

What's in a decade?

Towards a history of the Periodical Review

While writing about Irish art, I have always been struck by the extraordinary gaps in what is recorded and how. Tremendous bursts of activity unfold, create ripples, and then as quickly as they came, can fizzle out again. Production within contemporary art more generally is not particularly an issue. There is a tremendous amount of art made, funnelled into ever larger networks of biennial, art fairs and ever expansive commercial gallery circuits. The artists that will never make money continue on too, driven on by a hardy mixture of spite and inspiration. Adequate pay and facilities are certainly an issue, especially in Ireland. But for what does manage to happen, somehow, despite it all, risks falling out of view and into the dark of history. There are few moments of pause, reflection or connection to hold onto things before they disappear. As sentimental as it may sound, we need an infrastructure for thinking and conversation if only to slow us down from the whirl of making, marketing and acquisition.

Beginning in 2011, the Periodical Review is an annual exhibition surveying recent contemporary art in Ireland. Established by Gavin Murphy and Mark Cullen and of Pallas Projects in Dublin, the format has evolved over the years but certain parameters have remained constant: the invitation of other selectors and the artworks having been disseminated within that year on the island; resulting in an exhibition with an accompanying booklet featuring writing contextualising the choices. Every exhibition takes on an almost impossible task — there is simply too much that has happened, too spread out across the country, for the selection process to offer a totalising, rounded or even ‘fair’ (whatever that could mean in this context) perspective. But this was never a project that promised to be definitive or complete.

Periodical Review reconsiders the gallery space as something more akin to a magazine. Pallas Projects have reflected this ambition since the beginning, describing it, since the beginning, as “not a group exhibition per se” but as an “editorial review with a critical and discursive position”. The exhibition title, too, echoes this publishing endeavour, suggesting something

occurring at regular intervals. Explaining how the process works, Gavin Murphy stated: “We have an initial meeting with selectors early in the year to discuss the parameters and structure, and again around September for the editorial meeting. Generally, each selector suggests approximately seven possible artists who are discussed and decided upon. Often there are instances where an artist is proposed by more than one selector.”

In terms of the rationale for what gets selected as well as the motivations and limitations surrounding an end-of-year review, Murphy added: “the space provided [in magazines for end-of-year reviews] is always too brief to allow for anything meaningful; you might get one image per writer, so they always fall short. That fed into the structure of exhibition – multiple selectors choosing a number of artists or projects, writing a short accompanying text, but also showing the actual work. That’s partly why it’s described as ‘not a group exhibition per se’. Selectors talk about works as much as showing them, with the works intended to act as ‘texts’ as much as artworks. In that sense, documentation or publications have been included alongside artworks in the exhibition, as opposed to being auxiliary elements.”

The evolution of the Periodical Review can be charted in neat stages, with each iteration marking points of repetition and departure. This history is as spatial as it is conceptual. Its origin story is tied, at least partially, with Pallas Projects’ own trajectory. The booklet for #1 describes how the exhibition coincides with their new gallery space, the refinement of their name and identity, and signals a clarification of their “dual role as a programming and resource organisation.” Both PR#1 and PR#2 took place solely in the Pallas gallery space, with an additional offsite project developed at John Fallon’s bar for PR#3.

In the accompanying booklet for each exhibition, the selectors offer a short text in response to each artwork. Sometimes they’ll explain why it was chosen, other times they write about what the work means and its wider context, and, occasionally, a relevant funder gets a shout out. Together, it’s a web of how art is generally framed and discussed, from the personal to the bureaucratic and the academic. The discussions of the artwork as featured in the accompanying booklet for #1 set-up what was to follow — a certain tone and perspective marked by a kind of expansive attitude. Writing about the work of David Beattie, Murphy writes about the “quiet elegance to the rough hewn materials” of the works from “concrete, paper, guts of radios, walkmans, and rudimentary sheets of metal [that] perform simple interlocutory call-and-responses.” He, like many others, references previous exhibitions of the artists’ – creating its own informal map of the art scene.

Typically, there is one paragraph per artist or project. The demarcation between each entry is signaled through a subtle underline of their name —or bolding in some of the later booklets — allowing the description of the artworks, the references to other spaces and activities, and reflections layer upon one another. Variations in writing style frame the artworks differently. Cullen switches between points of personal reflection (“I first encountered...”), a behind the scenes look at how the show came together (“...we discussed whether...”) and speculation with literary flair (“One can almost hear the engines hum out of this impossibly large floating city”). Ruth Carroll, a curator at the RHA, then and still, offers a more informational institutional tone, describing the artist’s practice and story of the artwork with a certain

neutral objectivity. The artist Carl Giffney, on the other hand, begins with his own perspective on trends within the Irish art scene (“...the final declines of many traditional forms of social capital...”) which sets up a list of peers who reflect this tendency.

