

“What matter who’s speaking someone said,  
what matter who’s speaking”;<sup>i</sup>  
Contemporary Art Writing in Ireland

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“Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say if I had a voice, who says this saying it’s me?”<sup>ii</sup>

Art Writing is a relatively new and emergent practice, a practice which still defies complete definition. A practice in the margins in some respects, as Kim Levin states, “[f]or some years now, much of the interesting advanced art has come from the so-called peripheries rather than from the art-world’s so called centres.”<sup>iii</sup> This idea of practices developing outside of the centre is one which is encompassed by aspects of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of ‘minor literature’: “[a] minor literature does not come from a minor language; [they write] it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of a minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with high coefficient of deterritorialization”<sup>iv</sup> - something they themselves consider to be present in Ireland’s history and writing (mentioning Joyce and Beckett in particular), although their main subject is Kafka. I will in this short paper juxtapose a number of conceptions of art writing and then go on to see how they might go together with several contemporary positions on Irishness. In this patchwork, I hope will emerge an understanding of art writing as a contemporary practice and how it as a practice might naturally be integrated into Irish cultural production.

American art critic David Carrier touches accurately upon the nature and definition of art writing, “[n]ow and then [he suggests], texts revealingly fall in between this division between artcriticism-writing and arthistory-writing.”<sup>v</sup> From Carrier’s description we envision a fragmentation, a crack upon the surface into which texts fall, and subsequently generate a new language, a new medium. Belfast-born Director of the Masters of Fine Art in Art Writing at Goldsmiths University in London, Maria Fusco, describes ‘Art Writing’ as a “monstrous body made up of lots of little bits.”<sup>vi</sup> In her essay ‘Don’t Say Yes, Say Maybe! Fiction Writing and Art Writing’, she notes that “[c]ontemporary art criticism [...], may be observed to be assembling an inauthentic absolute object or teratological corpus, through rationalist grafting of interpretation from scrappy parts – criticism depending to be read of itself, whilst simultaneously calling for a reading or comprehension of something which is outside of itself.”<sup>vii</sup> As Jennifer Higgin, art critic and co-editor of contemporary art

magazine, *Frieze*, suggests, fragments are indicative of a whole<sup>viii</sup> and this suggestion of a fragmented contrived body, one composed of other pieces, or as Fusco suggests a body with abnormalities to its traditional organic development, is, in effect, a body whose malformation with respect to established practices redefines it completely.

Curator and Writer David Dibosa, in his essay entitled ‘Fatal Distraction. Art-Writing and Looking at Art’, also revisits this idea of art writing as something altogether different from traditional modes of writing about art or criticism.

Dibosa suggests that, “[w]riting on art; reviews, criticism, history, theory has its place in such exchanges – [he finds however that] the issue remains [...] as to what role it can be assigned. Is such writing there to clarify direction, to define certain trends [...], to make suggestions, [or] to explore possibilities [...], as a role for writing on art that may appear elliptical, troubling, confusing? [...] The aim [he concludes] is not to be definitive but rather to propose a range of possibilities concerning what we could choose to look for in writing about art.”<sup>ix</sup> Additionally Dibosa proposes that “[p]erhaps the problem with reading about an art work is the way that the knowledge one attains makes one feel secure only by securing the artwork in turn, by neutralising its effects, by making it safe.”<sup>x</sup> Writer and artist Simon O’Sullivan too addresses the traditional modes of criticism and writing about art and asks, “[w]hy write about an object – or experience – which, in itself, is alien to discourse? What could motivate such a project besides a desire for colonisation, or, more specifically, a desire for meaning?”<sup>xi</sup>

