

THE OSCHOLARS

Oscar Wilde and his Worlds

Exhibition

Wilde Art

Professor Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

Art is individualism, and individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. There lies its immense value. For what it seeks is to disturb monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.

— Oscar Wilde

Parisians will know that Oscar Wilde is both deeply loved and a source of contestation – and that this is particularly evident in and through the art created in response to him. Jacob Epstein’s tomb of the writer in Père Lachaise Cemetery, unveiled in 1912, was erected under difficult circumstances, the Sphinx’s genitalia first covered, then uncovered, then mutilated and artistically reinstated. Now the sculpture appears in its neutered state and “cleansed”, having been kissed over and over by Wilde’s admirers and tourists.

Static monuments do not seem to suit Wilde, or any of the Irish writers who emigrated, in order to live their lives more freely and who adopted an independent stance of any fixed positioning or identity. For **Maggi Hambling** it had to be a “bent coffin”, resonating with biographical allusions to the tensions between Wilde’s Anglo-Irish background and socialist/Republican allegiances. Entitled as *A Conversation*, it provides an invitation to sit “on” Wilde, rest in the public sphere and have a dialogue with the writer. Such reflections on and comparisons between Wilde’s life and work and current life between Soho and London’s theatres cannot but be fruitful. We realise that we stand (or sit) on Wilde’s shoulders. In art-historical terms, the work has allegiance with Cubism, i.e. it writes Wilde further into the time after his death, provides a sequel to his oeuvre, thereby keeping it alive.[1]

Patrick Chambon follows a very similar path – in a more pronounced way showing Wilde in conjunction with works by Paul Cézanne or Jackson Pollock, and repeatedly – and aptly, I think – Andy Warhol. Wilde’s independent way of thinking is not out of place today. This does not just communicate that Wilde was ahead of his time, but also expands on the Dorian Gray theme of art changing and the protagonist (conflated with the author) remaining the same. The artist himself appears to identify with the writer.

McDermott & McGough have also taken such an approach, in very thorough ways indeed – they moved to Dublin and lived their lives as contemporaries of Wilde would have done, clothing themselves in historic costume and conducting their lives as if in the nineteenth century. Of course there are direct references to be found: paintings detailing Wilde’s property towards the end of his life, quotations such as “... No Money, No Credit, and a Heart of Lead”, and references to Antiquity, Wilde’s field of study, abound. It is hard to locate artworks without any reference to the writer in their oeuvre it seems. In the works chosen for this exhibition, however, the techniques

hark back to Wilde's context and even further back: old photographic techniques, a frame with hand-blown glass, and "educational" woodcuts. The latter establish now out-dated conventions about health and societally accepted norms, only to subvert them through exposing them – akin to what Wilde did with his society comedies. The educational woodcut as a Medieval institution interestingly bridges such socially engaged concerns with the Expressionists in the decades after Wilde's death: Erich Heckel created illustrations for *Reading Gaol* cut in wood in 1907. McDermott & McGough's works here oscillate between artistic support for gay rights and aestheticism.

Marc Camille Chaimowicz's sheets of wallpaper may not directly reference Wilde, but as objects of interior design they are directly bound up with aesthetic sensibilities. Wilde is known to have made a recommendation early in his adult life that wallpaper shouldn't be applied to the hallway of a house being, as it is, a transitional space. At the end of his life, the destitute writer is reported to have battled with the wallpaper of his hotel room, railing that either he or the wallpaper had to depart. The wallpaper is here asking the viewer to remain, to feel "at home" in Wilde's universe as revealed to us indirectly by contemporary artists.

One of them, **Ailbhe Greaney**, photographed the room of Wilde's birth in Dublin. A window-shaped photograph, it will – during the run of this exhibition – be joined by the second piece of the diptych, this time showing where Wilde died, L'Hotel in Paris (with or without wallpaper). The implication is also that Wilde's death has not yet occurred; at the beginning of the exhibition, Wilde is still alive.