For PR#4, the exhibition expanded beyond Dublin, beginning in Pallas before being reshaped for a second iteration in Ormston House in Limerick. This second edition drew a substantive link with another collaborative, expansive exhibition which took place in Limerick.

Throughout July 2014, Basic Space Dublin took up residence at the historic Sailors’ Home building inviting 24 artists to contribute to the unfolding and expanding Stone Soup, and Marie Farrington revisited her site-specific installation of locally sourced limestone scattered throughout the space in Ormston House. For PR#5 towards the end of 2015, the exhibition continued the expansion, this time across multiple spaces, occupying both Pallas and the NCAD Gallery. (The funding behind the project shares a similarly varied history, receiving support from the Arts Council and Dublin City Council, as well as self-funding, crowdfunding and hosting an auction with proceeds from artwork sales helping to support both Pallas and the artists involved.)

It was during the sixth edition in 2016 that Periodical Review took on a larger reflection. Coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of Pallas Studios, the PR#6 survey extended well beyond the usual 12 months to encompass the previous 20 years. Cullen and Murphy stepped back from the selection process. Instead, Brian Duggan, Sarah Glennie, Jenny Haughton and Declan Long took the lead. Murphy elaborated: “In that instance we decided that our input would be to invite four selectors who we thought had made important contributions within different areas of the Irish visual arts over the previous 20 year-period, concurring with the timespan of Pallas.”

This shift in timescale veered away from the immediacy of the previous exhibitions; instead, drawing attention to what stayed with us over time. There were many artworks which held a claim of importance, which were also counterbalanced by more modest pieces. What stands out too is the quantity of archival works, especially of offsite projects, and indeed entire gallery histories. “Small epochs in themselves”, Murphy reflected to me. In the same year, Pallas launched another major project of critical reexamination. A book described as part manual, history and critique, *Artist-Run Europe: Practice/Projects/Spaces* addressed the role of artist-led practice within contemporary art, looking at a timely set of recent and long-running projects asking to what extent they offer an alternative to institutions from the museum to the commercial gallery.

Periodical Review is more than the output of the exhibition. The centrality of the accompanying booklet highlights the process of dialogue, consideration and negotiation that takes place behind-the-scenes. And with the involvement of RGKSKSRG, the curatorial duo of Rachel Gilbourne and Kate Strain, in the selection process for PR#7 this came to the fore. Both Murphy and Cullen work as their own kind of duo, and the involvement of another opened up the process in a playful way. This playfulness was reflected by the reconstruction of Tom Watt and Tanad Williams’ platform/structure ‘Forerunner’ (2017). The modular architecture structure, originally commissioned for a previous show at Mermaid County

Wicklow Arts Centre, was repurposed for the PP/S space, acting as both a display system and stage for the exhibition. Pallas embodies flexibility as an organisation countering that of an institution which, understandably, has its own set of rigid responsibilities and processes.

As much as the project is described through curatorial moves, decisions and shifts, it exists openly and actively within a political context. PR#8 took place during a pivotal time in the lead up to the historic Repeal the Eighth Amendment referendum, a vote to remove constitutional restrictions on reproductive rights. In the previous year, Pallas also organised the Nasty Woman fundraiser to raise money directly for artist-led efforts on the issue. Artists were very much at the forefront of the wider Repeal campaign. Acting as a curious point of galvanisation and support, this particular exhibition featured artworks directly addressing the debate as well as numerous artists at the heart of the movement.

PR#9 highlighted the project's ability to showcase not just individual artists or pieces, but also wider projects, past exhibitions, and private collections. Founded with the desire to facilitate numerous viewpoints through its structure, the 2019 iteration, for example, featured aspects of the ambitious conservation project to restore Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland's seminal mural at the Sirius Arts Centre. It's a subtle distinction, but an important one: not to champion individual artworks in isolation, but instead to highlight particular practices, approaches and histories.

Periodical Review now encapsulates a decade. Looking back, it is curious to revisit the project's trajectory and momentum. A certain kind of expansion has unfolded, whether in terms of physical venues, perceived critical reach and reception, or the slowly building legacy. This history lends momentum to the project, while also adding a pressure for new iterations to continue to challenge, prod and question the format. The latest iteration comes during a time which we're already fatigued by describing. But beyond the present day, now at the ten year mark, this milestone invites a larger reflection on the period, prodding questions about Irish artistic artist practice.

