

# 'Tonguetied Sons of Bastards' Ghosts'<sup>1</sup>

## Postconceptual and Postcolonial Appraisals of the Work of James Colema

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A consistent feature of art critical discourse in Ireland concerns the relationship of artworks from, or relating to, Ireland and the wider international circuits of which they are part. Herein, two strands of thought can be identified. In the first case, there has been a strand of practice that argues for the uniqueness of Irish art, which, while drawing from its own culture, can still nonetheless stand proudly in comparison with international trends. To highlight differences between local and international production is to make a virtue of these to the extent that they will be the selling point of a distinct 'Irish' art. The second strand is born from a desire marked by its critical push to have local art established on a wider international stage. There exists a geopolitical imbalance in the art world and subsequently it is necessary to acknowledge the central role of material factors involved in certain art becoming 'great' (or at least occupying the centre of attention). Art from Ireland will remain peripheral unless a cogent argument and an institutional push can be made to force otherwise. The idea was to identify art that articulates the cultural and historical complexities of local circumstance as a means to invigorate wider art discourse on matters of place, identity and conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Both strands can be seen to be rooted in colonial and postcolonial discourses. In the first case, the desire to carve out and defend a niche often by recourse to a latent Celtic mythology (the Irish as poetic, oblique, sensual, etc) is a means by which to resist colonial and metropolitan discourse. The second strand has argued that such a discourse was caught in an implacable bind that would leave art in Ireland forever marginalised. Furthermore, this position is marked by a profound suspicion of nationalist rhetoric as it attempts to address what it suppresses – namely issues of class, gender, sexuality and the complexities of race and ethnicity.

1. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (the 1922 text), edited with an introduction by Jeri Johnson, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 311.
2. For examples of such debate, see Tom Duddy, 'Irish Art Criticism: A Provincialism of the Right?', *Circa*, no 35, July/August 1987, pp 14–18; Joan Fowler, 'Art and Independence: An Aspect of Twentieth Century Irish Art', *Circa*, no 14, January/February 1984, pp 6–10; Declan McGonagle, 'Ireland's Eyes: New History from Beyond the Pale', *Artforum International*, May 1993, p 92; Declan McGonagle, 'Looking Beyond Regionalism', *Circa*, no 53, September/October 1990, p 26; and Mary Stinson Cosgrove, 'Irishness and Art Criticism', *Circa*, no 52, July/August 1990, pp 14–18.

3. The comments of Enrique Juncosa, the current Director of IMMA, are significant in this respect: 'He [James Coleman] has a significant reputation abroad but was, until now, not properly represented in the National Collections. IMMA is now the only museum to own the trilogy of his best known slide projected works. We hope that it will help his work to be better known in Ireland and are also happy to be able to add to our collection such important seminal works.' Juncosa alludes to the fact that while Coleman's reputation is certainly appreciated in Ireland, there has been little opportunity in the last 20 years for a local audience to engage sufficiently with his work. Certainly, Coleman had a significant exhibition profile in Ireland up to the mid-1980s, but after that the exhibitions of his work were few and far between when compared with exhibitions in Europe and North America. In this light, the acquisition by IMMA of Coleman's trilogy represents a significant coup. See Press Statement from the Irish Museum of Modern Art, [www.modernart.ie](http://www.modernart.ie), 10 March 2005.
4. The superlatives that adorn the book cover further reinforce Coleman's reputation: 'Coleman has emerged in recent years as one of the most important artists of visual postmodernism. His work has transformed critical debates about the status of the image in contemporary culture and influenced an entire generation of younger artists in a way that has not yet been fully acknowledged.' George Baker, ed, *James Coleman: October Files 5*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, UK, 2003.
5. Rosalind Krauss, "'... And Then Turn Away?'" in *James Coleman: October Files 5*, *ibid*, p 161.