Wallpaper in an art exhibition problematizes if not negates the white cube convention of the gallery space. It is no surprise that another emigrant Irishman, the visual artist and writer/critic **Brian O'Doherty (aka Patrick Ireland)**, has paid as much critical attention to his surroundings as Wilde did and was the first in contemporary art criticism to problematize the white cube as being not by any means "neutral", but ideologically and market-derived. Wilde's keen visual awareness, Republican and socialist political affinities and creative multi-disciplinarity cannot but have been of profound importance to O'Doherty (a former medical doctor like Oscar Wilde's father) who has lived in New York since 1957. In this exhibition, O'Doherty exhibits a meaningful "wallpaper", made up of readable fragments derived from old Irish ogham script (based on the Latin alphabet, ogham script used nothing but horizontal and diagonal lines). Again, aesthetic appearance and meaning relate to one another in exciting ways holding the balance that was Wilde's domain.

O'Doherty's latest novel, *The Crossdresser's Secret*, 2014, has a trajectory that is also very close to Wilde's interests and his person. As a novel written by a visual artist, it shares a very current preoccupation of a sizable number of artists that is captured under categories such as art writing and conceptual writing. O'Doherty's Booker Prize-shortlisted novel, *The Deposition of Father McGreevy*, 1999, already focuses on sexual mores and religion, but in Ireland not in France. O'Doherty's interest in Wilde not only as a creative writer and aesthete, but as a popular and witty critic must stem from the artist's days working on US American television. The task for O'Doherty was to mediate contemporary notions of the visual to a public that was possibly intrigued, but also fearful of art. Again the question raises its head about how much has changed.

Mark Wallinger similarly chooses Wilde's theoretical remarks about beauty and confronts a child with them. This results in beautifully voiced words, but also in laughter, stumbling over the unknown terms. What Wilde proclaimed with panache and unwavering but playful and paradoxical certainty acquires doubt – and further layers of beauty. The accent is an English one. Wallinger plays with the (British public's) scandal-hungry expectations that the mere concept of letting a young boy read any of Wilde would conjure. The result is, of course, somewhat disappointing: there is no salacious detail. In France, I expect this element to be nearly absent,

only to be intuited possibly when the sound work is played in the CCI's chapel (at the opening).

Wallinger has in a previous work provided us with a lesson in both grammar and Anglo-Irish identity: *Oxymoron* is the title of a Union Jack in the colours of the Irish tricolour, green white and orange. Wilde was such an impossible construction, speaking in a refined English accent as an Anglo-Irish Republican and a (reluctant) convert to Catholicism.

Seamus Harahan is a Belfast-based "London-Irish" artist (and erstwhile postman for the Northern Irish Assembly at Stormont). He comments on the statue that commands the Stormont site, enlisted to signal stable, Unionist identity: it is of Edward Carson, who had studied alongside Wilde at Trinity College, Dublin, was even an acquaintance – and muted to be homosexual himself – but became the writer's persecutor, the person who committed him to prison. In Harahan's video, shot with a hand-held camera, the statue is made to dance to punk music. Carson is thus destabilised, he nearly topples in the video (reminiscent of how Communist leaders have in Eastern Europe). The hand gesture turns from angry Unionist certainty to signifying a tortured, complicated inner life, which the career politician likely never allowed himself to live. Having played hurling, a quintessentially Irish sport, at Trinity, the artist imagines him wielding a hurley in the air in front of Stormont. Punk music was one of the very few ways for Northern Irish youths during the Troubles to let art enter their lives, to learn to value difference: the height of that generation's aestheticism. Statuary is shown to be superseded by what one now calls intangible heritage, i.e. social performances: a development for which Wilde already sensitised us.

