

[GROUNDINGS]

FRICTIONS

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[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

We should be wary of defining internationalism in opposition to nationalism. According to this false binary, one is either a cosmopolitan 'citizen of nowhere' committed to a homogenising global culture or the parochial defender of an essentialising national identity. These caricatures align with conventions of centre and periphery: the residents of major westernised cities are presumed to be in the former camp, everyone else in the latter.

Given how damaging this polarising tendency has been to our politics, it is dispiriting to see it so regularly reaffirmed in an art world at least rhetorically committed to challenging prescriptions around what today's culture looks like and to whom it belongs. Yet each time a regional biennial rolls around the coverage tends to focus on its perceived failure to adequately engage with 'local' issues, as if issues of wider relevance were the preserve of metropolitan institutions.

This springs from a critical prejudice that is no less obvious for being unexamined: that it is in the peripheries that cultures uncorrupted by globalisation persist, that here some purer form of identity has been preserved, and that regions should therefore focus on the conservation of culture rather than its production. The critic's desire to travel to the fringes and experience something authentic in its otherness betrays his own unconscious yearnings, like a European backpacker trawling the world in search of some rapidly disappearing real.

These issues resolve into a sharper focus for me on the occasion of the EVA International biennial in Limerick, as here I have one foot in both camps. My mother was born in the city and now lives with my father a short drive outside it. I, meanwhile, am a paid-up member of the internationalist art press: based between London and Athens, working for a New York-based organisation, a hanger-on to the art-world caravan that rumbles around the world to pass judgement on the objects and ideas presented in diverse cities. When I return to Limerick to see the biennial, I experience a kind of double consciousness: do I belong to the internationalist discourse, or to

the local community histories? Why does the notion that they are incompatible persist? And why has it in recent years hardened?

So I wanted to take this essay as an opportunity to explore my felt belief that internationalism is not destructive of a national identity, but constitutive of it. That identities are shaped not by the erection of barricades around a homogenous local culture but through the exchange of ideas and the formation of new alliances across borders. To do so I have chosen to write about an infrastructural project that was formative of both the national identity and, in the most literal way, my own sense of myself as a product of the tension between the local and the global, the national and the international.

At first glance, the century-old hydro-electric power station a few miles outside Limerick might seem to reinscribe those old oppositions. Ardnacrusha is best approached on foot by the eight-mile-long canal that feeds it from Lough Derg, the raised banks of which afford the walker a gorgeous view over the tessellated fields of west Ireland. That landscape represents a vision of Irishness that a modernising industrial project might seem to destroy: these rural settings preserved indigenous life through centuries of colonial occupation; this is the picture-postcard pastoral scene that independence movements set against the mills of industrial England; this is the sentimental home of Celticism; this is the land towards which the cosmopolitan narrator of Joyce's 'The Dead' looks for deeper spiritual meaning at the story's conclusion.

So, even with the extended prologue of a long walk, the irruption of this giant symbol of industrialised modernity into the mythical heartland is still disorienting.¹ The shock of its scale might have diminished since the completion in 1929 of what was then the

1 The 'headrace' is the technical term for the canal that branches the River Shannon from its wandering course into Limerick and, by keeping the water level flat through a declining landscape, creates an artificial drop. On the far side of the dam, a shorter 'tailrace' connects the water that has streamed through its turbines back into the mainstream of the river.

world's largest hydro-electric scheme, and a foundation stone of the Irish Free State, but it is still capable of inspiring that awe that comes with contemplation of forces that seem to exceed the human scale. From the last of the three bridges that cross the headrace it is hard not to marvel at the sheer volume of material shifted to manufacture a hundred-foot waterfall out of eight miles of imperceptibly sloping ground. Here is an artificial, technological sublime to set against that of the natural landscape.

