

Earlier this year, we circulated a questionnaire among artists at different career stages, both members of the RHA and those not involved with the institution, asking them about their experiences of working as a woman in the arts in Ireland. Our survey asked respondents about the key events that shaped their artistic trajectories and about the support networks both formal and informal that supported their practices, as a way of helping to preserve the history of exhibitions, networks and works that have been important to women artists working in Ireland. The survey was not designed to be a completed document, but the beginning of an open-ended resource for researchers, students and those interested in Irish art history. To that end, we would be delighted to receive further responses so that this resource can continue to grow and evolve.

Pluck @ RHA

In 1968 the students at the National College of Art rebelled against their antiquated syllabus, much of which was delivered by members of the RHA. In a gesture that would represent their frustration at a number of factors — institutional, political and aesthetic — the students smashed the classical casts which formed the bedrock of their academic art education. Representing the friction that would develop from the 1960s on, this action marks the two different paths that Irish art practice takes during the late twentieth century: tradition versus modernization. Now an institution that uniquely pulls together these two histories of Irish art, the RHA and its histories of education, membership and programming forms the backdrop for a series of seminars that will consider some of the ways in which modernisation is visible in mainstream institutions. With a focus on representations of sexuality, gender and race this series will bring together writers, artists and art historians to consider the conversation between these two tendencies and how it develops into today's art landscape

Our first session looks at the history of feminism and activism in Irish art practice. We want to use this opportunity to gather people's thoughts, memories and reflections on the changing experience of women in the arts in Ireland. To that end, we would very much appreciate your responses to the following questions:

Alice Maher RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

I remember vividly an installation, [*Attendant* (1992)], Dorothy Cross did in the underground public toilet on the traffic island at the junction of Westmorland and Pearse Sts. That toilet is now gone (as are ALL the public toilets of Dublin). It must have been at the same time she had a show at DHG when she showed the lockers she found in the Pigeon House power station which she was using as a studio. How she got permission for that installation in the subterranean toilet is a mystery, but a wonderful once-off thing. In the toilet she had replaced the men's urinals with bronze urinals cast in the shape of the map of Ireland and the 'drain' was a cast human penis. It was brilliant! I had never seen work so on the mark about Irishness, maleness, subterranean history, inheritance, shame, sexuality, waste, psychosis,

EVERYTHING that spoke of our mixed-up country at that time. I cannot remember the date but am sure it was very late eighties, early nineties. I have no picture of it, and wonder if any exist? It was what one would today, call a 'pop-up' installation. But it has never left my consciousness as a very great and memorable intervention (and perhaps un-documented?) in the history of Irish art. It was so 'alive' to the reality of the moment. I am sure there are many many more once-off installations/happenings which took place over the years that are un-documented but which have left a 'memory' legacy of provocative intervention in the land/city scape that nowadays seems all but impossible.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

I am sure they have been mostly recorded. I'm thinking WAAG and the Northern Ireland WAAG. Pauline Cummins & Breda Mooney would have a vast archive on this I am sure (which Pauline Cummins is, I believe, exhibiting this year at Eva International). Circa magazine was a lifeline to all dialogue in my formation as an artist. I remember writers such as Anne Carlisle (founder), Deirdre O'Connell, Joan Fowler, Medb Ruane, Jill Nunn, Fionna Barber, Hilary Robinson. But even more importantly, we (Irish artists) got to meet great female artists who came to Ireland in the early nineties like Nancy Spero, May Stevens, Ida Appelbroog, Annette Messanger, Joan Jonas, Sherri Levine, Anne Hamilton, Maud Sulter. We got to not only see their work but to converse with them and gain insight into their practice, sometimes helping them to install work (Annette Messanger at DHG). This was support by example, there was no hierarchy. I was lucky to meet with Helen Chadwick, representing the UK at Sao Paolo the same year I was there (the whole place smelled of her Chocolate Fountain), and she had to loan us hammers as we did not even have the simplest equipment with which to hang our work. Her show at the ICA in London, (where that column of waste she made exploded and the place had to be shut down!) was a great influence on me; her use of her own body as material, her multi-media practice, her courage, and gallows humour, all spoke directly to me.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion/exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