Northern Irish homophobia was not intended to be a specific theme in this exhibition, but Belfast is named in **Neil Bartlett's** *Oscar Séance* as well. The writer has played an important role in contemporary visual art circles in the city: many artists (Susan Philipsz, Phil Collins, Peter Richards, Susan MacWilliam and others) used to live in the house in College Green, where Wilde stayed when in Belfast. His presence is also conjured by the tourist authority, which has advertised literary Belfast with Wilde, as if one could still encounter him on the steps of the Linenhall Library.

Wilde spent seven formative years in Northern Ireland, at Portora Royal College, Enniskillen. Another Dubliner, Samuel Beckett, who was educated there later, here gained his early insights into tribal, orthodox societies and the fate of those who think differently in such conformist environments. Beckett was to apply these lessons through his engagement in the Résistance. Wilde, similarly, but two generations earlier, understood the dangers of the "monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" in the hinterland of the booming industrial city of Belfast, whose sons and heirs attended school with him. Wilde's was an astute analysis and tailored poetic response, but it also displayed a naïve belief that words, art and his aesthete persona could save him when on trial.

Hugh O'Donnell is a performance artist from Ireland, who has lived in Belfast for many years. His performance on the exhibition's opening evening will be a reflection of his advanced understanding of the intricacies mentioned above – and the fact that homophobia is still one of the few things that members of the two communities in Northern Ireland share for the most part. O'Donnell will focus on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, choosing mirrors, two chairs and a calf's heart as his props. He will also be addressing Wilde as an implied presence occupying the empty chair. It could be suggested that he is extending Neil Bartlett's *Oscar Séance*. Art-historically there are close ties between contemporary visual art in Belfast and the network of Richard Demarco, Edinburgh gallerist, who brought Joseph Beuys (and his performance art tradition) to Ireland,^[2] in particular

Northern Ireland, and worked with the young Neil Bartlett.

Ines and Eyal Weizman's *Celltexts* is a library assembled of books written in prison. Arranged according to the length of imprisonment, it comprises the most diverse literature. Nelson Mandela's 27 years were not rivalled by Oscar Wilde, but *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* share with many other texts two traits: an incisive analysis of the brutal and brutalising conditions of prison, and a reminder of and insistence on the humanity (of prisoners). *Celltexts* bears testimony and gives voice to prisoners as human beings, as authors to those who are not normally heard. It is in keeping with Wilde's intentions, thus, that visitors to this exhibition should inform themselves (in the database provided) of imprisonment through the perspectives of so many literary captives. *Celltexts* is a project emanating from architectural history and theory. In this regard Wilde could be seen as the quintessential author for it, as he spent much of his life arguing that attention to art and the aesthetics of the living environment would improve society. Prisons, Wilde argued, generally do not.

The Weizmans' works draw our attention to the fact that Wilde is one of the very few canonical Modernist writers – with Joyce and Beckett – whose allegiances were securely on the left of the political spectrum. As Irish writers they are now certainly canonical, but they insist in reminding us that even the canon can be liberating.

In this sense, the current exhibition is a “literary art exhibition” and it emanates from an on-going research project that I began as curator of *Joyce in Art*, Dublin 2004. The project has had many incarnations and has so far culminated in the exhibition *Convergence: Literary Art Exhibitions*, Belfast, Limerick 2011. *Wilde Art* shares with that exhibition the character of a contemporary art exhibition that at the same time reflects on literature, reading, the canon and the book. It is fortuitous, therefore, that *Wilde Art* through *Celltexts* also includes primary literature for visitors to read. It wishes to enable transfer, to merge literary and contemporary art audiences and encourage reflection on how one can keep the liberating aspects of such a canonical writer as Wilde alive in and through both the visual domain and the debates that are related to it. How to do this is still an open question.

