



Art Promotion: Far Pavilions

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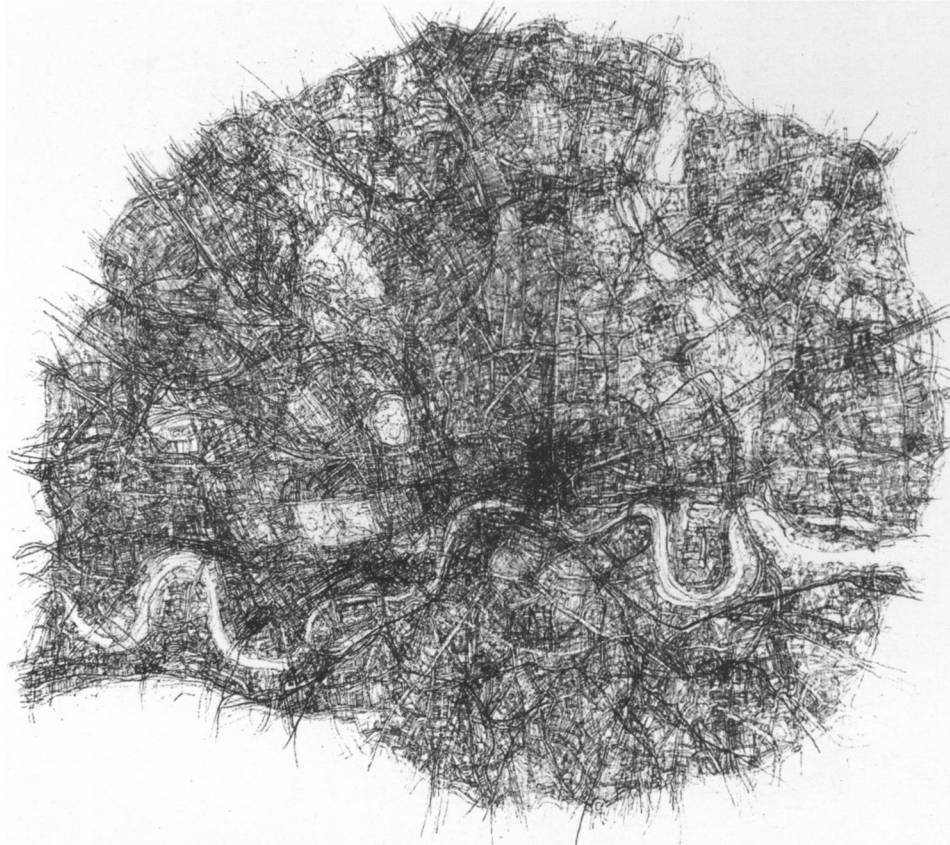
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Far Pavilions

Kate Rivers traces the chequered history of Irish participation at the Venice Biennale in its Centenary year.

Street full of water. Stop. Please advise
This telegram succinctly conveys the shock and delight that every visitor to Venice experiences. The city's Carnavalesque quality also makes it particularly suited to hosting an event like an international art biennale. Yet as Alice Maher and Philip Napier made clear [1], large international contemporary art exhibitions present enormous challenges to artists, particularly those from less economically powerful countries.

While those artists' experiences in Sao Paulo last year had a lot to do with the particular character of that Bienal, it is fair to say that biennales *in general* are strange beasts. And the Venice Biennale, now in its Centenary year, is the grand-daddy of them all.

Part trade-fair, part artistic platform, the

Venice Biennale is an enormous event. This year, about a half a million visitors are expected to attend: during the vernissage alone, some 2,500 journalists and countless curators will converge. Thousands of art works by hundreds of artists from over fifty countries are on display. Indeed, Truman Capote might have been speaking of the Biennale when he said that '*Venice is like eating an entire box of chocolate liqueurs at one go*'.

From its inception in 1895 the Venice Biennale has always been international in character. Yet, despite its internationalism, it is an intensely *nationalistic* event. This comes about because of its physical structure and layout. The main part of the show takes place in the Giardini – a public park on the seaward side of Venice. There, the

larger nations have over the years built their own pavilions – architectural expressions of their national self-image. Visitors to the Biennale wander from pavilion to pavilion, in a series of encounters with 'national presentations' each of which has been selected and funded by that country.

