

## Fire Station Artists' Studios (ed. Liz Burns & Clodagh Kenny) 'Art & Activism'

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**THE** latest publication from Fire Station Artists' Studios is less of a manifesto or call to arms and more of a provocation asking, 'what does activism really mean to artists?' The book is a slim volume containing a collection of interviews and essays. In the introduction co-editor Liz Burns explains that she chose the title as an attempt to open up discourse around the idea of the artist as activist, primarily focusing on work that emerged from the 'Troubling Ireland' mobile think tanks, which began in 2010.

The book offers insight into the diverse collection of contributions from artists Anthony Haughey, Kennedy Browne, Anna McLeod, Susan Thompson and Augustine O'Donoghue, with further responses from cultural geographer Bryonie Reid, curator Galit Eilat and the now-director of Fire Station, Helen Carey.

It was launched in a week when activism – in the form of the country's water charge protests – and the decade of commemoration were in the news, following the release of the government's controversial promotional video for the 1916 commemoration. Despite marking a key anniversary of the birth of the state, this latter offering was criticised for failing to mention the actual players in the 1916 Easter Rising, indicating a sanitising of Ireland's bloody past in a toothless rebranding exercise – the strapline for the commemorative year is 'Ireland Inspires'.

While protests and activism may be firmly on the agenda today, in 2010, when Danish curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion were commissioned to devise and lead 'Troubling Ireland', the country was relatively new to recession and the cumulative effects of austerity were yet to bite. Perhaps because of this and the still-recent glow of the Good Friday Agreement, the objectives of the project were, as Kuratorisk Aktion put it, to "explore socially engaged art and how curating can engage a problem like 'Ireland'".

Using a methodology of postcolonial discourse merged with transnational feminist critique, Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen of Kuratorisk Aktion invited artists and thinkers to respond in different ways to the subject, with the resulting responses taking place over the ensuing three years in the form of think tank symposia. These comprised discussions, presentations, art works and essays.

Thus, when the pair began their interventions, activism was somewhat rhetorical in an Irish context. This is the position taken by Helen Carey, then Director of the Limerick Gallery of Art, who asserts in her short essay about the exhibitions she commissioned to commemorate the 1913 Lockout, that "Irish artists are witnesses, not provocateurs". This

is an apt observation on the many projects featured in her programme of Lockout exhibitions, including Jesse Jones's *The Struggle Against Ourselves*, Anthony Haughey's *Dispute* and Darek Fortas's *Coal Story*. Haughey's work is shown in part here, and explores the closure of the Lagan Brick Works, the Republic's last red brick factory, which closed its doors overnight leaving workers unemployed.

The longer pieces in the book provide plenty of starting points for anatomising the idea of 'Troubling Ireland' and the many questions and enquiries prompted by the nature of art and activism. Liz Burns's interview with Hansen and Nielsen offers a useful framework for exploration of activism in Ireland from an outsider perspective, an approach that immediately seems more objective and less volatile than those posed from within. The pair talk about how addressing post-colonial issues in Ireland such as 'double-speak' and self-silencing assisted their approach to their practice, while the longevity of the project gave them the opportunity to revisit the same group of artists through the duration of the think tank programme.

Curator and writer Galit Eilat, meanwhile, provides an edited version of the presentation she gave at Fire Station's 2013 'Art and Responsibility' symposium, where she discussed a selection of the actions she has participated in at home in her native Israel. Preferring the term 'responsibility' rather than 'activism', Eilat has taken part in works addressing her home country's controversial 'Green Line', the 700km wall dividing Jewish settlers and Palestinians. While in other contexts these might be viewed as distinctly 'activist', she prefers to see this kind of work as artists engaging with politics, rather than being 'political'.

In the short time since the events that inform the book took place, however, much has changed in the social, if not political, landscape. This raises the question of whether those who contributed to *Art and Activism* might well reframe their thoughts if they were writing today.

Nonetheless, this is an enjoyable collection of the responses from the highly-engaged participants of Kuratorisk Aktion's multi-faceted exploration of an Ireland 'troubled' by its many difficult legacies.

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### Notes

1. E. O'Cailli, 'Don't mention the war – 1916 video fails to mention Rising', *IrishTimes.com*, 13 November 2014
2. F. Hansen, Kuratorisk Aktion in conversation with Liz Burns, *Art & Activism*, 2014, 14
3. H. Carey, 'Contemporary Art and Commemorative Activity', *Art & Activism*, 2014, 55



Speakers at the Fire Station Artists' Studios seminar, 2014