While this overview treads well-worn ground, there is a point to be made. It lies in the fact that these strands of criticism have often been read in opposition to each other to the detriment of uncovering what they have in common. Two such features can be identified. First, the emergence of postcolonial discourse as a persuasive critical framework prioritises works of art that can be seen to engage with issues pertaining to Irishness and sensitivity to the locale in all its cultural and historical complexity. In other words, the discourse of Irishness continues to dominate the evaluation of art deemed significant. Second, there is an implicit assumption built into both strands: that those from, living in, or who have an intimate knowledge of Ireland should be the judge and jury of those artworks dealing with the locale. The critic, astute to such complexity, should now have the upper hand over its other who is now morally obliged to grasp these subtleties as a process of learning. Subsequently, it can be said that art criticism in Ireland is predicated on a gambit that seeks to challenge standard modes of evaluation that spread from metropolitan centres of power. But it does so at a cost inasmuch as the discourse of Irishness once again colours what art will be deemed relevant. Of course, the more robust strands of art criticism in Ireland are thoroughly infused with the wider circuits of knowledge – it is how these are assimilated so as to be fine-tuned to the demands of the locale that will count.

So what of the situation where an artist from Ireland makes it on the grand stage where Irishness does not appear to be a dominating feature of how his or her work is received? The work of James Coleman is an interesting case in point, particularly on the eve of the arrival of Coleman's trilogy of slide-projected works, *Background* (1991–94), *Lapsus Exposure* (1992–94), and *INITIALS* (1993–94), at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. These works were purchased through the Government's Heritage Fund and can be seen as one of the more significant art acquisitions in Ireland in recent years.<sup>3</sup> One only has to look at the *October Files* to get a sense of the reputation Coleman has acquired on the international circuit.<sup>4</sup> The preceding publications in this series are given over to Richard Serra, Andy Warhol, Eve Hesse and Robert Rauschenberg. This is not bad company to keep. Furthermore, the level of engagement with Coleman's work by major contemporary critics such as Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Kaja Silverman (all often writing for *October* journal) places Coleman firmly in the contemporary canon of art. If there is consistency in the concerns of *October*, it lies in drawing out the fraught relationship between the sheer diversity of contemporary practice and the legacy of modernism. It is also noted for its theoretical rigour and its close associations with postconceptualist ideas. Coleman's reputation has certainly been affirmed by *October*, which, for better or worse, represents a touchstone of critical value in contemporary visual art culture.

But one need not cower to the sound of the big guns of the art world and avoid a clear-sighted examination of the forms of critical appraisal Coleman's work receives. For, from the outset, it appears that the discourse of Irishness represents a point of tension for many accounts. Krauss, for example, has outlined how she felt unqualified to go down 'the road of the Irish Question' whilst acknowledging those writers who have.<sup>5</sup> Instead she concentrates on the issue of Coleman's choice of media that

she believes, quite rightly, to have ‘nothing particularly Irish about them’.<sup>6</sup> In her defence, Krauss asserts that we need be wary of ‘the idea that post-conceptualism chimes directly with postcolonialism’, thereby alluding to the merits of the former and the limits of the latter.<sup>7</sup> Just how Coleman’s work is valued in relation to such tensions is worth pursuing since it appears that an opportunity exists to shed further light on an underlying dynamic informing the critical reception of Coleman’s practice.

It follows that it is necessary to concentrate on two themes. First, to examine what is at stake by scrutinising the limits of postconceptual discourse in the accounts of Coleman’s work. In other words, it will be important to consider that which lies beyond the demands of the locale as well as considering its shortfalls. Second, it is also necessary to investigate the suitability of postcolonial discourse as an alternative critical framework for Coleman’s work. By exploring these two themes, the hope will be to expose fault lines between these discursive frameworks that have come to govern our understanding of a contemporary critical terrain. It may then be possible to uncover alternative avenues of thought for an art criticism to develop.