On approach, some more subtle disparities between the building and its setting become apparent. The high vertical windows of the turbine hall are redolent of the Bauhaus while, more strangely, the pitched gable roof and rows of miniature dormer windows seem to have been imported from a 19th-century Bavarian farmhouse. Together they serve to light the vaulted room that houses the four vast turbines in a quasi-spiritual celebration of technical accomplishment.

Yet this power station is one of the foundation stones of the independent Irish nation, if independence is understood to be based on economic and cultural as well as merely political freedom from a colonising power. It was the gamble on which the recently founded Irish Free State staked the future of the country and announced itself as a member of the international community. Two years after the conclusion of the Civil War, the decision in 1925 to devote 20 per cent of a precarious national budget to the construction of a hydro-electric scheme that would electrify every house in one of the most technologically backward states in Europe seems, even with the hindsight of its success, an astonishing risk.

The extent of that hazard is worth dwelling upon: this was a country bitterly divided after the internecine catastrophe of 1922–23, with little agreement after 700 years of occupation on what modern Ireland really was. The scheme was fiercely opposed by politicians who thought the money would be better spent addressing the many short-term issues confronting the new state, and by the

powerful church. It was feared that the project might provide an easy target for remnants of those anti-Treaty forces who had not accepted the defeat in the war, and for the socialist revolutionaries who had in 1919 established a commune in Limerick. A scheme that aimed to unite the nation risked widening the cracks that could tear it apart.

And yet perhaps the greatest obstacle was that there was simply no precedent in Ireland's history for an infrastructural project of this enormous ambition and technological advancement, nor anything resembling the skilled workforce needed to realise it. This was the choice facing the infant country's leaders: hope to conjure an imaginary community out of appeals to a legendary past alongside local initiatives, or establish alliances with the international community that might help, paradoxically, to shore up a truly national identity. It was decided that the construction of modern Ireland would require assistance from abroad.

The company tasked with the construction of the Shannon Scheme for the electrification of Ireland, in a contract signed on 13 August 1925, was Germany's Siemens-Schuckert. There were practical reasons for the choice, most notably that the company was the employer of the scheme's founder and driving force, the engineer Thomas McLaughlin. But the collaboration also carried significant symbolic weight. That the Free State government did not look to England for assistance in this endeavour was interpreted by Ireland's pro-union newspapers as a snub, and by elements in the London press as evidence of an attempt by Germany to establish a strategic foothold in Ireland (with echoes of today's struggles over energy dependence). Nor were offers from the United States entertained, for all the mythology surrounding its connection to the Irish Free State.

Instead the deal was made with the representative of another new government, the Weimer Republic being only a few years older than the Irish Free State and no less precarious in its footing. It could be argued that the contract marked an equally significant moment in the Weimar project of nation-building: this was the largest foreign

contract awarded to a German company since the First World War, and letters from the company's owner to McLaughlin make clear that the project had consequences beyond purely financial profit. The contract was such that Siemens-Schuckert would have foreseen losing money on the scheme, yet its execution under the most trying circumstances would dramatically bolster both the firm's earning capacity and the international reputation of German engineering. Thus a patch of farmland on the outskirts of Limerick was transformed into a meeting place of different communities and a forge for the production of new ones.

The anthropologist Anna Tsing has described a methodology based on close attention to what she calls 'awkward zones of engagement'. Typically these are sites – she takes the deforested areas on the eastern seaboard of the United States and northern Philippines for case studies – in which large-scale changes to the physical landscape prompt new and unlikely collaborations between diverse demographics. These occasions are not always comfortable or smooth, and indeed Tsing identifies the 'friction' that comes from diverse elements 'rubbing up against each other' as the force that drives the formation of new relationships. The construction site at Ardnacrusha was just such a point of assembly.

