

Northern Ireland's Feminist and Queer Art Histories Conference Programme

Friday 21st January 2022, 10am – 5.30pm GMT

Organised by Rachel Warriner (The Courtauld), Edwin Coomasaru (The Courtauld), Anna Liesching (Northern Irish Art Network) and Clare Gormley (Northern Irish Art Network).

10.00–10.15: Introduction

Dr Rachel Warriner (Courtauld), Dr Edwin Coomasaru (Paul Mellon Centre), Anna Liesching (Northern Irish Art Network), Clare Gormley (Northern Irish Art Network)

10.15–11.15: Keynote 1

Chair: Dr Edwin Coomasaru (Paul Mellon Centre)

Dr Fiona Barber (Manchester Art School), Repeal and Reparation: The Timely Change of Northern Ireland's Art Histories

Dr Fiona Barber is Reader in Art History at Manchester School of Art. She is the author of *Art in Ireland since 1910* (Reaktion 2013), co-editor of 'Brexit Wounds: Cultural Responses to Leaving the European Union', a special edition of the *Open Arts Journal* (2020), and curator with Aoife Ruane of the exhibition *Elliptical Affinities: Irish women artists and the politics of the body 1984-present* (Highlanes Gallery Drogheda and Limerick City Gallery of Art November 2019- March 2020). She has written extensively on art in Northern Ireland, and gender in Irish art, since the mid-1980s, and in 1987 was a founder member of both the Women Artists Action Group, and Northern Ireland Women Artists' Group.

11.30–1.00: Panel 1

Chair: Clare Gormley (Northern Irish Art Network)

Dr Catherine Spencer (St Andrews), 'The Trace and the Stain'

In 2019, the journalist Lyra McKee was senselessly murdered by a dissident Republican group while reporting in Belfast. In the aftermath of her death, the words 'not in our name' were graffitied onto the white expanse of the iconic Free Derry wall, while McKee's partner Sara Canning and supporters conducted a protest during which they imprinted blood-red paint handprints on the Saoradh headquarters in Derry. McKee's murder was significant not just because it testified to the endurance of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, but because of McKee's individual significance as a member of the LGBTQ community who had celebrated queer lives using her journalistic platform. This is encapsulated by subsequent artworks such as a poster by the artist James Ashe, which transforms the Red Hand of Ulster by filling its outline with the colours of the rainbow, and pairs it with McKee's words. In each of these interventions, a key symbolic site of the so-called 'Troubles' is challenged and re-made, and thereby critiqued as having become an ossified, reductive sectarian trope which – regardless of its political alignment and intent – risks perpetuating division and upholding reductive and deeply conservative notions of identity. This paper links this recent challenge to a longer history of feminist artistic deconstructions of hegemonic signifiers in Northern Ireland that deploy the effects of the trace and the stain, processes which challenge representation and interrupt the transmission and consolidation of stable iconographies.

Catherine Spencer is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews. In 2021 she co-curated the exhibition *Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism* at the Glasgow Women's Library, and is currently working on a book project provisionally titled *Abstract Subjects: Art in Britain between the Border and the Trace*, supported by an AHRC Early Career Leadership Fellowship.

Dr Shonagh Hill (Queen's University Belfast), 'The movement of feminisms in the work of choreographer Oona Doherty'

Belfast-based choreographer and dancer, Oona Doherty, has had remarkable success in the years since her debut solo work, *Hope Hunt and the Ascension of Lazarus* in 2015. Her work has been performed across Europe to great acclaim and she was recently awarded the Silver Lion by La Biennale di Venezia. Doherty gives voice to those who are not traditionally represented in contemporary dance and while she is perhaps best known for her portrayal of young working-class men, my paper will focus on her choreographies of groups of women: the Sugar Army section of *Hard to be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* (2017), and *Lady Magma* (2019). I will track the range of feminisms that circulate through these works as Doherty explores the complexity of female corpo-realities, including second-wave feminism, postfeminism, and an intersectional feminism. I suggest that address of these feminisms prompts consideration of more complex experiences, counter to a focus on the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland. As Eilish Rooney suggests: '(r)epresentative democracy, politics and gender in the north of Ireland are enmeshed within the hierarchies of power and inequality, which are differently experienced and differently understood by differently positioned women' (Rooney, 2000, 166). Consequently, I will bring class and race into discussion with feminism. Addressing the ways in which the feminisms in both *Sugar Army* and *Lady Magma* mobilise, and fail, these women, reveals the potential for, and pitfalls of, community and solidarity.