Krauss’s appraisal of Coleman’s work centres on the claim that it ‘invents a medium’ from the technological detritus of modern advertising (the slide tape).<sup>8</sup> Coleman is seen to reconstitute ‘specificity’ against the grain of older modernist definitions of the term and in the face of various rejections of such a possibility in postmodern discourse. Modernist discourse accounted for specificity in terms of how the work’s content is tied to the defining features of the medium’s technical support. Reflexive, critical focus on these constitutive elements secured art’s autonomy against its threatened dissolution into a wider context. Michael Fried’s defence of the integrity of the medium against its dissolution into ‘theatre’ is a key example of such an approach. For Krauss, the postmodern celebration of the dissolution of medium specificity through interdisciplinary forms and generic definitions of art comes at a cost.<sup>9</sup> In almost (young) Greenbergian terms, it is Krauss’s point that only through medium specificity, ‘not by returning to the compromised forms of the traditional mediums but by “inventing” new ones’, can art resist its assimilation by the cultural project of advanced capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

Coleman’s work is seen to achieve this in how its various constituent elements interact, working with, through and against each other, to the extent that they illuminate the logic of the structure. This occurs at the same time as wider social concerns – questions of memory, identity, subjectivity and language – are drawn through that logic. It is Krauss’s view that, the disjunction between the mechanics of the tape-slide and the melodrama of the photo-novel *Seeing for Oneself* (1987–88), or, the circularity of the slide carousel mimicking the themes of circularity in *Photograph* (1998–99), allow works to generate ‘a set of conventions that will become recursive within it’.<sup>11</sup>

... the control of fissuring within each dimension and the rigorous separation of the visual/static from the audio/temporal, which is the fissured condition of the ‘medium’ itself, allow Coleman to produce a reflexive acknowledgement of how this medium is constructed.<sup>12</sup>

For Krauss, this circuit not only generates wider meanings that can question our own understanding of the world but returns the viewer to

6. Despite Krauss’s distancing, Irishness returns as a spectre to haunt her text as she later reflects on Beckett’s reworking of vaudeville antics as a useful analogy for Coleman’s engagement with pre-existing forms, *ibid*, p 161 and p 163.

7. *Ibid*, p 161.

8. See, Rosalind Krauss, “... And Then Turn Away?”, and ‘Reinventing the Medium: Introduction to *Photograph*’, in *James Coleman: October Files 5*, *op cit*, pp 157–84, and pp 185–210.

9. ‘It is at this historical juncture that the taboo against specificity comes to seem less and less radical and a desire to rethink the idea of the medium as a form of resistance to late capitalism’s utter generalisation of the aesthetic – so anything from shopping to watching wars on television takes on an aestheticised glow – seems less and less impossible’, *ibid*, p 199.

10. *Ibid*, p 199.

11. *Ibid*, p 202.

12. *Ibid*, p 176.

the process of how this occurs. Ultimately, then, the value of the work is twofold. First, adopting a medium discarded by modern advertising promises an exploration of imaginative possibilities and complexities in the shadow of spectacle. Second, the fractured heterogeneity of Coleman's medium refuses the axioms of modernism but, by holding out against the culture of spectacle, continues its hopes.

Where Krauss views Coleman's work as shrewdly charting a path through the pitfalls of postmodern discourse while holding to the treasures of modernism, Buchloh argues that the value of Coleman's work can be found in its excavation of the hidden other of visual modernity. Modernism's break with tradition, while holding to the remit of the 'real', would necessarily repress the visual's connection with memory, fiction and narrative. Buchloh thereby claims that 'visual modernism had to deny *its function of figuration* and its *rhetorical dimension*'.<sup>13</sup> Once again, by citing Fried's notion of 'theatre' as modernism's 'utmost historical repression', Buchloh places Coleman's art within the 'primarily American' context of postminimal and postconceptual discourse in its recovery of the traditions of theatricality and narrativity against high modernist orthodoxy.<sup>14</sup>

However, Coleman is soon seen to break with conceptual discourse by shifting attention away from analytic philosophy and structural linguistics and instead is seen to focus on extending visual and theatrical representation within a linguistic framework:

Coleman's work would now expand the range of linguistic conventions eligible for artistic practice to include rhetoric and dramaturgy, and – perhaps most important – the register that Roland Barthes would call the 'grain of the voice': the phonetic definition of subjectivity within acts of enunciation.<sup>15</sup>