The Italian pavilion is usually also home to participating countries who do not have their own pavilion [2]. This year, however, the space has been given over to one part of a special Centenary exhibition *Identity & Alterity: a brief history of the human body*. Special events for the Centenary also mean that there is no Aperto section this year. This is unfortunate as the *Aperto*, where invited curators showed younger artists, was widely considered to be the most exciting

Kathy Prendergast
from the series
City Drawings
Pencil on paper
1992
Photo by
Edward Woodman

Brief Chronology of the Venice Biennale

1895

The inauguration of the first international Biennale of Art took place in the presence of Their Royal Highnesses Umberto and Margherita of Savoy. The Cardinal of Venice sought to have a painting by Giancomio Grosso excluded but La Biennale held out. Attendance figures as high as 200,000.

1905

Picasso's painting *La famiglia di saltimbanchi* was not accepted for the exhibition. Picasso's work did not appear at the Biennale until 1948.

1907-09

The first national pavilion was constructed by architect Léon Sneyers for Belgium (1907). Record attendance figures of 457,960 – similar to those expected for 1995.

1910

Works of internationally recognised artists were exhibited: a room was dedicated to the works of Klimt, another to Renoir and the retrospective was on Courbet.

1914

The inauguration of the Russian pavilion brought the total number of national pavilions at the Giardini to seven. In addition to the Italian pavilion, there was Belgium (1907), Hungary (1909), Germany (1909), Great Britain (1909), France (1912), then Russia.

1916-18

The Biennale did not take place due to the First World War.

1922

The first retrospective of Modigliani, in addition to an exhibition of sculpture by African artists caused considerable mistrust and criticism. The Spanish pavilion opened, followed by the Czech (1926).

1930

The institution of the Biennale was absorbed by the fascist state, including the Fascist Party Prize, the Premio di Duce and the Maternity Prize. The United States of America constructed their pavilion at the Giardini. The international Music Festival was inaugurated. The Cardinal of Venice forbade priests from visiting the Biennale on account of the large number of nudes.

1932

The Film Festival came into being and, as from 1934, was held yearly. Denmark and Poland opened pavilions.

1934

The first Festival Internazionale del Teatro di Prosa (Theatre Festival). Austria and Greece opened pavilions. On the margins of a state visit to Mussolini, Hitler attended the Biennale.

1938

The Gran Premio di Pittura e Scultura was instituted.

1940

Despite the outbreak of the Second World War, the Biennale went ahead. Austria, Britain, Denmark, France, Poland and the USSR did not participate.

1942

The first wartime Biennale was essentially an 'Italo-Germanica Association'. The British pavilion became the Army pavilion; the US, the Navy pavilion; and the French, the Air Force pavilion. Joseph Goebbels attended.

1944-46

No Biennale events were held due to the Second World War.

1948

The first post-war and post fascism Biennale saw Peggy Guggenheim's New York Collection on display in Venice. It was subsequently transferred to Ca' Venier dei Leoni permanently. Exhibition of work by Georges Bracque. Henry Moore won the major sculpture prize.

1950-56

Major prizes awarded to new works by Matisse (1950), Dufy (1952), Ernst, Arp, Mirò (1954) and Villon (1956).

1958

Theatre Festival: performances of work by Ionesco and Beckett were the cause of lively debate.

1964

Pop Art. Robert Rauschenberg became the first American artist and the youngest to date to win the special prize.

1968

Biennale was not held due to student protest. This was the start of a period of institutional changes including a new statute (1973).

1974

The Biennale was not held in its usual form. There were various performances and events under the banner *Libertà per il Cile* (Freedom for Chile).

1980

The first Aperto section for young artists was organised by Achille Bonito Oliva. The Architecture Section was established with an international exhibition at the Arsenale Corderie, which was open to the public for the first time and transformed into a 'strada novissima' by Paolo Portoghesi.