Dr Shonagh Hill is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at Queen's University Belfast, undertaking a project on 'Generational Feminisms in Contemporary Northern Irish Performance'. Shonagh's first monograph, *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (CUP, 2019) provides an historical overview of women's contributions to, and an alternative genealogy of, modern Irish theatre.

Dr Clare Gallagher (Ulster University), 'Our foot's in the door: expanding the field of Northern Irish photography'

Amongst Northern Irish art, particularly in relation to the Troubles, photography has been characterised as masculine and been dominated by male voices. This enduring tendency has cast a long shadow over the representation of Northern Ireland and of conflict, and on the participation and voices of women in photography. While Northern Irish photography has established itself internationally as having a distinct and recognisable sensibility, noted for its insistence on subjectivity and sensitivity, it remains widely viewed as a male terrain. This view is reinforced by the gender imbalance in recent homegrown surveys such as Colin Graham's book and the Golden Thread Gallery's *Portrait of Northern Ireland* exhibition as well as in the current makeup of the national collections.

My previous doctoral research focused on the invisibility of subject matter associated with women, particularly relating to the home, itself an arena of heightened significance in wider Northern Irish and Irish culture. As a lecturer in photography at the Belfast School of Art I am acutely aware of the impact of these hierarchical perceptions and associations of subject matter and voice on the predominantly female student demographic. In this paper I would like to present an analysis of the omissions in representation engendered by the dominant straight white male voice and to offer up some examples of student and graduate work by women which present highly nuanced and challenging perspectives on Northern Ireland.

Dr Clare Gallagher is lecturer for MFA Photography and BA (Hons) Photography with Video. She studied in London, Canterbury, Toulouse and Belfast. She has been a lecturer since 2003 and is a Fellow of the HEA. Clare has been external examiner at the University of Sunderland and at IADT, is a member of the Northern Irish Art Network and is on the board of the Belfast Photo Festival.

Clare has written for Visual Artists Ireland, the *British Journal of Photography* and contributed a chapter for Stephen Bull's book *A Companion to Photography* published in 2020 by Wiley-Blackwell. Her practice examines ways of making visible the unseen work of home. She recently published a photobook *The Second Shift*, was featured in *The Guardian* and has given numerous talks on her work. She has exhibited her work internationally, most recently at the Gallery of Photography, Dublin and at the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki for which she was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize in 2021.

2.00–3.30: Panel 2

Chair: Dr Rachel Warriner (Courtauld)

Dr Isobel Harbison (Goldsmiths), 'Try Lizzie Borden: The Derry Film and Video Workshop & distribution beyond the Broadcast Ban'

'Message from Pat Murphy' was scrawled in black ink on the back of a Xeroxed newspaper clipping among the files of the Derry Film and Video Workshop, a highly active group of self-trained and predominantly female video and filmmakers galvanised in 1983 by the Channel 4 Workshop Movement.

The message from Murphy, then Ireland's foremost feminist filmmaker, offered a set of suggestions of who they might approach to distribute their works internationally. Because while Channel 4 was to provide start-up funding and ongoing community training and partial production costs throughout the 1980s, it did not guarantee broadcast or distribution. This indeterminacy was made most apparent when their first major documentary completed under the Workshop scheme, 'Mother Ireland', had become subject to Douglas Hurd's Broadcasting Ban in 1988, obstructing its broadcast for another three years (it was eventually shown in 1991).