For Buchloh, this shift would allow another critical dimension to be explored – namely subjectivity as a linguistic and social construct. In considering *Box (abhareturnabout)* (1977), the value of the work is seen to reside in its exploration of 'temporally and geopolitically determined forms of experience'.<sup>16</sup>

If Buchloh promises to lodge Coleman's work on this terrain, he soon shifts tack in accounting for the grander values of his work in how it interrogates myth within mass-cultural forms. His concluding summary of *So Different ... and Yet* (1980) makes this clear:

... the mythical structure is to be found not by identifying the ethno-cultural sources of the horned male figure, but rather by recognising that it is the technological image of the television itself and the types of narrative production it enforces which have inflicted myth with a vengeance onto the aspirations for an emancipation from the cult value of images through their technological reproduction.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, Coleman's work is valued for how its fragmented and decentred narratives seek to counter the domination of spectacle over visibility by negating the viewer's desire for closure. In one of the 'most complex aesthetic projects of postmodernity', Coleman's performative realism is born from its intense engagement with postconceptual discourse.<sup>18</sup>

There is consistency in the accounts of Krauss and Buchloh that merits further scrutiny. Two points of convergence can be identified. In the first

13. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Memory Lessons and History Tableaux: James Coleman's Archaeology of Spectacle', in *James Coleman: October Files 5*, op cit, pp 85–6.

14. Ibid, p 90 and p 86.

15. Ibid, p 93.

16. Ibid, p 100.

17. Ibid, p 104.

18. Ibid, p 107.



James Coleman, *Slide Piece*, 1972, projected images with synchronised audio narration. Photo: courtesy James Coleman

place, both accounts share similar historical touchstones as they plot the critical development of Coleman's work over the years. Both focus on Fried's defence of high modernism as a central point for their critical elaboration. Both trace Coleman's work against the shortfalls of minimalist, conceptualist, postmodernist and postconceptualist discourse as largely American phenomena, citing key artists of these eras such as Judd, Morris, Rainer, Nauman, Graham, Sekula, Heubler, Burgin, Wall and Viola in the process. One could almost imagine updating Alfred Barr's diagram as a means to clarify the new canon being constructed. The point to be made here is that there is a distinct regional flavour to such a framework. Furthermore, these accounts actively reinforce the contemporary canon of art on grounds that prioritise the centre over its supposed periphery. This is a limitation, and one, moreover, that gains further clarity if it is considered how attempts have been made to read conceptualism as a phenomenon existing beyond its commonly accepted geographical reach. Alex Alberro, for example, notes that conceptualism in Latin America in the 1960s focused less on the theoretical complexity of linguistic philosophy and more on the ideological function of art thereby becoming more closely aligned to social and political movements that were anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in character.<sup>19</sup> Postconceptual discourse as a 'primarily American' entity certainly seems quite confined by comparison.

This leads to the second point of convergence between Krauss and Buchloh. Both critics hold to the emancipatory rhetoric of modernism by

19. See Alex Alberro, 'A Media Art: Conceptualism in Latin America in the 1960s', in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, eds Jon Bird and Michael Newman, Reaktion Books, London, pp 140–51.

20. 'The operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location – grounded, fixed, actual – to a discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid and virtual'. See Miwon Kwon, 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity', in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005 p 39.
21. *Ibid*, p 40.
22. Consider, for example, Peter Bürger's re-evaluation of the role of the avant-garde: 'The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.' It is clear that Bürger counters prevalent notions of modern art as striving for aesthetic autonomy. Instead, the avant-garde is viewed in terms of its social commitment as a cultural force. The ideological thrust of his argument can very much be seen to be informed by the cultural and political upheavals of the late 1960s – those very same forces that have given rise to what we now recognise as conceptual art. Clearly, such a reading contrasts sharply with Krauss's reading of modernism. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p 49.

celebrating Coleman's work in its ability to resist the excessive banality of mass media in advanced capitalism. Such a reading can also be seen to be limited in the sense that the central claims for Coleman's radicalism are restricted to the realm of discourse within the artistic field and not to the place of art itself within the wider social sphere. There is scant acknowledgement of the social, cultural and material constraints that limit the reach of such a project when pitched against the resources of mass media lying beyond the privileged confines of the contemporary art circuit. While it is as common to ask too much of art as it is to ask too little, it is perhaps better to view such rhetoric more in terms of satisfying the institutional demand for critical value in the visual art circuit than as registering an attempt to overturn the social order, as modernism once dreamed.