1993

Fifty-four countries participated in the Biennale. A record of 2,827 accredited journalists attended.

Sources:

Adriano Donaggio, *Biennale di Venezia: un secolo di storia*, Art Dossier Giunti, 1988.

Lawrence Alloway *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968*
New York Graphic Society, Connecticut, 1968.

to do about it. He said he'd see but it was not a medical matter. We got the hold of a PO at 10 A.M. this morning and he issued us with 'half a fucking blanket each'. Bik told him they were torturing us for furniture being broke. We also at 10 A.M. got water. We saw Gov. at 11 A.M. every man asked for board form [complaint form] to get signer [lawyer] to see governor and Northern Ireland Office for breach of prison rules. We may have chance of a signer. Play this up, of court case over torture. To rub it in they put our dinner out, left it sitting for half an hour, then gave us it freezing cold. The boys are exhausted, the wing's like a morgue - all asleep. Bik, me and the lad waiting on the bad reports coming in from H5, expecting more trouble here. Remember the main point: they put us back on no wash again by putting us in filthy cells to try and sicken us. Only we [If we had not] moved on court issue we'd have been sitting fuckin' foundered till tonight. Man near collapsed here with cold and exhaustion. Sorry about the balls up, but we'd have had a bigger one if we had have moved. Okay comrade, two dials [radios to be smuggled in] for Elephant Friday!! I'm away for a sleep, think I'm sleeping now! Marcella.

31.1.81 To Army Council

Comrade, we received your comm (dated 30.1.81). We have listened carefully to what you have said and we recognise and accept the spirit in which it was wrote, likewise in view of the situation we do not deny you or criticise your extreme cautiousness. But, however distressing it may be, we regret that our decision to hunger strike remains the same and we reconfirm this decision now with the same vigour and determination. We fully accept and in full knowledge of what it 'may' entail, the right of the army to carry on unlimited operations in pursuance of the Liberation struggle and without handicap or hindrance. We accept the tragic consequences that most certainly await us and the overshadowing fact that death may not secure a principled settlement. So comrades, in all respects we recognise and

respect your problems. We realise the struggle on the outside must also continue. We hope that you accept that the struggle in H-Blocks, being part of the overall struggle, must also go on in unison. We reconfirm and pledge 'our' full confidence and support to you and march on with you to the Irish Socialist Republic.

From Marcella 31.1.81

Comrade, find enclosed confirmation of hunger strike. We need that hunger strike statement that fast comrade. The delay is damaging us, i.e. men will think we're telling lies. Lost a half a dozen comrades in the blocks yesterday [conforming]. Even a hunger strike won't hold some, for some it means three months' remission....

From Marcella

Comrade, here goes with all my details. I'm 27 on 9 March coming (swear to God) i.e. 9.3.54. Born in Belfast. Went to Stella Maris Primary School and secondary school (Rathcoole). Also attended Newtonabbey Tech for about 9 months. Worked as apprentice coach builder for about three years or more. Was in Union (whichever one that comes under). Now was also fantastic sports man. Ha!! Well, when I was young I was very much involved in soccer, athletics, swimming and about ten thousand other sports. Think there's merit in that? Was not really in any Gaelic football club. By the way, I used to run for Willowfield Temperance Harriers (real black [Protestant] place) in all the leading races in the north for boys; couldn't run fast enough on the two occasions I was snared ya!! (Take a redner [blush] says you)... I was caught the first time in October 1972 in Lisburn and genuinely on the run. I was then 18 and very naive. Got bad time in [police] barracks and I did sign a statement which was basic (i.e. not bad). Was convicted by a Judge Higgins late March, early April '73, to five years for possession of 4 shorts [pistols] which were stored in a place I was staying (they weren't in a good state which is why I got a light sentence). The woman of the house