How then, we must ask, is art writing different? What is the working definition we can assume for the practice of art writing? Simon O’Sullivan’s questions fuel the argument for a different kind of writing other than that of the traditional descriptive. His audible cynicism with regard to traditional descriptive methodologies, concedes that “there might be a way of lessening this inevitable friction – not only through celebration of the latter as a *productive* friction but also by appreciating the work the art object is already doing – and somehow paralleling this work, which means by writing in a different, seemingly tangential manner [...] and on an apparently unrelated subject [...]”<sup>xii</sup> This methodology proposed by O’Sullivan suggests an evolution away from traditional practice towards an alternative reading. “Rethinking the art object”, O’Sullivan writes, “means rethinking the subject [...]”. Indeed, art looked at [...] in this way implicitly calls for a new kind of subject – or proto-subject; in fact, in this place, discrete boundaries are blurred – between object,

writing and subject.”<sup>xiii</sup> “A kind of writing – or intervention – which does not reduce or seek to limit the art experience, but rather opens it up to further adventures.”<sup>xiv</sup> A writing *with* the object rather than *about* the object as proposed by Maria Fusco.<sup>xv</sup> She proposes “[r]e-imagining the art object as sharing a number of basic ontological qualities with the riddle, [...she envisages it as a way to] write *round* the art object: to illicit; to unlock; to *induce* its essential obscurity with essential obscurity.”<sup>xvi</sup> Fusco views art writing as writing informed by methodologies, specifically perhaps, the methodologies of the art work and this style of writing she stresses demands a certain proximity, and “being a reader and a writer at the same time.”<sup>xvii</sup> This dualism Fusco alludes to is “a challenge to comprehension”<sup>xviii</sup>, where the object will speak to you, [one has to] listen very carefully and also learn a language.”<sup>xix</sup> This engagement or reengagement with an object amounts to as Fusco aptly suggests an “interest in how one sharpens ones tools.”<sup>xx</sup>

So what might this all mean in the specificity of an ‘Irish’ context or in the context of ‘Ireland’?

In the introduction to the *ROSC* exhibition catalogue in Ireland in 1984, writer Dorothy Walker observes that, “[n]ationality [...] can be confused with nationalism; national characteristics and skills can be exploited for quasi-political nationalistic marketing [...] In terms of negotiable art pursuits, the most marketable Irish commodity on the international market has been the flair for writing. We still rely on the genius of Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett to establish our art credentials and to give a character reference to our Celtic tribe.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Writer Declan Long in a roundtable discussion of ‘Contemporary art and the matter of Ireland’ in *The Irish Review*, asks “[h]ow do the particular social and cultural conditions of Ireland today shape the styles of artistic, critical or curatorial activity that [...] have developed? How does an Irish ‘background’ affect the way [...] work can be perceived and positioned internationally? And, [...] how does the experience of working in Ireland, North or South, influence [...] a view of a much wider art world?”<sup>xxii</sup> Though impossible to answer all of these huge questions here, in

such a short time, I can but scratch the surface and underline the presence of these questions around contemporary artistic production in Ireland.

Artist and writer Sarah Pierce observes that “[t]here are artists who make work about Ireland about the context [...], but most often, [Pierce notes] this work implicates someone else, someone other than those looking at the work, or writing about it, or making it. What if [Pierce asks] we begin to see ourselves in the politics we are so critical of? For instance, when do we, despite ourselves, desire cohesiveness and a kind of reformed national identity and when does that desire reform an idea of Ireland through what it means to work within a specific geography?”<sup>xxiii</sup> Declan McGonagle argues that, “[a]rtists are living beyond these questions of nationalism. The task for artists in general [he writes] and Irish artists in particular is to create third readings.”<sup>xxiv</sup> This reinstates the idea of deterritorialization, allowing culture a freedom from the binds of place.

In his 1874 poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*, Lewis Carroll conceives of a blank map to lead “the impossible voyage of an improbable crew to find an inconceivable creature.”<sup>xxv</sup> This blank map to my mind at least is representative of the ‘third reading’ called for by Declan McGonagle, it also calls for the tight restraints of place and nationality to be loosened and embraces the methodological approach championed by Fusco.

“Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes! But  
we've got our brave Captain to thank, (So the crew would protest)  
“that he's bought us the best-- A perfect and absolute blank!”<sup>xxvi</sup>

“[A] text [Maria Fusco writes] is ultimately a self-referring structure, an entity without significant connections with the external world”<sup>xxvii</sup> In her essay, ‘Say who I am. Or a Broad Private Wink’ in Irish art magazine *Circa*’s online edition ‘On Criticism’, Fusco asks that we look “to less orthodox modes of criticism to examine the dissolution or again dissemination of the absolute object, in the same way as we look to fiction to lead us on an aporetic procedure; enacting critical judgements through question after question rather than answer after answer [For as Jennifer Higgie suggests there is not much room for play with answers.<sup>xxviii</sup>] Criticism [Fusco concludes] can cajole objects to speak.”<sup>xxix</sup>

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“The mark of the writer,” Foucault writes in ‘The Author as Gesture’, “is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.”<sup>xxx</sup> Giorgio Agamben working through Foucault’s text suggests that there is a “paradigm of presence”, [and] “absence of the author in the work.”<sup>xxxii</sup> This suggestion of both presence and absence suggests a suspended proximity. A closeness that is at once a singular absence, a duality that reinstates the boundaries of presence, a practice in motion, a ‘becoming’. Gilles Deleuze states that, “[w]riting is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any liveable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life. That traverses both the liveable and the lived. Writing is inseparable from becoming.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Dorothy Walker captures this becoming, this movement in the context of Ireland when she writes, “The Irish mind, in its artistic activities, seek[s] always the fluid rather than the static, the continuing option rather than the problem resolved [... Irish arts] have neither beginning nor end but have their being in the present moment, in the perpetual movement and in eternally recurring cycles. [...] The structural rhythm is one of the most profound elements in the Irish turn of mind.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Jennifer Higgie, in her paper entitled ‘*Ghost-writing*’ given at the Whitechapel’s art writing symposium in June 2009 envisaged writing as “to engage with the dead” and “to read [...] to allow slippage and uncertainty, [and as with Carroll’s ‘blank’ map ... an] incursion into uncharted territory.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Where writer Eugene O’Brien writes of Yeats and Heaney in his essay, ‘Derrida, Heaney, Yeats and the Hauntological Re-definition of Irishness’, we could propose that in Ireland, artists too are “attempting to further a progress of serious engagement with a modern, and even postmodern, sense of Irishness that while taking account of its past, refuses to be bound by that past.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> O’Brien sees “ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> [And concludes that, t]hrough the presence of spectral alternatives, or *hauntological* aspects of different traditions that have been inherited from the past, [there can be an] attempt to redefine Irishness in terms productive of an engagement with notions of modernity.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> This idea of modernity filtering through to the present is further discussed by Francis Halsall in his essay ‘Strategic Amnesia’, he proposes “that to write about art in Ireland (whether one

knows it or not) means to write in a context that is directly shaped by the dialectic of modernity and Modernism. [he suggests that] further strategically forgetting the problems of the unfurling of this dialectic in Ireland can invigorate the contemporary practice of writing about art.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