It was, first of all, a site of massive environmental destruction. A weir was constructed to split the course of the largest river in the British and Irish isles. A deep channel was constructed to lead the branching water to the dam and the drop that would drive it through four state-of-the-art turbines. This required the moving of eight million tonnes of earth and their reconstruction as steep embankments, using machinery imported from Germany on three chartered steamships.² No electricity being available in the area, a miniature power station was built to provide for the machines, and a railway network was constructed to supply the site. Photographs,

2 ESB, 'Ardnacrusha Generating Station.' <https://www.esb.ie/docs/default-source/education-hub/ardnacrusha-power-station>

etchings and paintings from the period show a landscape more typically associated with the Black Country or the steel mills of the Ruhr, and which is hard to reconcile to reconcile with the peaceful canal down which pleasure-trippers walk today.

The several hundred German workers were housed in new accommodation, the grandest examples of which might be mistaken for Alpine lodges, with their own club and school for their children. They were joined onsite by 4,000 Irish workers in temporary lodgings, with the labour exchanges sending candidates from every part of the country. This was not only a meeting between Germans and an undifferentiated native community, but between representatives of every corner of the Free State, with particular tensions reported between the Irish-speaking men and their anglophone compatriots. It is hard to overstate the significance of these meetings in a postcolonial context, when the success of a new nation depends on the production of internal alliances between its various constituents – a shared imaginary of what the nation is, and a shared experience constructing it – as well (as we have seen) as on the formation of external links with countries and companies beyond the nation's borders. Here is the congregation of conflicting elements that Tsing describes in her studies, and out of which a new imaginary of nationhood could emerge.

Among the German workers who made the journey across Europe to help in the construction of Ireland was my great-grandfather. His name was Anton Grossman, he was an electrical fitter, and in March 1928 he was crushed by a crane after having gone to the assistance of a colleague. He suffered serious injuries that would trouble him for the rest of a life that they would eventually cut short.³ Yet he stayed in Ireland, marrying Bridget Collins from nearby Labasheeda, and went on to work for the newly established Electricity Supply Board. Observing some curious historical loop

3 Anton Grossman's story is told Michael McCarthy's *High Tension: Life on the Shannon Scheme* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004), to which I am indebted.

my parents (Anton's Limerick-born granddaughter and my father, an English engineer) now live 15 miles north-west of Labasheeda, having met in Germany and spent time in England. My desire to see the power station as a metaphor for post-independence Ireland is, therefore, born of a desire to understand myself.

My own Irishness is in many ways analogous to the scheme's – it is hyphenated, impure, nonessentialist, internationalist – and my stake in the nation tied to the foundational project that Anton Grossmann helped to construct. I'm attracted to the story of the scheme because it suggests that the double consciousness with which I have grown up – Irish and internationalist, a citizen of this place and a citizen of nowhere – is not some new expression of 21st-century globalisation but baked in, so to speak, with the hundred-year history of independent Ireland.

Nor am I the only person to understand Ardnacrusha as a symbol. Sorcha O'Brien writes in her exceptional study of the project, *Powering the Nation*, that 'the Shannon Scheme was begun primarily as an advertisement for the Free State government'.⁴ It was the first function of the project to provide a vision for what a united and independent Ireland might be: technologically advanced, economically independent, internationally engaged and, because the power station would supply enough electricity to illuminate every house in the nation, interconnected and collectively enlightened.

This idea was taken up enthusiastically by a number of artists at the time, most notably the painter Seán Keating. Introducing a 2012 exhibition of the drawings, watercolours and oils that Keating produced on site at Ardnacrusha, Éimear O'Connor writes that 'his vision of the Shannon Scheme as metaphor for New Ireland was in parallel with that of the government of the day'.

4 Sorcha O'Brien, *Powering The Nation: Images of the Shannon Scheme and Electricity* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2017), 8.

