

## **2nd International AICA Congress Germany 2019**

*Art Criticism in Times of Populism and Nationalism*

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### **Abstract: *Galway 2020: The Very Space of Art on the Edge of Europe***

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I completed an essay on *Conceptual Art in Ireland* for a book publication in 2007. The project was delayed for various reasons and I was asked to 'update' the essay for publication in 2019. It was clear that, despite being an art historical essay, a new conclusion was necessary for present circumstance. The initial conclusion was hinged between optimism and pessimism in terms of what a legacy of conceptualism or a critical practice could offer the current critical terrain in 2007. It could not have anticipated the profound effect the economic crash would have on the visual arts in Ireland (and beyond).

Artist-led spaces, educational institutions, galleries, museums, print publications, local and national state funding bodies - in short, the whole visual arts infrastructure – have been reshaped by a bureaucratized accountability too often grounded in neoliberal ideals. Looking back on the initial conclusion, it is interesting to see the degree to which the gallery space is taken for granted as *the* arena in which to act. Here lay an unspoken confidence in the secure foundations and power of art. This is in contrast to a prevailing need in the present moment to fight for the very space of art. It is also interesting to note a shifting role for the art critic (at least for this one!) from one of evaluating specific works of art within institutional confines to defending the visual arts as action against a prevailing tide characterized by a utilitarian creed, economic accountability and funding models demanding a branded optimism as a rejuvenating cultural force.

This paper explores various facets of this dilemma. It focuses on three key areas:

- The artist-led organization: I look at the idea of artistic autonomy in the light of the report, *FOOTFALL: Articulating the Value of Artist led Organizations in Ireland*, commissioned by 126 Artist-Run Gallery in Galway. At root, this is to explore tensions between pleasure and bureaucracy in artist-led organizations in the search for valuable models of practice.
- The plight of fine and contemporary art education in Ireland in the light of national educational policy and wider shifts in EU policy.
- The impact of new state funding models for the arts, contrasting an older ‘arms-length’ principle of Arts Council funding with new funding streams. This is to focus on the troubles and tensions surrounding the designation of Galway as 2020 European City of Culture (*Galway 2020*). This is to explore the notion of festivalism and its impact upon a local visual arts scene.

My perspective on each of these areas are born from my practical involvement with each. I sit on the advisory panel for 126 Artist-Run Gallery, I teach Art History and Critical Theory in Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, and, until recently, I was chair on the board of directors of TULCA Festival of Visual Arts (TULCA is to play a significant role in *Galway 2020*).

My perspective has also been shaped by recent essay commissions on this topic. This includes *A Very British Putsch: Brexit, Ireland and the Red Room for Third Text* which explores the idea of the periphery. It considers Brexit as an unforeseen consequence of the global economic crisis which will have a dramatic impact upon Ireland. Brexit is driven by neoliberal fantasy and populist doctrines of the heartland, boorish towards *periphery* in all its complexities. Placing this, and the aforementioned topics, within a wider European framework will allow me to imagine durable forms of resistance within the current conditions of severe confusion, doubt and despair. It is to suggest that the very space of art might not be found in phenomena like *Galway 2020*.

## **Biography**

Gavin Murphy lectures in Art History and Critical Theory at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. He has published in *Circa Art Magazine*, *Irish Review*, *Irish Studies Review*, *Source Photographic Review*, and, *Third Text*. He has contributed the essay 'New Media Art in Ireland' to *The Art and Architecture of Ireland, Volume V: Twentieth Century* (Royal Irish Academy and Yale University Press, 2014). He has also contributed to the *Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks* series, published in the *Irish Times* and appear in the book of the same title, edited by Fintan O'Toole.

## **Portrait Photo:**