Another major fault line is revealed when one considers the grounds upon which specificity is argued for, particularly in Krauss's account. Her appraisal of Coleman's work centres on how it holds to the integrity of the medium and only by these means is the critical project consolidated (as opposed to sliding into generality).

The artwork is characterised as a self-contained entity that is not primarily bound by a sense of place but plugged into a distinctive discursive circuit (postconceptual discourse). The artwork can be seen to be nomadic in that it is transferable from institutional site to site so long as those institutions subscribe to this cultural project. This falls in line with Miwon Kwon's point that the artwork's relationship to a particular location or the cultural framework of a particular institutional site is now subordinate to a 'discursively determined site'.<sup>20</sup> The artwork will thus be verified by its relations with an existing critical discourse and, in Krauss's case, Coleman's success lies in its resistance to commodification and the culture of spectacle. However, the drift of Kwon's argument is to suggest that such mobility, when combined with a discourse removed from a politics of place, rather than being resistant to the current social order may actually be complicit with it:

But curiously, the nomadic principle also defines power and capital in our times. Is the unhinging of site-specificity, then, a form of resistance to the ideological establishment of art or a capitulation to the logic of capitalist expansion?<sup>21</sup>

While Kwon also questions the virtues of a politics of place, her point stands in contrast to the emancipatory rhetoric of Krauss. By prioritising the specificity of artistic media over geographical specificity, by prioritising the integrity of the medium as a locus of value thereby permitting art institutions to buy in an artistic commodity for the benefit of their own critical kudos, and by affirming a primarily American canon of contemporary art as a touchstone of current critical practices, one senses a critical project less in tune with the emancipatory rhetoric of modernism than one drawing on its internationalist remit for the consolidation of power in the cultural arena. It is a project, moreover, quite antithetical to the more robust politicised strands of European modernism in the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

If this hints at some kind of neo-imperial gambit as a cultural enterprise, such an assertion gathers momentum when one considers

how such a discourse actively seeks to close down postcolonial readings of Coleman's work. Krauss's comment is significant in this regard:

The blanket condemnation of the avant-garde's belief in transnationalism as just another cover for the imperialist ambitions of international capital, and the idea that the only source for unalienated, authentic meaning is to be found in the specificity of national tradition, seem a dangerous embrace of the archaic to me. In turning its back on the long history of modernism, it shrugs off the very thing it wants to save: the idea of tradition against which to test the meaningfulness of forms.<sup>23</sup>

A crude caricature of postcolonial discourse is called up for Krauss's defence – one bound by nationalist desire despite the fact that a critique of such a position defines current postcolonial thinking. Her comments are also marked by a defence of the legacy of the avant-garde and modernism as a means to test current practice. Krauss once again overlooks the possibility that her own position may be questioned by recourse to that very same legacy. The outcome of this is that Krauss forecloses any constructive engagement with the question of geopolitical specificity in Coleman's work as an *extension* of postconceptual discourse.<sup>24</sup>

The need to account for Coleman's interactions with the locale through his work is no more clear when considering Anne Rorimer's appraisal of Coleman's *A-Koan* (1978).<sup>25</sup> The title of the piece for the Galway Arts Festival, *A-Koan*, refers to a lament. The work transmitted a child's voice ('I'm ready, I'm calling you, I've done a poo ...') over a megaphone that was positioned beneath an Irish tricolour. For Rorimer, the work 'amplifies, quite literally, the idea of senselessness' and 'elicits no logical interpretation'.<sup>26</sup> To make senselessness a virtue of the work overlooks the possibility that this work can indeed be interpreted as engaging with the complexities of nationalist aspiration. Irishness has often been feminised and infantilised in the colonial imagination. Nationalist aspiration, by working variously at times with, through and against such mythical structures, imagines a destiny in which the individual can realise his/her full potential through a new collective subjectivity. It is an imagined collective identity that dreams beyond the degraded cultural and political structures of the present. The aspiring child's actions prevent the passage from material circumstance to an imagined ideal beyond. Subsequently, there is the sense that the individual subject is forever caught in the very structures nationalism once hoped it could transcend. To play out this dilemma over a tannoy system (the means by which modern Irish politics have so often addressed the 'people') is to broadcast questions of identity and subjectivity as fluid cultural and linguistic constructs into the social space with all its local complexity.