Keating's work at Ardnacrusha has been written about extensively elsewhere, and indeed provided the inspiration for Inti Guerrero's 2018 edition of *EVA International*, so I will resist the temptation to write about it at length here. But a brief appraisal of the most famous work to emerge from Keating's impulse to document what O'Connor calls 'without a doubt, *the* event in post-Civil War Ireland' might help to flesh out some of the ideas to which this essay is addressed. When it was first exhibited, Keating's *Night's Candles are Burnt Out* (1928–29) caused a degree of interpretive confusion that is in retrospect hard to understand, leading it to be labelled as a 'problem painting'. But the allegory is straightforward, and unpacking this contemporary history painting gives some idea of the imaginary of Ireland that Keating wanted to propagandise.⁵

The backdrop for this theatrical crowd scene is provided by the unfinished dam; the shallow foreground is busy with a crowd of allegorical figures. At the centre is an imposing man in a smart suit clutching a portfolio who can be identified as a businessman or, more tendentiously, an engineer.⁶ A man in military uniform genuflects beside him: we can take this central action to indicate the retreat from the scene of those armed revolutionaries who forced independence (and prosecuted the Civil War), to be replaced by the professional men who in peacetime take over the job of making a nation. The extreme corners of the canvas are reserved for those figures marginalised by the country's enlightenment: from a

5 I don't use the term 'propagandise' to diminish the achievement, but rather to communicate the degree to which Keating understood himself as a political artist serving a social function in the context of a new state. It is worth noting here, too, that he travelled to Ardnacrusha under his own steam. He was not commissioned to make the work by any official body, and was in fact initially discouraged from doing so, although the ESB was later foresighted enough to acquire the work after its completion.

6 O'Brien goes so far as to suggest that the figure might even be a German engineer, before allowing that his fedora and two-tone shoes make this unlikely. This seems to me far-fetched, but it is revealing that it is even possible to consider that a foreign engineer might stand at the heart of this allegory for a new Ireland.

pylon in the top left of the canvas hangs a skeleton clothed in rags representing the 'stage Irishman' of English stereotype, while in the bottom right a priest is absorbed in reading a leatherbound bible by guttering candlelight. In case the context wasn't enough to make clear Keating's attitude towards the clergy's future role – the dam was being built very literally to provide the electricity that would illuminate a nation – the title hammers it home. Standing on a raised dais behind the priest, Keating the artist directs the gaze of his young son towards the dam. Beside him is his wife, also pointing towards the future, her face bright with the caught sun. On her shoulder sits their as-yet-unborn second son, inheritor of the reality being constructed on the horizon.

Keating's painting embodies the idea of Ardnacrusha as the 'zone of engagement' for competing elements – tradition and modernity, militarism and business, secularism and the church, local and international – out of which a united Ireland was made. The friction between these parts is not detrimental to the construction of a national identity in the wake of colonialism but essential to it. That Ardnacrusha was an international collaboration situated in the Irish west only underlines the falseness of the binary between national identity and international exchange, not to mention that which divides provinces from metropolis. Instead it might be taken to show how any nation – any individual – does not come to understand itself in isolation, but through a network of exchanges and dependencies. Our culture, whether it is based in the centres or the peripheries, must reflect rather than deny these complex entanglements between the local and global, national and international.

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and the Electrification of the Irish Free State*
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Ben Eastham is a writer and editor, currently editor-in-chief of art-agenda, the division of e-flux devoted to contemporary art criticism. He is the author of *The Imaginary Museum* (Harper Collins, 2020) – a speculative fiction about the way that material culture shapes individual and collective identities – and the editor of numerous books including including *Luis Camnitzer: One Number Is Worth One Word* (Sternberg/e-flux, 2020), *Fabio Mauri: Before or After, at the Same Time* (Hauser & Wirth, 2019), and *The White Review Anthology* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017). His writing has been published in ArtReview, frieze, the London Review of Books, the New York Times, Mousse, the Times Literary Supplement, and many other publications.

Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

Groundings is the first public initiative of Occasional Groundwork – a series of co-commissioned texts by writers, artists, curators, and academics, exploring themes of internationalism, sustainability, audience, and infrastructure within the context of the contemporary art biennial and the shift in conditions imposed by the ongoing pandemic.

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