sold her soul for £300 and shot to England leaving the Brits in the house to wait etc. (you crying?). Also was done with two or three petty robberies which were fashionable in them days. I refused to recognise [the court] etc. You should get Judges' summing up that was in the paper, i.e. 'young man never in trouble, no criminal record, from good family' - okay, take the point? Now I was released on 13.4.76. Hold on, forgot to mention I was going with a girl before I got lifted and was going to get married. She was pregnant, I got married in gaol on remand, it's not a well-known fact. Anyway, comrade, as I said I got out 13.4.76 and lived in Twinbrook with wife and child and was snared again on 14.10.76, six months later, outside a furniture showroom in Dunmurray in which were four ticking bombs. You'll get all the crack on that somewhere, it was pretty fierce - two or three comrades were shot, I was caught in a car with three others and a gun. Anyway I was took eventually, to Castlereagh [interrogation centre] and got very bad time, but gave (this time) only name, address and said I was looking for a job. Anyway, I didn't sign and at the end of 11 months of remand (four of which were in H-Block) I got sentenced to 14 years for possession with intent. Refused to recognise [the court]. We beat stack of bomb charges 'cause we'd kept quiet. Four of us got 84 years between us for one gun. You should see signer [lawyer] and he'll get you 10 page statement I wrote on the six days we spent in Castlereagh. [Fr] Faul might have it also. The judge on that occasion was 'Watt'. The trial, true to form, was a farce etc.!! There was a ruckus after we were sentenced which we didn't start, screws got into us, three of us got boards [sent to punishment block] and six months loss of remission. I spent first 22 days of sentence on boards in [Crumlin Road jail]. 15 days I spent totally naked in front of hundreds of crims [ordinary criminals]. I was subjected to No.1 starvation diets [bread and water] every three days etc.!! Must have wrote you articles on that at one time. The Blanket men down there at that time used to get 3

days of every two weeks, we got 15 days in a row (I'll write you an article on this again 'cause it was really bad). Anyway I came on the blanket late Sept. '77 and began writing articles and stuff right away and I never really received any bad beating. But in Jan. '79 I was really bad with flu and was carried out to hospital on a stretcher. They tossed me in the air while on it, hit me and dropped me naked on the snow and threw me into the back of a van like a bag of rags. I was forcibly bathed the same night. (That was the third forced bath I got I think.) Anyway sagarts [priests]: I'm friendly with [Fr] Paul, Reed and Mahon, ha!! Not much use that, is it? The sagarts in Twinbrook, you know them. Stay clear there - i.e. Rogan. If he weighs in I'll ask him to leave, for he'd say things that weren't OK. I've a cousin who is a nun and who visits me. Also am friendly with other nuns. She's dead sound, i.e. passively radical ha!! I've no criminal record, I'm great admirer of your dog and Ethna Carberry [an Irish poetess]. Back to wife: I'm now separated (that's the way it goes) but I will see her during the hunger strike. She's in England. Bear this in mind comrade. Make it a point to get word to her that I want a visit, or she will be dangerous loose end for the press, okay. See my ma on that. You should know that that is my principal excuse for signer: she asked for a separation, I agreed and it was done in court. My wee lad is eight in May. Anyway for what it's worth I'm well known in Twinbrook, Andersonstown, Short Strand, Bawnmore, Unity Flats and the Markets. I've done roughly 8 years in gaol. 3 and a half in cages, 4 and a half this time. I spent nine consecutive Xmas's [inside]. My birthday will fall in later stages of hunger strike no matter. In regard to my family: My mother and father are like all mothers and fathers, very vulnerable to the press. They won't be of use for interviewing, okay? They'd get murdered, so look after them. I've a sister who is married. 'Marcella' is her name, so now you know who that [his pen-name] came from. She, if groomed, might be sound okay? Cara [friend], she's 26. I've a brother who

