaces his essay with Adorno's statement that 'The German word *museal* (museumlike) has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more

to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art.' Pointing out that the modernist museum aspires to a moral as well as an aesthetic authority, he maintains that the idea that museum displays constitute a coherent representational universe is a fiction. He quotes Eugenio Donato as saying that 'Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world'. He refers to the ideas of Foucault to buttress this position. Foucault's project involves the replacement of those unities of humanist historical thought such as tradition, influence, development, evolution, source, and origin with concepts like discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, and *transformation*. Thus the 'self-evident' quality of masterpieces is no longer acceptable. The humanist notion of art— 'an ontological essence, created not by men in their historical contingencies, but by Man in his very being'—is now superfluous.<sup>10</sup>

The arguments of these artists and critics, in large part, are rhetorical, conceived as ways of undermining the dominance of traditional thinking about the role of museums and galleries. After all, a degree of common sense is all that is needed to perceive that some works of art (defined as specific examples of cultural expression or intervention) resist the passage of time more than others, and thus can reasonably be regarded as more meaningful than those that don't; and that white walls do provide a discreet ambience for their display. These issues are problematic, not easily resolved. But we can no longer disregard the assumptions and

implications that hide behind the facades of traditional museum and gallery structures—they have to be acknowledged and investigated. And as O’Doherty has observed, contradiction is our current vernacular.

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The broad strategy that is in place at IMMA takes into account some of the contradictions of postmodern culture. Diversity, rather than homogeneity, will be the museum’s keynote. Artistic projects, both within the walls of the Royal Hospital and without them, will be initiated, so ‘process’, as opposed to ‘product’, will be encouraged. And instead of basing the museum’s historical aspect on a permanent collection of international stature—an impossibility in any event—specific investigations will be conducted into areas of modernist art history. In order to do so, works from other collections will be brought in on loan. Furthermore, IMMA’s speculative and heterogeneous approach to its role in society will be unified not merely by qualitative criteria but by a sense of artistic activity and sceptical historical enquiry. There will be no attempt to anthologise or to impose a rigid form of narrative chronology. And while there will be corridors of white rooms in this extraordinary building, they will be composed of small interlocking spaces, with windows that open onto the world outside.

Such a policy may be both canny and ideologically admirable, but it is not unambiguous. It runs counter to deep presuppositions about the nature of a national museum, for despite the example of institutions like the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the traditional notion of a museum’s function remains the norm against which

alternatives are judged. Most people expect a museum to contain masterpieces, displayed authoritatively in a ‘high’ cultural environment, and the inflexibility of those expectations, which are not confined to a specific social class, should not be underestimated. IMMA’s immediate aims disregard the high connoisseurship, the rarefied elitism, and the supposed ideological neutrality of a conventional museum. A comparison with the genesis of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art makes this plain, for IMMA has put little emphasis on ‘purchasing’, ‘taste’, ‘expression’, ‘distinct school’, and ‘conditional gifts’—the axial points of Lane’s approach to a similar project. But will this approach be regarded as the right one in two decades’ time? Should a national museum of modern art be an institutionalised ‘alternative space’?

Contemporary cultural theory and plain pragmatics suggest that it is the only viable way forward. And it has to be conceded that Lane never achieved his ambition, despite the existence of the gallery that has since taken his name. In part, this is because Ireland is not a wealthy country; its artists and art market have always been peripheral to the main art centres. Had it been otherwise, a national museum of modern art might have been founded a long time ago. But limitations can be seen as the parameters of strengths and thereby transformed. Ireland is marginal, out of the mainstream, literally eccentric. An Irish national museum, if it is to be true to its roots, will reflect those qualities. Besides, it is almost a truism that the edges are the centre of postmodern discourse. There is, in short, every reason to be optimistic about the future of the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Bodkin, *Hugh Lane and his Pictures* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1956), 10.
2. *Ibid.*, 12.
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. See John Hutchinson, 'Sir Hugh Lane and the Gift of the Prince of Wales to the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin', *Studies* (Winter 1979): 277–87.
5. Daniel Soutif, 'Pictures and an Exhibition', *Artforum* (March 1991): 86–7.
6. *Ibid.*, 88.
7. Hans Haacke, 'All The Art That's Fit To Show', reprinted in *Museums by Artists* (Toronto, 1983), 151.
8. Donald Judd, 'On Installation', in *Museums by Artists*, 196.
9. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube—The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, with an introduction by Thomas McEvilley (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986).
10. Douglas Crimp, 'On the Museum's Ruins' in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 43–56.

JOHN HUTCHINSON was Director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Trinity College Dublin for twenty-five years.