'Try Lizzie Borden' Murphy had suggested, providing the New York phone number of the legendary US director, renowned by the late 1980s for her explorations of the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race, and capitalism as well as different forms of political organising and collective action, her works then distributed by Women Make Movies. Murphy also suggested that the DFVW contact Marian Urch at the London Video Arts at 21 Frith Street in London's Soho, and Annie at the California Film Institute.

The note was found recently by Sara Greavu while researching the exhibition, 'Open the book at a different page – Derry Film and Video Workshop' at Project Arts Centre, Dublin. It reveals how such a network of women filmmakers and distributors promised a vital alternative to national broadcasters or established film cooperatives at a crucial moment of the DFVW's short lifespan and shows affinities between their works and the most renowned international filmmakers of their generation.

Dr Isobel Harbison is an art historian and Lecturer (Critical Studies) in the Department of Art, Goldsmiths.

Alessia Cargnelli (Belfast School of Art), 'Layering feminist methodologies: self-organising, collaborating, and resisting as praxis in the work of women-led artists advocacy groups in the '80s island of Ireland.'

My research focuses on the intersections of art and activism in the work of women-led and feminist-led collectives in the Island of Ireland in the late 80s and their legacy in the contemporary discourse. Rooted at the local level and consciously allied with the international civil rights and gender rights movements, these artists-led initiatives aimed to establish a peer-led community of women artists, creating exhibition opportunities for underrepresented groups in the arts and initiating a political discourse around the living conditions of women - in Ireland and Northern Ireland, or as Irish immigrants in UK - giving their struggle visibility and credibility, outside their own community and friend circle.

In this paper, I will focus on the "rhizomatic" relationships of friendship, solidarity, and collaboration between three women artists' advocacy groups active in the late 80s: the Irish Women Action Group (London), the Northern Irish Women Artists' Action Group (Belfast & North of Ireland) and the Women Artists Action Group (founded in Dublin, all-Ireland wide). These initiatives provide a safe space for the personal artistic development of women artists – including queer women - coming from different social-economic backgrounds and political identities that eschew the divisions of the then ongoing conflict in the North.

After few intense years of continuous activity and these initiatives naturally dissolved, leaving behind an intricate network of friendships and connections – which reflects how the North, the South of Ireland and the UK are strongly interrelated in the Irish feminist experience and artistic production.

Alessia Cargnelli (b. 1990 in Trieste, Italy) is a visual artist and researcher based in Belfast. Alessia is a former co-director of artist-led initiative Catalyst Arts Gallery (2016-2018) and currently a PhD researcher at the Belfast School of Art, with a combined theory and practice-based study on artists collectives and feminist-led collectives dedicated to social justice, civil action and activism in the island of Ireland. She is 2020-21 Research Associate at the Centre for Contemporary Art of Derry~Londonderry. She completed her BFA at IUAV University and MA at Ca'Foscari University in Venice, Italy. With a background in artist moving image practice, subsequently informed by artist-led initiatives and collaborative productions, Alessia's interests expand towards alternative forms of education, feminist methodologies, collective self-organisations, activism, and artist moving image production and programming. Along with artist Emily McFarland, she is co-founder of Soft Fiction Projects (2018-ongoing), an artist-run initiative dedicated to producing digital and printed matter on artist moving image culture. Alessia is a member of Array Collective, a Belfast-based group who create collaborative actions in response to the socio-political issues affecting Northern Ireland. Array Collective is the winner of the Turner Prize 2021.

Patrick Hickey (Ulster University), 'Sex, Desire and Homoeroticism in Northern Irish Painting'

This paper explores homoeroticism and queer coding within Northern Irish painting, with an emphasis placed upon my own art practice and Belfast-born artist Gerard Dillon's painting, *The Cottage Gable* (c. 1950). To better understand the significance of Dillon's painting and the queer codes found within them, I will explore how the context of Northern Ireland has shaped queer experiences and how artists throughout history have used their artworks to hint at alternative, queer sexualities. By using my own practice as a case study, I will explore how my practice attempts to interrogate issues surrounding queer identity, masculinity and sexuality through a Northern Irish lens.