My first solo show in the Douglas Hyde Gallery was important, (every young Irish artist could aspire to a solo show there in the eighties/nineties). It was my first major catalogue with essays by Cécile Bourne and Fionna Barber. That body of work was then chosen for Sao Paolo biennial in 1994. I had just given up my teaching job at NCAD and never looked back. You say in your introduction that a revolution took place there in the sixties, to me in the early nineties it looked like it was right back in a place of stagnation.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

I believe that feminism came to me, rather than my going to feminism. In my younger days I was concentrating on was my work, not having the understanding as yet, that that work incorporated all the concerns and even the language of feminism from very early on. It was through others reading of my work (by feminist writers; see answer 2) that I believe I came to understand it to be feminist. From then on, I began to read and research writings on feminism myself. Theory followed practice, in other words.

It has to be said that all the art I was looking at and admiring was by women starting with Hannah Höch, Claude Cahun, Paula Rego, Alice Neel, Louise Bourgeois, Rosemarie Trockel, Barbara Kruger, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Helen Chadwick ...so my influences were clearly from a particular quarter! I was aware of the Guerrilla Girls of course, and protest art in general, but did not become involved in art activism until much later in life. I had always read voraciously, and in fiction it was mostly writers like Angela Carter, Willa Cather, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood, Edna O'Brien, Anne Enright. I followed all the writings of female journalists like Mary Holland, Nell McCafferty, Susan McKay in their daily exposés of Irish society and politics. All of the ideas and Images I was absorbing through literature and art were feminist/radical in tone and strategy.

Like many people in the early eighties, I believed art to be 'neutral', that all good art would rise to the surface etc. It took me quite a while to cop on to unconscious bias. This often surfaced in the form in which my work was framed by newspaper reviewers, for instance often using my name 'Alice' to somehow infantilise me, using my biography (rural) to confine & define me. If I had a fiver for every newspaper by-line that used 'Alice in wonderland' I would be rich today. I have had the experience of my work being reviewed on the radio by a respected art historian, as the work of another artist altogether (of the same age and gender)...in other words 'we are all the same' and our individual practice is not respected nor differentiated sufficiently, even though we have been making work individually for 30 years. Women practitioners of the late eighties early nineties tend to be shown together, written about together, grouped together. This you do not see in the case of male practitioners of the same era. I cannot complain that I have not had every opportunity to show, because I have had...but it is the manner in which these shows are understood, spoken about, written up, historicised and contextualised in this country that makes the difference.

Of course it has been my privilege over the years to meet great activists, who influenced me and drew me closer to activism in later life. Early on, my friend Louise Walsh (on my MA course in Belfast) was an influence in raising my consciousness. Her collaboration with Pauline Cummins I admired very much. I knew activist Nell McCarthy and her partner Nuala O'Faolain. So I guess the company I was keeping influenced my thinking. Ailbhe Smyth also came into my orbit..through WAAG I think. Maud Sulter was someone I met through Declan Macgonagle. She was an artist/poet of Scottish Ghanian heritage, whose work dealt with issues of identity, exclusion, colonialism. Her photographic series 'Zabat', exhibited at IMMA had a big impact on me. In later years Cecily Brennan drew me into the Artists Campaign to Repeal the Eight Amendment. This was a campaign in which I was truly involved, influenced by earlier protest work like that of Suzanne Lacy, Keith Haring, the Aids quilt, Mark Wallinger, union banners, confraternity banners etc. It was a live issue, not an abstract one. Earlier in this section, I described my feminism as coming through the encounter with other artists, an 'experiential' learning/awakening.... perhaps the activism came also through authentic lived experience, a fact that was so obvious (in the sense that the 8th amendment was a law that actively discriminated against women) it HAD to be dealt with. Today the young women I admire (Jesse Jones, Rachel Fallon, Tina Kinsella, Aideen Barry, Sarah Browne, Amanda Coogan) and hang around with, have a much more nuanced and complex political analysis of the role of feminism than I had at their age.

Anonymous 1

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

I assume that this question relates to other artists' exhibitions. I am not aware either way, whether exhibitions are being documented or not. In recent years with more widespread use of digital databases, there seems to be more documentation of exhibitions available in general.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

I am not aware either way.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion/exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

No, I believe it has been a gradual development.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

I do not feel that I was being treated differently with regards to my gender at the start of my career (14 years ago).