plays traditional music. He's about 20. I've another sister who is 21 and single. She's in Dundalk [south of the border - on the run]. Fire bombs went off in her pocket. She can't come up here, but if again groomed would do down there. She's been there for 3 years, okay. I haven't seen her in over three years. Because of her (and I'm not trying to be smart or stupid or mimic anyone) I wanted buried down there. To be honest I think I'm going to die and again I'm no playing at bravado or egotism. You understand, I'm sure. Anyway I've relatives in USA and England (see my ma), probably other countries too because I've lost touch. My wife lost a child the second time I came in. I was in two and a half months when it occurred. I got hospital parole in the High Court, the first person to get it I believe, and I of course honoured it... With the exception of a broken heart I'm healthy (I think). Have been interrogated in Castlereagh, Crumlin Road detention centre, Black Road, Musgrave billet, Dunmurray Bks. Lisburn Rd and Fort Monagh. The latter being the only one where I wasn't assaulted. I'm fairly fluent in Gaelige (big head). Well that's about the heap, comrade... Marcella.

To Liam Óg from Bik 4.2.81

... Enclosed you will discover a letter to one Jacqueline Mason from Malachy. It is in reply to a 'letter' he received from her. Under no circumstances must you deliver that letter. The Jacqueline Mason who wrote to him is in this cell. I want you to reply to the letter, or one of the girls in the office - smother it in scent and send it through the censor. You should have heard him when he received the letter from 'her' he's crazy. Anyway, can you please help us out in our devilish scheme? It's right up your street comrade...

Liam Óg from Bik 5.2.81

...By the way Charlie [Sands] is well into poetry - he read one out last night and wrecked the wing. A work of art, though I'll be cutting it to ribbons when I hear it

part of the Biennale. Together with the extra pressure placed on smaller countries previously accommodated in the Italian pavilion, the omission of the *Aperto* raises questions about the balance between a retrospective celebration of the Biennale and its commitment to contemporary art.

Ireland does not have a pavilion. And largely as a result of this, Irish presence at the Biennale has been patchy. Things started well: throughout the fifties - the period much maligned now for its introversion and chronic provincialism - Irish artists participated in two Biennales: the first time, in 1950, Norah McGuinness and Nano Reid were selected (a fact which must temper easy accusations that women artists suffered discrimination).

During the late 1950s there were plans for an Irish pavilion. Spearheaded by architect Michael Scott, the building was to function also as a bridge across one of the canals in the Giardini.

This was followed in 1956 by a show of paintings by Louis le Brocquy and sculptures by Hilary Heron. Le Brocquy's large canvas *The Family* won the Prix Prealpina Spa. Another exhibited work, *The Bathers*, met a less noble fate. On its return to Ire-

land, the canvas was slashed by persons unknown. The artist was told it had been caught up in a fire, but in reality, it had been languishing in a basement in the Department of Foreign Affairs. There it remained for over thirty years until its recent discovery and restoration.

Irish participation had less continuity in the 1960s. Patrick Scott exhibited work in 1960 - the artist now recalling his delight in his space being next to that of Brancusi! For the following Biennale, Jack B. Yeats was to have shown. However, the space was not suitable and, for reasons not quite clear, the exhibition didn't happen.

Furthermore, during the late 50s, there were plans to build an Irish pavilion. Spearheaded by architect Michael Scott, the

Shane Cullen
Fragmens sur les
Institutions
Républicaines III
Photo by
Declan Barnes



Shane Cullen
Encode
Carved Limestone
Photo by
Declan Barnes

building was to function also as a bridge across one of the canals in the Giardini. However, it was not to be. Despite getting it accepted by the City of Venice and securing the site from La Biennale, the cost of £27,000 proved too high for Frank Aiken, Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time, and the project was starved of funding.

This was indeed a lost opportunity – one which must have been instrumental in retarding Irish artists access to this most important of international platforms. It was not until after a break of thirty-three years, that Dorothy Cross and Willie Doherty again re-established an Irish presence. On a tiny budget, they coped with an extremely difficult space in the Italian pavilion – a small corridor within a warren of partition walls.

Shane Cullen and Kathy Prendergast are the artists chosen by the Irish selectors to show at Venice this year [3]. A space has been secured – a new private gallery called Nuova Icona – which suits the works very well. Also, a link with Nuova Icona's energetic director, Vittorio Urbani, has been forged. Urbani has already visited Ireland to

meet the artists, and looks forward to future cooperative projects.