Patrick Hickey is an artist and Ph.D. researcher at the Ulster University. He received his BA (Hons) from the Ulster University in 2015. His research and art practice focuses on homoeroticism and queer coding in modern and contemporary painting.

4.00–4.55: Keynote 2

Chair: Anna Liesching (Northern Irish Art Network)

Emma Campbell (Activist/Artist/Academic and member of Array Collective), 'out with you f*cking wh*res!'

Emma gained her Documentary Photography BA (Hons) at U.W.C.N Newport in 2001, an MFA in Photography at Ulster University in 2012, and continues her practice-based PhD addressing photography as an activist tool, an artist practice and as reflexive academic inquiry in the movement for abortion rights. Inspired by practices employed by the women photography collectives in her historical research, she employs archive images, documentary, film, group performance, found images, street art and collage. For her forthcoming practice supported by University of Atypical she is using photography and sculpture to create a series of pre-Christian-esque artefacts which reimagine fantastical queer feminist icons. Emma collaborates frequently with Irish artist Siobhán Clancy and is co-convenor of Alliance for Choice. Emma has exhibited in solo shows in Belfast, Dublin & Berlin and in group shows in London, Liverpool, Donegal, Dublin, Belfast, Stockholm, and Bangkok as well as street art and online.

5.00–5.30: Screening and Performative Reading

Chair: Anna Liesching (Northern Irish Art Network)

Prof Maria Fusco (University of Dundee), 'History of the Present: a working-class Belfast opera'

This paper will embody and explore Fusco's new practice-led research project, *History of the Present*.

History of the Present is an experimental working-class opera, written and directed by Fusco. It explores the legacies of the peacelines in Northern Ireland, giving voice to the working-class communities separated by material and ideological reminders of conflict. The work is commissioned by the Royal Opera House, London and supported by The British Council to tour internationally, it will premiere on the 25th anniversary of The Good Friday Agreement, in Spring 2023.

Fusco was born and brought up in Ardoyne, a Catholic working-class area of Belfast. A very particular place and moment in time is utilised to reflect on broader intersectional feminist civil struggles globally, alluding to the many ways these same struggles continue in different forms today.

She will present a short film of an opera-in-progress event that took place at The Royal Opera House and will discuss the driving research question in the work: how socio-political concerns, in addition to providing subject, can structure how an opera is produced. The interdisciplinary piece is an artistically bold, non-normative treatment creating an emotional access point for questions around the complexities of social trauma, collective memory, reconciliation rhetoric and the stubbornness of borders.

The journey for this opera started when Fusco was commissioned by BBC Radio 4 to make a broadcast where she walked the perimeter of 'her peaceline'. These field recordings alongside archival materials give her a starting point to build a non-linear narrative of multiple versions of herself, to create a fragmentary subject, accenting fissure, fracture, incongruity, the imperfect fit between voice and world.

Professor Maria Fusco is an award-winning Belfast born writer, working across the registers of fiction, performance and theoretical writing.

She holds a personal Chair of Interdisciplinary Writing at the University of Dundee, her texts are published internationally and translated into ten languages and she is Editor of *The Happy Hypocrite*, a bi-annual journal for experimental writing.

Recent sound and performance works include *Mollspeak* (2020), an eleven-channel sound installation in the Museum of Home; *ECZEMA!* (2018) a touring performance commissioned by National Theatre Wales to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the National Health Service, and *Master Rock*, a repertoire for a mountain, performed and recorded inside a granite mountain on the west coast of Scotland commissioned by Artangel and BBC Radio 4.

Her latest books are *Give Up Art* (2018), collected critical writings, of which Lisa Robertson has said "Fusco's scintillating mobility invites us to savour a new kind of critical empathy" and *Legend of the Necessary Dreamer* (2017) an ambient novella described by Chris Kraus as "a new classic of female philosophical writing".

mariafusco.net