Carolyn Mulholland RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

I started my sculpture 'studio' in the 60's in Belfast - others went to England to get on. Sculpture was rare, and even the idea of a studio was regarded as pretentious. UTV and the BBC made a couple of small films and there were a out two radio interviews, I've no idea what happened to them. During this time I was involved in small group exhibitions and the Arts Council of N. Ireland was a large part of the support.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

With the 60's there would have been consciousness raising groups starting up as the fashionable thing to do - but i am not a group person, so i wouldn't have been invited!

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion / exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

There would have been plenty of galvanising moments - but behaviour too upsetting to ignore was the spur to survive and grow.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

I consider myself to be very fortunate - there were enough group exhibitions and small commissions to give me experience and a living in those days. Things are much the same now, thanks again to the RHA, the RUA, and the Arts Council. I have always regarded myself as an artist - rather than a female artist - for me, my gender has never been a special category. I suppose the fact it is called a career rather than a way of life now, keeps the creative challenge alive.

Elis O'Connell RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

Being based in Cork after art school, I organised my own first solo show at the Ivernia Theatre behind the old Tourist Board office in Cork. It was the only ground floor premises available in the city where I could show big steel pieces. There was no catalogue and no funding. A Dublin architect came across my show accidentally and offered me my first big sculpture commission for a Swiss company in Dublin. That commissioned piece won me the Mont Kavanagh Award for Environmental Art awarded to both myself and Micheal Warren.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

They are probably documented but really important for me. The organisers of "Oasis "the outdoor exhibitions of sculpture in Merrion Square Dublin in the early 80's, the Living Art and Independent Artists groups who ran open submission shows similar to the RHA annual. In Cork the informal group who began the Triskel, Robbie Mc Donald, Maud Cotter, James Scanlan and myself, following that the setting up of the Sculpture Factory in Cork. I was a member of the Arts Council for a short while and pioneered the idea of a funding a sculpture space in Cork, it was agreed as future policy before I resigned. Maud Cotter and Vivienne Roche continued brilliantly with that work and did the legwork to make it happen while I left for the UK.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion/exposure that was important to your development as an artist ?

Things really changed for me after my fellowship at the British School at Rome. Being included in Rosc, the Paris Biennale and Sao Paolo Biennale were really important. Following the fiasco of the Kinsale Commission, I was told by a prominent person in the Arts Council that because I went to lawyers about the Kinsale copyright issue I would never get work in Ireland again, so I left for London, it was the only option if I were to continue working as full time sculptor. London really opened up to me and offered me possibilities that did not exist at home.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

Being a female sculptor is particularly difficult as it is very hard physical work so more men practice than women. Funding is mainly available through Public Art projects and the world of commissioning big sculpture is still very much a man's world. When I got shortlisted in London for commissions I was almost always the token woman on the list and it was a great challenge to me to win because I had a lot to prove after Kinsale. Ironically it was that piece that got me on the shortlists in the first place. Things in Ireland have changed drastically since the 70's and 80's as has our society in general. When I look back at my career and particularly the abuse that I got over the Kinsale sculpture I believe it was a case of "who does she think she is". I was very idealistic and naive then and believed that I could legally fight for copyright. We have many strong female artists working in Ireland today and there are many women running art institutions here. Being an artist is difficult for everyone not just women but at least we have level playing field now.

Eithne Jordan RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

We were pretty much thrown out to sink or swim on our own after art school. I lived in London initially for a few years, in the mid-seventies, where I came in contact with radical feminist groups, often based around organised squatting movements. I was also involved in a co-operative group studio being set up in Butler's Wharf at that time. So I sought out my own support network.

A few years later I was one of the founder members of Dublin's first co-operative studio space, the Visual Arts Centre. We set it up in response to a dire lack of studio space, and also to the isolation many of us felt working at home on our own. This group had a core of women artists, like Cecily Brennan, Theresa McKenna and Gwen O'Dowd, and although not specifically set up as such, it became a huge support network for all of us.

At the time in Dublin, there was an exciting group of artists emerging from the Independent Artists annual open submission exhibition. However, it was still a very male dominated scene. Although the guys were the rebels in the NCAD a few years earlier, the women who were also part of the same movement still tended to be ignored, or at least, not taken as seriously.