What I have, somewhat predictably, called *Wilde Art* is particular in that it is still under-researched. I would also like to insist that contemporary art responding to Oscar Wilde is both wild *and* self-consciously art: it is characterised by a deep affinity to Wilde's plight, social awareness *and* his aesthetic sensibility. In discourse around art's social efficacy, even ten years ago that might have sounded like a contradiction in terms. Now the rediscovery of aesthetics is central to debates on current visual art. Today, in order to be impactful in real life, many consider the “detour” via art as indispensable. The view has gained credibility that autonomous artworks are (more) socially efficacious than instrumental, commodified approaches that seek to remedy social ills, but end up preserving the status quo.[3]

This stance may be supported – but is also complicated – by the observation that Oscar Wilde is today a deeply popular writer and personality. One can even say a “celebrity”. He has entered popular culture and everyday wit so thoroughly that we can sense that what he stood for is more accepted because of him. With his notoriety and fashion-consciousness he is far more our contemporary than Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, who died in the same year. Even though he did not save himself and he may have made matters worse for the gay community of which he was a part, he can be said to have pioneered the metro-sexual man whose presence in contemporary advertising and media cannot but help to make any lingering anti-gay sentiments less likely to be expressed due to their implied unfashionability. The recent Eurovision song contest outcome and the CCI's programme including Panti, a vociferous transsexual from Ireland, are cases in point.

Wilde is important for current discourse on art and popular culture, because that superficial element is not in contrast to or exclusionary of social principles. These principles may not be without contradiction (Wilde's journey to Algeria or his relationships with working class men did have their exploitative elements), but he was an eloquent advocate of human rights, and he suffered for his convictions. In Wilde's popularity against the odds one can even see a "proof" of Jacques Ranciere's distribution of the sensible at work, the unhinging of the cause and effect relation between art and its political and social effects playing out.[4] As such, the importance of fiction is evident in the works shown in this exhibition.

The work of **Yinka Shonibare MBE** fictionalises and removes his scene from real life, by recreating a masked ball and elaborately dressing the elegant protagonists in fabric usually associated with colonised rather than colonising nations. In one of his previous works *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* series, 1998, he substituted the gay white man with a black man, changing the cause of otherness and rendering conventions, prejudice and discrimination (back in real life) both obvious and strange.

The heightened awareness and "fictionalisation" that occurs when one leaves one's familiar surroundings were known to and exploited by Wilde, of course. This could be the reason for Ailbhe Greaney creating the diptych of the locations of Wilde's birth and death. Chambon similarly inserted Wilde into subsequent art history – and into the popular comic format, where Wilde had chosen the form of a popular, working-class ballad to reflect on *Reading Gaol*. McDermott & McGough's collaborative practice on two continents and lives/oeuvre in different "times" and media also fictionalises whatever they do. Lastly, Mark Wallinger, in letting a child read Wilde on beauty (from *Dorian Gray*), directly links the conduct of our lives to the art: what happens when the living person's appearance or voice don't suit the "content" that is lived, thought and spoken? This jarring awareness of the fictional for and in Wilde, and the artists responding to him, become pointers to how one may need to act and live.

This rediscovery of aesthetic(ist) positions that are arguably in keeping with Wilde's convictions is likely to lead to an even further increased interest of artists in the writer. There is already such an indication – for Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg, Marlene Dumas will show a suite of portraits of famous gay men, centrally including Wilde. He, of course, continues to be at the forefront of those whose names are again and again invoked when the immense contribution to culture and human history by those branded as "different" apparently needs to be reasserted in the face of repression.

Wilde Art as a topic is thus far from exhausted. It will be extraordinarily fruitful to follow up with at once a broader historical focus[5] and an enhanced field of contemporary artists. The current instalment hopefully functions as something that shows the directions in which there is scope to proceed – and something that both you can enjoy and that Wilde would have enjoyed: an amuse-bouche.

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[1]This element is one where lessons can be transferred from research on the artistic legacies of other (Irish)

writers, such as James Joyce. See my: *Joyce in Art: Visual Art Inspired by James Joyce*. Foreword: Fritz Senn, envoi: James Elkins, design: Ecke Bonk. The Lilliput Press Dublin 2004. The notion of Wilde living on, artists creating sequels to him is particularly apt, because of the narrative of *Dorian Gray* also thematising such asynchronicity.