If debate to this point has concentrated on major critical oversights, it should be acknowledged what has been achieved in terms of drawing on knowledge of the locale as a crucial element in evaluating Coleman's work. Luke Gibbons's account of Coleman's *guaiRE: An Allegory* (1985) is one such case. It begins by acknowledging how this staged allegory is 'deeply informed by its Irish context and situation'.<sup>27</sup> Gibbons proceeds to explore the various elements of the work that are born from its engagement with the locale. On one level, the specific location in

23. Krauss, "... And Then Turn Away?", op cit, p 161.

24. This is not the case with Buchloh's account, although his account, as has been seen, also limits the possibility of extending the reach of postconceptualist discourse through his eventual shift in emphasis. Nonetheless, Buchloh does articulate the complex interaction in Coleman's work between the 'abstract universality' of spectacular display and the tension characterising the need to articulate particular social and cultural experience. He may have allowed the writings of Fisher and Deane to do the spadework but at least the possibility of pursuing this avenue of thought is not foreclosed.

25. Anne Rorimer, 'James Coleman 1970–1985', in *James Coleman: October Files 5*, op cit, pp 1–17.

26. *Ibid*, p 11.

27. Luke Gibbons, 'Narratives of No Return: James Coleman's *guaiRE*', in *James Coleman: October Files 5*, op cit, p 73.

which the piece was performed – in Dungaire Castle, Kinvara – is seen to re-engage with the legend of Guaire on the grounds that were supposedly his stronghold. On another level, this connection with the legend and its remaking through allegory contrasts sharply with the heritage banquets normally staged by the tourist industry on the site. Immediately, the piece is marked by a more robust engagement with local history. The various themes in the piece – exploring a feminised public sphere as a subversion of the patriarchal order of the state, the refiguration of female allegory played out before the idea of unrestorable origins, and its reflexive commentary on allegory's workings – are all seen to be drawn through the complexities of local material circumstance. Thus, for Gibbons, the retelling of the story of a doubted paternal lineage can find its contemporary counterpart in the Irish state's deep need to establish paternity in the Kerry babies controversy. It is Gibbons's point that Coleman's piece can only be appreciated by accepting how it is shaped by its engagement with the locale, how it frames history as an ongoing dispute and, moreover, how Coleman draws these themes through his own reflexive strategies.

Likewise, Jean Fisher focuses on the themes of identity and cultural memory in Coleman's work as they are drawn through particular social and historical contexts.<sup>28</sup> *Box (abhareturnabout)* (1977) can be taken as an example of where Fisher explores these themes. The work is based on the champion boxer, Gene Tunney, and his defence of his title in a return fight with Jack Dempsey in 1927. The accompanying soundtrack to the

28. See, in particular, Jean Fisher, 'The Place of the Spectator in the Work of James Coleman', in *James Coleman: October Files 5*, op cit, pp 19–36.



James Coleman, *So Different ... and Yet*, 1980, video installation. Performed by Olwen Fouere and Roger Doyle. Photo: courtesy James Coleman

continuous film loop contains fractured dialogue, grunts and gasps over a rhythmic pulse. The immediacy of Tunney's efforts are punctuated by verbalised references to his anxiety as to his status (being 'champ and not-champ' at the same time). The figure also draws on Irish myth and the semantics of Irishness in colonial struggle as a resource for his defence. Fisher highlights the sensuality of the enigmatic work with all its somatic heat. This is brought to bear upon how the figure is suspended, forever in the process of his validation (in the sense that the film footage is looped). In turn, this observation is seen to recoil back on the spectator for him/her to consider his/her own sensuous relations to lived experience, suffused as it is with cultural myth that supplies its own definitions of individual agency. Once again, Fisher's appraisal of Coleman's work attains a balance between local specificity, the grander themes of identity and myth, and the means by which Coleman is seen to expose such workings through his practice.