Though already in progress before being selected, the works on show at Nuova Icona address the broad theme of the Biennale 'Identity and Otherness': Cullen's work offers a more directly political commentary on official commemoration and the construction of national identity; Prendergast's work takes up a more personal evocation of the dislocating experiences of emigration – most directly in the poignant *Two hundred words for Lonely* (1994), which is included in her exhibit.

Her main piece is the *City Drawings* series, which she began in 1992. Her goal is to make drawings of the 180 or so capital cities in the world. So far, she has completed over eighty. In the drawings, vast metropolises are shrunk to Lilliputian proportions – their diminutive size only increasing their intensity. Each has a magnetic quality, pulling the viewer inwards into its own labyrinthine world. The effect is something like that of the zooming visual sequence in the current Guinness 'Time' ads – only

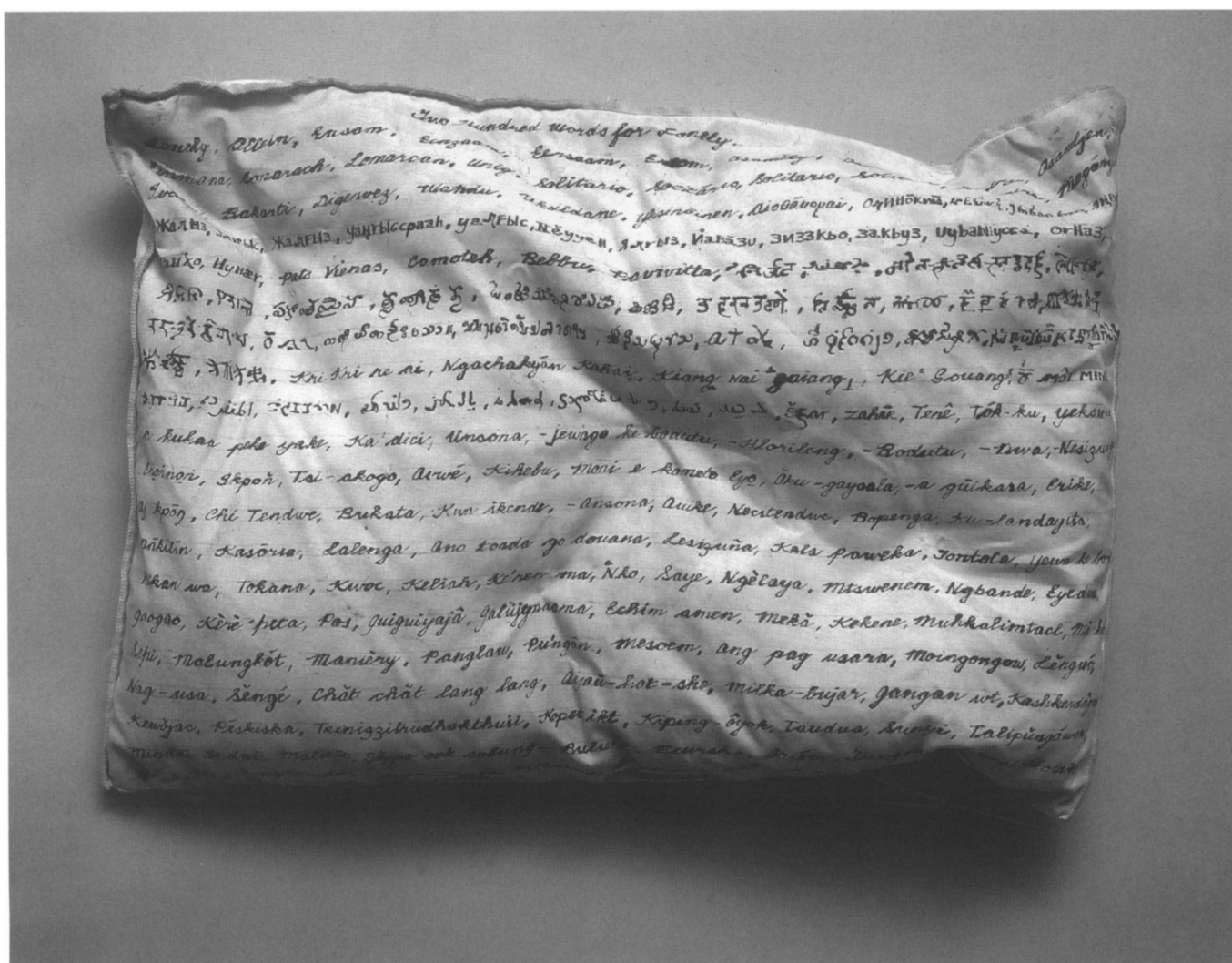
Prendergast's achievement is all the more