Periodical Review is difficult to separate from the history of Pallas itself. Founded in 1996, Pallas Projects/Studios is like so many other independent artist-led spaces across Ireland – perpetually shaped by 'crisis' and perceived gaps in the cultural infrastructure. In *Artist-Run Europe*, they articulated this balance between activity and support. There were waves of activity in the late 60s, a recognition of the need for greater infrastructure in the 80s, followed by a surge in activity in the 90s and 2000s, by artists who chose to remain in the country, due to improving economic conditions. The exhibition is deeply embedded in the trajectory of artistic practice and in the fluctuating infrastructure of recent decades. Just as independent projects and artist-led activity filled in the infrastructural gaps, this too established something of a rival critical platform, as a counter to other institutional frameworks. By reflecting upon the Irish arts ecosystem, Periodical Review, like *Artist-Run Europe*, probes the legacy and the archival contributions of Irish art practice. Looking back over previous exhibitions, many of the names will be familiar, as these artists have since developed their practice substantially over the years. The exhibitions where artworks were originally shown, also provide another archive of contemporary Irish practice, bringing numerous galleries, curators and periods

into this conversation. Crucially, Murphy explains that the exhibition “was never intended to be a ‘best of’ yearly honour roll, or some kind of resolution of things, but a collaborative dialogue, an active discussion of where things stand now”.

PRX, the tenth in the series, takes this on directly. Instead of a look back on the past year, the selectors have been tasked with evaluating the past 10 years covered by the curatorial project. Arbitrary as the construction of a decade may be, it does – inevitably, if not irresistibly – invite the consideration of some kind of tendency or trend. What defined the last ten years of Irish art? Could we say there are a defining or prevailing set of concerns or strategies?

Looking back, three key moments come to mind. The effects of the 2008 financial crisis extended long beyond the initial crash, producing waves of austerity and resistance against the backdrop of a slow, limping non-recovery. This had direct impacts on the Irish scene as the State grabbed the opportunity to make “difficult choices” in the form of funding cuts and closures, as well as a wider programme of underinvestment and disillusionment. With the volume of part-time and precarious workers in and out of the sector, people struggle with their day jobs that subsidise the culture industry. Some people moved away; others weren’t able to be as ambitious; there were those who gave up and did something else; and many, we can assume, decided to never go to art school in the first place.

Against the grim economic forecast, there were artists who carried on regardless and created their own artworld amid the ruins. Project spaces and temporary studios sprung up in empty buildings. Despite austerity, or perhaps to spite it, communities were formed. Just as this grassroots moment reached its peak, it was met by the so-called ‘decade of centenaries’; a programme of events celebrating significant centenaries occurring over the period 2012–2016, marking key moments of the Irish struggle for independence which led to the modern Republic in 1949. At its best, this was national moral reckoning; a broad and inclusive reexamination of the period, its economic and social context as well as shifting cultural norms; an honest attempt to build understanding and dialogue with traditions across the island; highlighting not just historic leaders, but the lived experience of ordinary people; establishing a dialogue with a diversity of communities, those new to the country and those now abroad. At its worst, this was a benign patriotic hangover recast as a tourist marketing campaign by a deeply neoliberal government; a perfect encapsulation of the failure of the state which people fought and died for, or, proof of the limits of its original conservative vision now laid bare.

As the decade was closing, we began to see the rise and fall of Trump, as well as the spectre of instability along the Northern Irish border due to Brexit. The term fake news was popularised, alongside widespread despair at the looming Climate Crisis. Within the Republic, a popular movement swelled around liberalising referenda, legalising gay marriage and repealing the Eighth Amendment — in such quick succession of each other they signaled more than a mere evolution of social values, but an historic break with the Catholic Church’s stamp on the country. But reproductive rights can’t be discussed in isolation, and neither can the grassroots struggle which drove the issue. The financial collapse of 2008 set forth a cascading series of political decisions that radicalised a generation. From healthcare to housing and

human rights, these were the shared concerns of a population subjected to brutalising austerity. Ireland's postcolonial history heightens questions of power and resistance in relation to systems of control. This was the politics that shaped Irish artists. Money, land and resistance; these are the three great themes of the last ten years just as they, arguably, have been for the past 100 years of Irish art.

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