If the preceding accounts tip the balance towards the notion floated earlier in the essay – that those from, living in, or who have a sound knowledge of local complexities could enjoy a position of authority in relation to Coleman's work – it should be noted that this need not necessarily be the case. Paula Murphy's appraisal of Coleman's work is certainly noteworthy for its grasp of Yeats's influence on Coleman's later works.<sup>29</sup> Her text is also illuminating in how it draws on art historical knowledge as a means to illuminate further aspects of Coleman's work. In fact, Murphy appears to contrast her own approach to Coleman's work with the forms of commentary Coleman's work has inspired in the wider arena. For Murphy, these other writers 'have not allowed themselves the freedom of an independent and philosophically unencumbered approach' to Coleman's work. Subsequently, these texts have 'no real feeling for the spectator relationship with the work'.<sup>30</sup>

The idea of an independent subject's ability to look at a work of art free from philosophical baggage (or to be more specific in this context – postconceptual discourse) is one fraught with difficulties. In the first place, it adopts the romantic division of feeling and intellect without questioning. Second, Murphy's assertion stands in dramatic contrast to Fisher's sensitive account. Third, Murphy's disdain for critics weighted down with cultural baggage does not account for her own use of art historical references as a means to make sense of Coleman's work. If the suggestion is that such baggage is antithetical to the act of experiencing that art, it remains unclear what can be gained from the work when the art itself appears to be born from its engagement with such material.

Coleman's *Slide Piece* (1972–73) can be taken as an example of where Murphy plays out her objections. The piece consists of a slide image of a banal Milan street scene projected sequentially in the gallery space. It is matched by an audio accompaniment consisting of a single voice articulating various individuals' description of that scene. As each description identifies different aspects of the scene, an interpretive distance opens up before the viewer. In her account of the piece, Murphy takes issue with Rorimer when Rorimer claims that the commentaries bring the photograph to life. For Murphy, it is as if Rorimer accepts that the viewers themselves are to be unaware of the multiple meanings an image can hold until they hear the commentaries. To be fair to Rorimer, it is her point that this interaction of image and text reveals the fact that

29. Paula Murphy, 'Rhythm, Repetition and Reproduction: Re-Experiencing the Art of James Coleman', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 14, 1998, pp 162–7.

30. Paula Murphy, *op cit*, p 163.

'a totality may only be perceived in time as a sum of its parts'. Moreover, she claims that this is indeed dependent on the viewer's particular outlook.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Murphy suggests the repeated commentaries imply that there 'is nothing new to say about art, that the experience will always be the same'.<sup>32</sup> In adopting such a tone, there is little sense in Murphy's account that Coleman's work is the result of his own investigations into contemporary visual discourse. On this note, it is clear from *Slide Piece* that the viewer is encouraged to track each perceptual insight with the visual image acting as a touchstone. It would seem that the visual is granted a certain gravitas as an arbiter of interpretive commentary. However, given that scepticism towards aesthetic conventions' claims to the real is central to postconceptual discourse, what is revealed is the indexical power of the photograph (its material connection to the claim that 'this has been') to generate realist claims. Coleman's work thereby appears to suspend truth-claims in terms of the limitations of spoken interpretation and the fact that the slide photograph only gains significance when it is utilised within linguistic (social) structures. Rorimer's account appears to fall in line with such a reading. Murphy's text, by contrast, overlooks how Coleman's work has been shaped consistently by its engagement with postconceptual discourse.