While writer and critic Thomas MacGreevy wrote, “[i]t is only by learning to fully understand the past that we can most easily come to realise the significance of the present”,<sup>xl</sup> writer Ciarán Benson concedes that, “Modernism has impelled us to understand how signs of all types work, and how meanings are made, unmade and remade.”<sup>xli</sup> This making, unmaking or remaking of meaning suggests a motion or movement which translates in identity and suggests the embodiment of a becoming, one which invites a re-looking and a rethinking, inviting emergent practices such as art writing to represent Ireland in new, less traditional ways. “Ireland [Fintan O’Toole writes] may be reaching a point at which it is comfortable with the knowledge that its distinctiveness does not lie in any one way of imagining itself, but in fact that it is a place forced from moment to moment to imagine itself. It is beginning to understand that movement itself, and not anything fixed or intact, is its identity. It is beginning to enjoy the freedom of knowing that what is important is not the triumph of any one way of imagining the country, but of imagination itself.”<sup>xlii</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> Beckett, S., *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, Grove Press, 1967, New York. p.85
- <sup>ii</sup> Beckett, S., *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, Grove Press, 1967, New York. p.91
- <sup>iii</sup> Levin, K., 'Poetics, Politics, and Irish Art: Thirteen Questions' in Levin, K.; McGonagle, D.; O'Toole, F. *Irish Art Now; From the Poetic to the Political*, Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999, London; Independent Curators International, New York. p.28
- <sup>iv</sup> Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, Minneapolis. p. 16
- <sup>v</sup> Carrier, D., 'Artcriticism-writing, Arthistory-writing, and Artwriting', in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 78 p.401-3, S. 1996. URL: [http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results\\_single\\_fulltext.jhtml;hwwilsonid=FB132UACWOPGZQA3DINCFGOADUNGIIIV0](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single_fulltext.jhtml;hwwilsonid=FB132UACWOPGZQA3DINCFGOADUNGIIIV0) (Accessed 09/11/2009, 14:32), p.402
- <sup>vi</sup> Fusco, M., Personal Notes taken at a lecture: *Writing and Making: Rephrasing the Argument – Don't Say Yes Say Maybe! Contemporary Art Writing and its Environs* and workshop on Art Writing at University of Ulster, Belfast, 31st March 2010.
- <sup>vii</sup> Fusco, M., 'Don't Say Yes – Say Maybe! Fiction Writing and Art Writing' in Tormey, J. and Whiteley, G. (ed.) *Telling Stories: Countering Narrative in Art, Theory and Film*, 2009, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne. p.36
- <sup>viii</sup> Higgie, J., Personal notes taken at Art Writing Symposium – Whitechapel Gallery London – June 2009 - Arts Writing Symposia Day 1: *Who is this who is coming?* (chaired by Maria Fusco), 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009
- <sup>ix</sup> Dibosa, D., 'Fatal Distraction: Art-Writing and Looking at Art', in Fusco, M. and Hunt, I. (ed.) *Put About; A Critical Anthology on Independent Publishing 2004*, p. 42
- <sup>x</sup> *ibid*, pg 43
- <sup>xi</sup> O'Sullivan, S. 2001, 'Writing on Art; (Case Study: The Buddhist Puja)' in Parallax, 2001, vol. 7, no. 4., pp.115 – 121. URL: <http://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/writing-on-art.pdf> (accessed: May 18th, 2010. 15:00.) p. 115
- <sup>xii</sup> *ibid*, p. 116
- <sup>xiii</sup> *ibid*, p. 116
- <sup>xiv</sup> *ibid*, p. 115
- <sup>xv</sup> Fusco, M., Personal Notes taken at Art Publishing Seminar – *Art Publishing in the Contemporary World* at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2009
- <sup>xvi</sup> Fusco, M., 'Say who I am: Or a Broad Private Wink' in FitzGearld, P. (ed.) *Circa* (Issue 131, 2010 Online Edition: URL: <http://www.recirca.com/issues/131/> [http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show\\_item.cgi?post\\_id=5262&type=Issue131&ps=publish](http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5262&type=Issue131&ps=publish) (accessed 03/11/2010, 22.09pm) p. 23
- <sup>xvii</sup> *ibid*. p. 25
- <sup>xviii</sup> Fusco, M., Personal Notes taken at a lecture: *Writing and Making: Rephrasing the Argument – Don't Say Yes Say Maybe! Contemporary Art Writing and its Environs* and workshop on Art Writing at University of Ulster, Belfast, 31st March 2010.