I studied at Dun Laoghaire School of Art in the seventies, so I wasn't involved in the student strikes, though I was certainly aware of them.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion/exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

There was no one galvanising moment, rather a series of events and exposures:

- Setting up and being involved in the Visual Arts Centre.
- My solo show at the Project Arts Centre in 1982
- My Lincoln Gallery show 1984
- The Project Arts Centre was an important space for new emerging artists.
- Then Temple Bar Studios started up.
- Douglas Hyde Gallery was also an exciting venue then, with some great shows.
- The Orchard Gallery in Derry run by Declan McGonagle.
- Some great female artists emerging then..... Dorothy Cross, Cecily Brennan, Alice Maher, Kathy Prendergast.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

There has been a big change in Ireland at any rate. When I was starting out, there were almost no role models for female painters. Of course I considered myself a feminist, but the feminist artists I came across were too ideological for me. I've always been a painter, and painting was considered part of the male tradition that we were all supposed to reject as committed feminists. However I have always been inspired by the grand old western tradition of painting, and could not reject it as it was central to my practice.

I was very interested in, and influenced by, the new expressionism of the eighties, which was a force in Ireland and Europe at that time. In Ireland, it was very much a male dominated movement.

My solo show at the Lincoln Gallery in 1984 was an important one, as it was dealing with the experience of motherhood through using the traditional vehicles of the European painting tradition, but looking at the subjects from a female point of view....looking at the Beauty and the Beast myth, also the history of Madonna and Child painting, Goya's *Saturn Eating his Children* etc.

Some of the best artists in Ireland today are women. Things have changed enormously, even though it's still far from perfect. It's been interesting to see and be part of the changes in the RHA over the past 10 – 15 years. What was once a bastion of conservative male establishment has become a much more dynamic institution, and is actively working towards having a 50/50 balance in the membership, and for the first time has a female President, Secretary, and Keeper.

Maria Simonds Gooding RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

There were exhibitions that particularly impacted on me, both consciously and unconsciously. Most likely they were documented.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

Most of my life has been spent independently living at the edge of the Dingle Peninsula. When I became a founder member of Aosdána in 1981, it provided the support when I needed the most.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion / exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

There were two important galvanizing moments of inclusiveness to my art development. The first was in 1978 when I was invited by Betty Parsons to exhibit my work in her New York Gallery offering me one person exhibitions. The second was in 2008 when I was elected associate member of the RHA. This allowed me to exhibit work without the long intervals that were required between my shows in the Taylor Galleries. However I would like to add although usually one of my works for the Annual RHA show was included each year, it took over 40 years before being elected ARHA.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

I was not aware of any disadvantage being a female artist working in Ireland. None the less I was aware it could be a disadvantage and signed my name with M. Simonds-Gooding instead of Maria Simonds-Gooding. What was a disadvantage it seemed to me, from the 70s and for the next number of years in Ireland was my stark minimal (not abstract) art work. This changed gradually and when I became an ARHA it gave me the opportunity to show my work as I created it at the time. This gave the freedom and the exposure I needed.

Una Sealy RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

Several of my own solo shows were not catalogued due to lack of funds. Even professional photography was not always available.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

I don't know. Groups I remember are WAAG (Women's Artist Action Group). I wasn't a member, but they held several exhibitions. I've no idea if they were documented. Grapevine Arts Centre, and City Arts Centre, both of which I was involved in the 1980s have a good archive, but as far as I know, has not been digitised.

Lots of things happened in the 80's that lacked documentation, but it wasn't just in the arts, photography and printing was just not as readily available or affordable.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion/exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

Not one galvanising moment, but a series of successes and failures too numerous to mention. Election to the RHA has enabled me to contribute to an institution that has given so much support to artists by way of exhibition opportunities, education, and highly relevant programming.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

Being a woman has never made any difference one way or another to my career, so therefore hasn't changed.