[2] Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Victoria Walters (eds.). *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond: Art, Culture and Politics*. Series: European Culture and Politics. Münster, et al: LIT 2011 – It was Richard Demarco who first spoke to me about Neil Bartlett's *Oscar Séance*.

[3] See e.g. Jeroen Boomgardt, "Radical Autonomy: Art in the Era of Process Management". *Open* Nr. 10 / (In)tolerance, 2006, pp. 30-38. [http://www.skor.nl/_files/Files/OPEN10_P30-39\(1\).pdf](http://www.skor.nl/_files/Files/OPEN10_P30-39(1).pdf) (accessed May 2014).

[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. New York, London: Verso 2009.

For a review of this exhibition by Caroline Rossiter, please click [here](#).

[5] David Rose many years ago approached me and planted the seed for *Wilde Art*. I thank him for his tireless work in the service of Wilde, particularly in planning special celebrations for Wilde's 160th birthday, 2014, in Paris. They are the reason why this exhibition came about. The bigger picture has long been envisaged. We hope it may see the light. I thank those who made it happen in artistic, institutional and practical ways: Nora Hickey-M'Sichili, CCI's directrice, her staff, the funders – and especially, of course, the artists, the galleries and collectors.

Exposition collective internationale

Neil Bartlett, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Patrick Chambon, Ailbhe Greaney, Maggi Hambling, Seamus Harahan, McDermott & McGough, Brian O'Doherty, Hugh O'Donnell, Yinka Shonibare, Mark Wallinger, Ines et Eyal Weizman

Exposition du 16 mai au 26 juin 14

Vernissage le 15 mai 14, de 18h30 à 20h, entrée libre

Oscar Wilde a toujours suscité des réactions très variées, y compris dans la sphère de l'art contemporain. Vivacité d'esprit, sensualité exubérante et sens aigu de l'esthétique caractérisent cette exposition collective multiforme qui réunit quelques-unes des propositions les plus originales inspirées par les écrits et la vie de l'écrivain irlandais. Depuis *Oscar Séance* dans la chambre de Wilde à Oxford (**Neil Bartlett**), à la lecture par un enfant de ses aphorismes sur la beauté (**Mark Wallinger**) et aux « costume dramas » à plusieurs épaisseurs de **Yinka Shonibare**, l'auteur devient ainsi une source de célébration visuelle. Il est aussi une référence en termes d'identification et de représentation pour les individus qui souffrent de leur orientation sexuelle ou de leurs convictions ; les travaux de **McDermott & McGough, Seamus Harahan, Hugh O'Donnell** et **Ines et Eyal Weizman** (*Celltexts*) abordent Wilde sous cet angle. Cette double approche fondée sur l'engagement et l'esthétique, ainsi que l'écriture artistique – comme dans l'oeuvre de **Brian O'Doherty alias Patrick Ireland** –, revêt une signification d'autant plus cruciale aujourd'hui, à l'heure où fait débat la question de l'autonomie radicale de l'art et dans l'art. *Wilde Art* est une exposition à la fois affranchie et maîtrisée, hédoniste et conceptuelle, engagée et joyeuse.

Commissaire : **Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Université d'Ulster/Université d'Amsterdam**

Imaginée par le CCI en collaboration avec la Société Oscar Wilde, cette exposition est présentée conjointement avec les « Wilde Days in Paris », qui célèbreront le 160ème anniversaire de la naissance de l'écrivain du 6 au 14 juin en nos murs.

Horaires d'ouverture de l'exposition : Du mardi au samedi de 14h à 18h ; Nocturne le mercredi jusqu'à 20h ; le dimanche de 12h30 à 14h30. Fermé le lundi.

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