From Murphy's approach one senses the gap between traditional art historical scholarship and contemporary critical discourse, that characterises writing on the visual arts in Ireland. This returns us to the debates at the outset of this essay concerning the role, or roles, art critical writing

31. Anne Rorimer, 'James Coleman 1970–1985', op cit, p 5.

32. Paula Murphy, op cit, p 164.



James Coleman, *guaiRE: An Allegory*, 1985, performed work, performed by Olwen Fouère, set design Dan Graham, Dun Guaire Castle, Kinvara, Ireland, 1985. Photo courtesy James Coleman



James Coleman, *Lapsus Exposure*, 1992–94, projected images with synchronised audio narration. Photo: courtesy James Coleman

in Ireland should play. For the two strands identified – an older model celebrating Irishness as distinct from British and/or international concerns, and a more recent approach exploring themes of Irishness as a point of critical engagement with which to challenge the wider discursive and institutional structures of art – can be seen to be overlaid upon tensions between traditional art historical scholarship and contemporary critical discourse in Ireland. In fact, it can be argued that the latter approach has emerged from the legacy of conceptual discourse. This is not to say that Murphy falls neatly into the former. But the obvious distancing from postconceptual discourse for a more ‘pragmatic’ approach to viewing art comes at a cost inasmuch as it clearly forecloses possible avenues of thought. Moreover, it is to risk relegating art criticism in Ireland once more to the sidelines of contemporary discourse.

Of course, this can work the other way as well: that to become hopelessly entrenched in postconceptual discourse is to have the experience before the art circumscribed before the act of viewing. Unless, that is, the doctrine falls under critical scrutiny itself. The potential range of interpretations an artwork can attract is already inscribed through the various discursive frameworks in operation at any point in time. It is by exploring, and even challenging, those frameworks through the act of looking that it is possible to expose the gaps. To claim this is not to relegate art history to the margins either. It is precisely through art historical research that a fruitful engagement with postconceptual discourse can

take place. For it has been suggested that the framework in which Krauss places Coleman's work should be countered, in the first place, through a re-engagement with modernism's history. In other words, while this essay is sceptical of how postconceptual discourse seeks to position Coleman's work, it is clear that only by working through the limitations of such a discourse can alternative lines of approach be pursued.

A second approach to questioning the dominant framework in which Coleman's work finds itself centred on countering the universality of postconceptual thought by recourse to postcolonial models of thinking. It has been claimed that art criticism in Ireland, by focusing on the question of Irishness, seeks to challenge metropolitan modes of discourse on its own grounds. To read this alone into Coleman's work is too narrow to be authoritative. In the case of Gibbons, he makes a virtue of Irishness as a critical point of evaluation for Coleman's work but only inasmuch as how this is woven through a consideration of the aesthetic conventions by which *guaiRE: An Allegory* takes shape. Fisher's account is also marked by how it weaves in and between postconceptual and postcolonial modes of thought, revealing these to be now more fluid than Krauss ever imagined. And perhaps this is what is most interesting of all about Coleman's work and the attempts to account for it. For it appears on the cusp of two competing discourses, on what Homi Bhabha has called the 'borderline engagement of cultural difference' that may as often be 'consensual as conflictual'.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, we are only beginning to get to grips not only with the potentials that Coleman's work might offer but with realising the wider context, with its impending social forces, into which it is to be received. On this note, on the eve of the arrival of Coleman's work in Dublin, it is worth examining those social forces that lie beyond the grasp of local cultural politics. For here is an artist who has made it big on the grand stage and the arrival of his work will no doubt be celebrated in terms of a kind of homecoming and a confirmation of the hopes of visual arts in Ireland. But with this new site-specificity comes a daunting task: to begin to see the traditional contours of art criticism in Ireland as too narrow to tackle the grander questions to hand; to begin to see that our desire for distinction is also what Kwon describes as a highly seductive quality in the promotion of cities 'with the competitive restructuring of the global economic hierarchy'.<sup>34</sup> Now, was it in *October* that Kwon originally published her essay?

33. Homi K Bhabha, 'On "hybridity" and "moving beyond"' (1994), in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p 1111.

34. See Miwon Kwon, 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity', op cit, p 47. Kwon's essay was originally published in *October*, no 80, Spring 1997, pp 38–63. Many thanks to Tracey Sweeney for her valuable research assistance in gathering material for this essay.

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