remarkable for being wrought from the simplest of materials.

Given that the work has a more directly political content, this year's selection of Shane Cullen cuts close to a very contentious bone. The work as shown in Venice consists of twenty-four panels, each 8 foot high, onto which are painted in meticulous Bodoni type, sections from the 'comms' or communications sent during the 1981 Hunger Strike between prisoners and the outside. These comms were written on cigarette papers, which were then crushed into pellets, covered in clingfilm and secreted in various bodily orifices to evade prison security and its censorship [4].

The work draws on a particularly fraught period of recent Irish history. Ten hunger strikers died in the campaign, which was mounted in an effort to attain political status for IRA prisoners. Entitled *Fragmens sur les Institutions Républicaines III* the work monumentalises this 'ephemera'.

As with the earlier works of that title, which dealt with the French Revolution, Cullen appropriates 'official' devices of commemoration in an ironic commentary



Kathy Prendergast
Two hundred words for
Lonely
Cotton pillow and ink
1994
Photo by
Edward Woodman

on the process of constructing concepts of nationhood.

As Commissioner for Ireland, Peter Murray has noted, 'both artists seek to remove the evidence of their own individuality from the work they produce, and to emphasize instead truths which can be learned from an intense examination of how societies create images of self.'

Both series of works are evidence of a tremendously disciplined approach to the transformation and re-presentation of a surfeit of information. There's also a dynamic at play which could perhaps best be described as 'Swiftian'.

Prendergast's Lilliputian cities, and Cullen's Brobdingnagian communications suggest a modern Gulliver. This Gulliver is perhaps wiser and more wary of the world, but is nevertheless committed, from a slightly shifted perspective, to giving it some order, however arbitrary or temporary its basis may be.

These elements in the works are further emphasized, by their translation to an international space, where the viewer's perspective is likewise shifted, and essential elements of the works take on enhanced sig-

Both artists' works are simultaneously ambitious and understated - an appropriate mix given the huge challenges facing small countries in mounting exhibitions at the Biennale.

nificance, beyond the specifics of Irish or British politics and nationality.

In this respect, both artists' work is simultaneously ambitious and understated - an appropriate mix given the huge challenges facing small countries in mounting exhibitions at the Biennale.

Compared to the situation in 1993, the Cultural Relations Committee have made great progress in securing a place for Irish artists. Now chaired by Cecily Brennan, the Visual Arts Committee of the CRC has devoted £25,000 to the project. This marks an important continuity of commitment, and is a significant step in redressing the

marginalised place of contemporary visual arts in Irish cultural promotion.

[1] 'Showing Abroad' *Circa* 71 Spring 1994 p50-54.

[2] In the last Biennale, in 1993, these countries included Ireland, Luxembourg, San Marino, Cyprus, Korea, Turkey, South Africa, Bulgaria and Latin-America (sic).

[3] The selection panel was made up of: Cecily Brennan (chair), Peter Murray (Commissioner), John Behan, Barbara Dawson, Sarah Finlay, Joan Fowler, John Hutchinson, Declan McGonagle and Paul O'Reilly.

[4] Locky Morris has also made work relating to comms. Whereas his installation developed the signifying potential of the material (cling film), Cullen re-casts the signifying structures within which the comms operated. Cullen's work will be shown in the Douglas Hyde Gallery early in 1996.

Kate Rivers

Kate Rivers is an artist based in London.