Vivienne Roche RHA

1. Are there exhibitions that were important to your practice that have not been documented?

Documented by whom? I doubt if many exhibitions from the 70's and 80's are documented at all. Like most artists I have a photographic record of a lot of my work and a reasonable print record-catalogues, reviews, etc. from that time but not documentation of exhibitions per se and there are lots of exhibitions that aren't documented for easy access now. Examples are a major sculpture exhibition in the grounds of TCD in 1974 or 75, which was for me a first showing with fellow sculptors just as I was starting out, my first one-person exhibition in Cork in 1978, a three-person exhibition (with Anne Tallentire and Eithne Jordan) in Wexford Arts Centre about 1979, group exhibitions such as Oasis, including Oasis over the Liffey (1982), I could list many more that were important to me and for different reasons.

2. Were there consciousness raising groups or support networks that have not been recorded?

The Artist Association of Ireland when it was set up and the role it played in connecting Irish artists to European artists through collective activism as well as the role it played in highlighting and improving the lot of artists generally. (I was on the first committee and spent quite a few years involved at committee level). I think Colm O' Briain as director of the Arts Council brought together that first committee. I don't know what the records of the organisation are like and if they are still accessible.

Also the Sculptors Society of Ireland, which developed sculpture symposia and connected sculptors from Ireland with ones working across the globe. Their work was very ambitious and influential.

I was a founder member (first we were 2 and then 4) of the National Sculpture Factory and its first chair (from about 1985-93). The large empty space, newly acquired by Cork City Council, was identified for this use by the Arts Officer of UCC (John Hanrahan) and with the support of CCC and the Arts Council, the NSF developed into the facility for making work at a scale not possible in the studio. It subsequently devised many programmes of support for artists as well as playing a role in bringing art into the public sphere. This no doubt is recorded but I want to emphasise, through the examples above, that artists were very active in developing support organisations on a national scale throughout the 70's and 80's.

3. Was there a galvanising moment of inclusion/exclusion / exposure that was important to your development as an artist?

If I think about this question I could give many answers but maybe the one most pertinent to the interests of Pluck is the following and it has to do with exposure, specifically to the aftermath of the unveiling of my first public sculpture - the Memorial to Cearbhall O Dálaigh in Sneem, Co.Kerry in 1983. A competition had been organised through the Arts Council in 1982 and I won the commission with a proposal for a steel sculpture. It was a challenging commission and was made under my direction (and with physical input from me) in Verlome Dockyard in Cobh. Based on wave action, it has three interlocking steel forms and is painted in colours to fit its concept and environment. I completed the sculpture on site in Sneem and met and talked to people as I was doing so. The unveiling was big event as Cearbhall O Dálaigh had been President of Ireland and had resigned his office in controversial circumstances a few years before he died.

The apparent abstraction of the sculpture caused a lot of press commentary, most of it very negative and especially in the local press. It was the first time I heard of Cllr. Jackie Healy Rae, who was a very vocal!

Working outside of the gallery system, there was no network of support for me as a young artist in engaging at that public level with a controversial project. It was a difficult storm to weather and people in positions that could have been helpful to me were not. My first public commission became my only one for quite a few years. The experience shaped my working life and in the long run it made me very resilient and more interested in engaging with a general audience through public commissions.

4. How has your experience of working as a feminist/ woman practitioner in Ireland changed over the course of your career?

Another interesting question and again I'll go back in time. The explosion of art making in Ireland throughout the 1970's and 80's was amazing and this was happening as society was conservative and slow to change. I felt very much part of a wider feminist movement.

The Irish art world was 'led' by a fairly small number of people, directors of galleries, curators and collectors, etc. who shaped artists careers. Looking back on that time, I felt that becoming a mother was certainly a mark against me, as it suggested I wasn't 'serious' about my work. I countered this by continuing to work all the way through pregnancy and making a work for 'Oasis over the Liffey' when my daughter was three weeks old. And I just worked on. Things hadn't changed that much within the art world when my second daughter was born 11 years later, though by then society itself had changed with the introduction, for those in employment, of maternity leave (which was very short by today's standard). This time I produced an

exhibition which opened when my baby was just two months old. This seems mad now but I really felt at the time that you couldn't 'disappear' to the care of a new baby.

The issue of motherhood has had little exploration in the arts, unless it is the subject of an artist's work. The costs of rearing a child are well documented, the costs of making art while rearing children are less so. Being a mother shaped a lot of decision- making for me right through my daughters' childhoods.

The biggest changes through the time I've been making art are the supports available through the welfare system and the access artists now have to that system.