- <sup>xix</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>xx</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Walker, D., 'The New Tribalism' in *Rosc '84* (Exhibition Catalogue for Rosc exhibition 'The Poetry of Vision', 24<sup>th</sup> August – 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, The Guinness Hop Store, St. James's Gate, Dublin 8.) p. 20
- <sup>xxii</sup> Jewesbury, D., Long, D., MacGiolla Léith, C., Pierce, S. and Thomas, R., 'Roundtable: Contemporary Art and the Matter of Ireland' in Long, D. (ed.) *The Irish Review*. 'Contemporary Art Issue'. (Issue 39.), Cork University Press, 2009, Cork. p.1
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid*. p. 3
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Levin, K., 'Poetics, Politics, and Irish Art: Thirteen Questions' in Levin, K.; McGonagle, D.; O'Toole, F. *Irish Art Now; From the Poetic to the Political*, Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999, London; Independent Curators International, New York. p. 34
- <sup>xxv</sup> Madan, F. and Williams, S., *Handbook of the Literature of the Rev. C.L. Dodgson* (1931) Oxford University Press, as quoted in Gardner, M. *The Annotated Snark*, Simon and Schuster, 1962, New York. p.16
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Carroll, L. 'The Hunting of the Snark', in Haughton, H. (ed.), *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*. Chatto & Windus Ltd. (1990) London. p.299
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Fusco, M., 'Don't Say Yes – Say Maybe! Fiction Writing and Art Writing' in Tormey, J. and Whiteley, G. (ed.) *Telling Stories: Countering Narrative in Art, Theory and Film*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, Newcastle upon Tyne. p.36
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Higgie, J., Personal notes taken at Art Writing Symposium – Whitechapel Gallery London – June 2009 - Arts Writing Symposia Day 1: *Who is this who is coming?* (chaired by Maria Fusco), 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009
- <sup>xxix</sup> Fusco, M., 'Say who I am: Or a Broad Private Wink' in FitzGearld, P. (ed.) *Circa* (Issue 131, 2010, Online Edition: URL: <http://www.recirca.com/issues/131/> [http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show\\_item.cgi?post\\_id=5262&type=Issue131&ps=publish](http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5262&type=Issue131&ps=publish) (accessed 03/11/2010, 22.09pm) p. 25
- <sup>xxx</sup> Beckett, S., *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, Grove Press, 1967, New York. p. 85
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Foucault, M., 'What is an Author?' in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, The Penguin Group, 1998, London. p. 207
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Agamben, G., 'The Author as Gesture' in *Profanations*, [trans: Fort, J.], Zone Books, 2007, New York. p. 66
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Deleuze, G., 'Literature and Life' [Trans: Smith, D.W. and Greco, M. A.], in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1997), University of Chicago Press. [Accessed: 26/04/2010, 11:26am, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343982>] p. 225
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Walker, D., 'The New Tribalism' in *Rosc '84* (Exhibition Catalogue for Rosc exhibition 'The Poetry of Vision', 24<sup>th</sup> August – 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, The Guinness Hop Store, St. James's Gate, Dublin 8.) p. 20
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xxxvii *ibid*, p. 220

xxxviii *ibid*, p. 232

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<sup>xl</sup> MacGreevy, T., 'Dublin – City of Art', *Father Matthew Record*, August, 1944, pp. 5-6, cited in Kennedy, R., *Critical Writing on Art in Ireland 1939-1972* (PhD. Thesis) University College Dublin, 2006, Dublin. p. 81

<sup>xli</sup> Benson, C., 'Modernism and Ireland's Selves' in Barber, F., Brett, D., FitzGearld, M., McBride, S. and Robinson, M. (ed.) *Circa* (1992) (No. 61. January/February 1992), p. 23

<sup>xlii</sup> O'Toole, F. 'Ireland' in Levin, K.; McGonagle, D.; O'Toole, F. *Irish Art Now; From the Poetic to the Political*, Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999, London; Independent Curators International, New York. pp. 25-6