Troubling the Museum: Anthony Haughey's Archival Obstinacy

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For well over a decade, many traditional historical museums have explored ways to revise their collections in order to reflect a sense of greater diversity in the areas of gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, race, and class. From the US to Europe and beyond, materials and objects obtained by museums in previous decades, sometimes even in previous centuries, are being carefully re-contextualized in order to highlight the role of women, of working-class people, of LGBTQ+ and non-white or non-Anglo people, as well as those who suffered from bigotry, colonization, and enslavement. In doing so, familiar historical narratives rooted in a far more homogeneous point of-view are either being displaced, or placed under a critical lens. It is a challenging task, made all the more difficult when the actual substance of the collection comes pre-selected to tell a completely different story that typically monumentalizes great men, great deeds, great sacrifices and a few singular moments of triumph, or all too often, of defeat. But museum curators are further hampered by their necessary fidelity to the specific objects under their care. One way to get around such limitations is to invite outside agents into the institution, such as visual artists, who can move freely beyond such constraints. While this too comes with its own set of risks and benefits, it is precisely such a work-around that brought artist Anthony Haughey into the National Museum in order to 'trouble' Ireland's past with his project, we make our own histories. Rooted in memory as much as forgetting, Haughey's artistic landscape investigates what appears at first to be familiar, if not historically indisputable. This has been his approach for quite some time. Take for example the exhibition Beyond The Pale: The Art of Revolution at the Highlanes Gallery Drogheda in 2016. Ranging across media from the written word and historical archives to contemporary installation art and photography, Haughey's omnibus project explored what is perhaps the most consequential and best-known moment in the lead up to Ireland's decolonialization and independence: the 1916 Easter Rising. One century later, Haughey and team displayed reproductions of vintage posters for both pro and anti-Home Rule positions as they chronicled key events from the General Post Office occupation, to the reading of the Proclamation of the Republic by Patrick Pearse, just days prior to his execution along with six other signatories, by

British military commanders at Kilmainham Jail. It's all there in Beyond The Pale. And at first, the heroic past, as memorized by every Irish child, is safe, with everything in apparent order. And then, something goes bump in the night. It starts with something stubbornly hard to pin down, something that interrupts our secure, inherited reverie. Actually, it is all too obvious, but also overlooked. How did we manage to miss this? The disruption involves the names and images of several women, including Elizabeth O'Farrell, who ran dispatches through bullet-riddled Dublin for the Irish Republican Brotherhood during the Rising. And, as a trained nurse, she cared for the wounded, with James Connolly among them. But O'Farrell's image is later airbrushed out of historic existence. Her presence is deleted from an iconic photograph of Pearse surrendering to British Brigadier General William Lowe. In other words, she was there, and poof, she was not. Haughey and team literally return O'Farrell to the nation's historical imaginary, along with dispatcher, suffragist, and trade unionist Margaret Skinnider who, as an expert shot, was armed with a pistol during the GPO occupation. O'Farrell and Skinnider, along with dozens of other radicalized women essential to the modern formation of Ireland, interpose themselves within the museum setting as Haughey, Cooke and Ruane raise them from dead erasure into a stubbornly unyielding residuum. Whatever seemingly easy journey we thought we had first glimpsed inside the museum is now troubled by the return of a material reality no longer suppressed within the present. We are reminded of the early 20th century German theorist Walter Benjamin, a troubled thinker who, not surprisingly, is a frequent reference for Haughey. In Benjamin's 1931 essay, 'A Short History of Photography', he insists that a photographic portrait is not merely a document of a particular moment or person, it is also a message from the past in the form of a petition towards the present.[1] Its appeal he adds, cannot be silenced because it 'impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time, and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into art'.[2] Haughey's art is grounded precisely in this refusal. Including the hesitancy to become simply art, a skepticism Haughey likely inherited from 1960s Conceptualism. Meanwhile, the artist, and his collaborators, both living and dead, become the groove of transmission. And like a historical magnetron, this stubborn resistor powers-up Haughey's projects until they glow in the now time, or what Benjamin called Jetzizeit. Meanwhile, the artist becomes the groove through which this obstinacy travels as

charged cultural transmission. It is a force that is impossible to generate alone. Bringing us to the present, and to Anthony Haughey's invitation, following an open-call, that he set up shop within the venerable galleries of the National Museum. With its multiple holdings and locations, this singular institution covers Natural History, Archaeology, Country Life, Military History, and includes the preservation of Collins Barracks within its Decorative Arts & History wing. we make our own histories got underway in 2021, during the centenary year of Ireland's partitioning into postcolonial and a still-colonized divisions. Notably, the project came to fruition one century after the end of the 1923 Civil War, which Haughey himself remarks upon, without nostalgia, but with an expectation of past promises yet to be met. Over these past three years, the artist and his collaborators have reimagined the Museum's vast archive of objects, images, and material heritage under the rubric that, we make our own histories, a de-masculinized spin on the well-known Karl Marx formulation that, 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please'.[3] Inspiration for this idiom-switching in fact comes from a host of sources, including the aforementioned shift in curatorial practice, but also from such female historians as Sinéad McCoole and Síobhra Aiken who have revised the Haughey's artistic objective is also pitched towards the future. we make our own histories points, he informs us, to a moment that will be built decades from today when the children of these collaborators enter the National Museum, and once inside they visit the works their parents created on display. They see the dress made with Akunma and Ramlah, as well as the revised flags made by young people incorporating a multitude of identities into a revised symbolism. They read the names of over 100 collaborators who made up the Young People's Assembly and join together with Haughey in asserting that, 'the silence needs to be overcome' while asking 'who has access to the museum, who gets to control the narrative, all this must also be troubled'.[4] But this will be taking place in a very different Ireland, one that will stake a very different claim to its past, as well as its unrealized egalitarian ideals as envisioned in that oh so briefly glimpsed Republican manifesto of 1916. What the introduction of an interventionist outsider into the museum ultimately makes possible, therefore, is the reinterpretation of existing collections using the tools of artistic interference. This includes looking sideways at the inherited aggregate of material artifacts, imagery and archives in order to generate a series of new, sometimes contrary, and sometimes even

paradoxical, re-readings of the museum itself. Anthony Haughey's we make our own histories does just this by employing three particular approaches including the use of unexpected materials, and site-specific interventions which call attention to existing display narratives, although not by filling in missing historical details, but by calling attention to their absences. And finally, Haughey engages in a robust primarily male, white, and Catholic monoculture of Ireland's past. And what better place to carry out a re-narration of this story than within the country's primary heritage museum site? Working with migrants from Africa, who are now Irish nationals, including Lauretta Igbosonu, Rita Petlane, and Leina Ibnouf, collaboration with other groups and individuals who have a stake in the way the past is represented but who have typically been excluded from participation. To cite the artist once more with regards to how the past informs the present and the future, 'we are the raw material' Haughey insists, adding that 'we are not outside history, we are not dislocated from history, we have more power than we like to think'.[5] Which is to say that while we do indeed make our own history, we don't get to do this just as we please. The obstinacy of histories and institutions, of objects and materials, clearly cuts both ways.

1 Walter Benjamin. 'A Short History of Photography,' in Screen Magazine, xiii, no. i (1972) pp. 5-26.

2 Ibid.

3 Karl Marx, The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (International Publishers, 1926).

4 Interview with Anthony Haughey (12 December 2023).

5 Ibid.