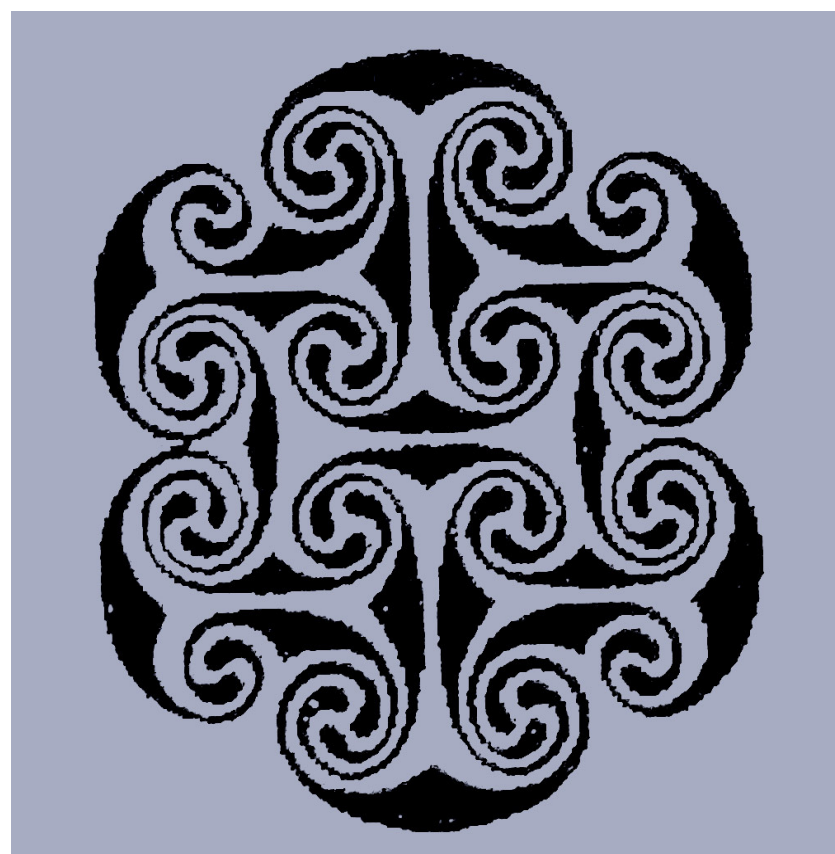
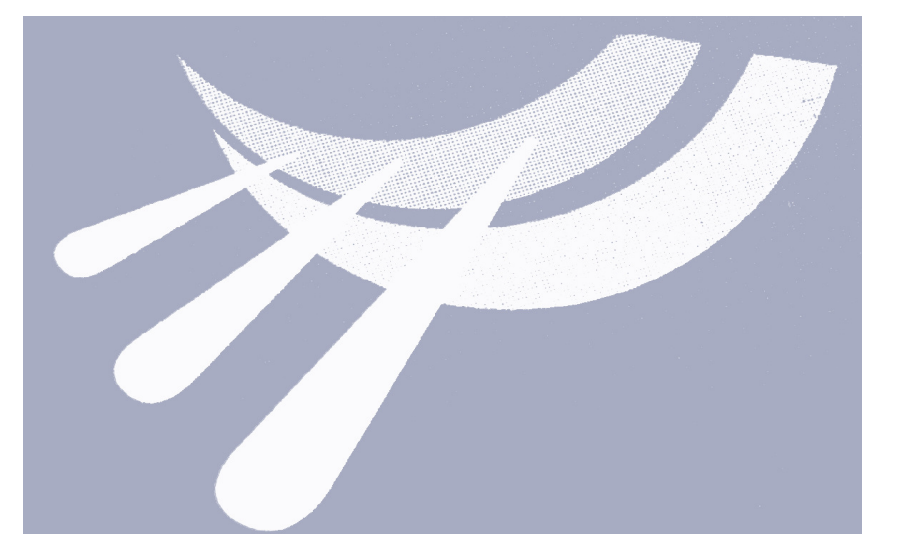


Repositioning Irish identities: exhibiting Irish contemporary art abroad (1980–2005)

The aim is to examine models of thinking about the international exhibition of Irish contemporary art (IEICA) and account for the discursive frameworks and institutional networks within which Irish contemporary art is viewed, discussed and evaluated. Art exhibitions are a primary site of exchange within a globalised cultural economy and, notably over the period examined from 1980 to 2005, have served as a critical forum in which issues of identity and the politics of national categorisation are debated. Taking the medium of temporary exhibition as a cultural artefact and a discursive practice, it is possible to trace through IEICA the continuous process of change and redefinition that has formed cultural identities in Ireland, and to show how the category of ‘Irish art’ is constructed, maintained and, at times, deconstructed in relation to a complex configuration of texts.



The ideological imperative to assert an autonomous cultural identity, that can be identified in IEICA, is evidenced in the logo of the Cultural Relations Committee (above). Set up in 1949 and charged with the task of promoting Irish cultural identity within an international arena, the CRC was the first Irish government agency in support of the arts .



Culture Ireland, an independent agency to promote contemporary Irish arts abroad, replaced the CRC in 2005. New personal and professional opportunities for Irish artists confer from participation in a globalised cultural economy

The Swiftian image of the flying island of Laputa (left) is a persistent trope in IEICA catalogue texts , connected with notions of the incoherency of ‘Ireland’ as a political and social entity, and symbolising the instability of the ‘national’ as a cultural construct.

Models of thinking about IEICA have been found to be determined by two factors: the symbolic capital generated by increased integration of an Irish art-world into the international art-world; the potential function of IEICA as an international platform to address, promote or reposition Irish cultural identity. The latter drive has variously been criticised for reinforcing a discourse of cultural nationalism, and celebrated as an expansion and reconfiguring of the cultural boundaries of the ‘national.’ However, perhaps the greatest indicator of the cultural confidence connected with the notion of a ‘renaissance’ in Irish contemporary art will be the continued distancing of nationality as the master term of discourse.

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