

INVENTING THE PAST, REIMAGINING THE FUTURE: REMEMBRANCE OF IRISH HISTORY IN *AISTEACH*

TIMOTHY DIOVANNI

Globalization and modernization in the 1990s contributed to an international ‘memory boom’ that scholars have connected to a societal need for a sense of continuity and groundedness, to balance against recent changes and upheavals. In Ireland, this period was particularly dramatic, with some academics calling it the most rapidly changing time in Irish history since independence.¹ The widespread proliferation in memory practices also coincided with a sharpened interest in history, whereby cultural attention shifted from the future to the past.² Ernst van Alphen has interpreted this development not as a celebration of memory, but rather as a symptom of a memory crisis precipitated in part by the overwhelming presence of media culture, which ‘threatens to destroy historical memory and the mnemonic image’.³ Such a memory culture has been characterized by a desire to remember ‘not only times of glory or martyrdom but also less assimilable past[s] of violence and trauma, persecution and guilt’, writes Silke Arnold-de Simine.⁴ This transformation has manifested itself in the arts, which have dealt with issues surrounding war, trauma, persecution, sexual abuse, migration, the Holocaust and other genocides, and have questioned processes of memory and historicization, particularly in using archival documents and techniques.

¹ Brian Girvin, ‘Ireland Transformed?’ in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. IV: 1880 to the Present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 407–40: 429.

² Ralph Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 25.

³ Ernst Van Alphen, ‘The Politics of Exclusion, or, Reanimating the Archive’, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24/49–50 (2015), 118–37: 133.

⁴ Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36.

While memory has enabled artists, writers, and other creative figures to uncover overlooked and neglected aspects of the past, it is limited to what can be remembered. Historical fiction, on the other hand, provides a potentially more effective way to represent and understand the past. As Umberto Eco argues, 'What the characters do serves to make history, what happened, more comprehensible. Events and characters are made up, yet they tell us things about ... the period that history books have never told so clearly'.⁵ Such representation of the past not only depicts what could have happened, but also acts as a commentary on what actually occurred. '[I]f no one has ever written what [a character] says, someone, however confusedly, should surely have begun to think it (perhaps without saying it, blocked by countless fears and by shame)', Eco claims.⁶

In some cases, however, historical realities might be seen as un conducive to historical fiction. The history of classical music in Ireland in the 1900s, for example, contains several significant lacunae that could impede fictional representations of Irish musical modernism. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Irish composers such as Seóirse Bodley, Gerard Victory, A.J. Potter, James Wilson, and John Kinsella engaged with modernist ideas by using twelve-tone pitch collections, 'sometimes as the basis of serial writing and sometimes as the basis of simpler variation and motivic techniques'.⁷ However, their perfunctory engagement (with the exception of Bodley) did not move beyond 'mere dutiful experimentation', argues Gareth Cox.⁸ Many avant-garde disciplines, including Fluxism, Futurism, noise music, Surrealism, and Dadaism, had no parallels in Ireland and no apparent influence on Irish composers. As Mark Fitzgerald posits in his study of modernism in Irish music, an Irish avant-garde only emerged in the 1970s and 1980s through the works of composers such as Raymond Deane and Gerald Barry.⁹ Moreover, these composers eschewed the experimental.

While these absences have sometimes been interpreted in a fatalistic light, Raymond Deane has proposed that a 'great gap' in a nation's classical music tradition

⁵ Umberto Eco, *Reflections on the Name of the Rose*, William Weaver (trans.) (London: Minerva, 1994), 75.

⁶ Eco, *Reflections*, 76.

⁷ Mark Fitzgerald, 'A Belated Arrival: the Delayed Acceptance of Musical Modernity in Irish Composition', *Irish Studies Review*, 26/3 (May 2018), 347–60: 353.

⁸ Gareth Cox, 'The bar of Legitimacy? Serialism in Ireland' in Gareth Cox and Julian Horton (eds.), *Irish Musical Studies 11: Irish Musical Analysis* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 187–201: 201.

⁹ Fitzgerald, 'A Belated Arrival', 355–6.

can instead be viewed as a productive resource.¹⁰ He supports his argument by referencing Benjamin Britten and Peter Maxwell Davies, who treated the renaissance and middle ages as a ‘progressive impetus’ in their music, thus negotiating a similar absence in British compositional history. Such an approach to the past has fuelled the construction of *Aisteach*, a fictional history of an Irish avant-garde curated and edited by Irish composer Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974).¹¹ In collaboration with a handful of Irish artists, musicians, and composers, Walshe created an ‘archive’ of Irish avant-gardists who allegedly lived in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, writing their histories and composing works attributed to them. The creators then published a website that includes articles on the imaginary artists, recordings of their works, and images of their art, among other resources. This essay will demonstrate how *Aisteach*, by including female and LGBTQ figures, creates a more diverse and inclusive history of Irish art and music, which in turn provides a new perspective on both the real historical past and the present musical and political scenes. Moreover, I will argue that in inventing an Irish avant-garde tradition, the *Aisteach* creators evoke alternative memories that fill gaps in their nation’s compositional history, enable future generations of artists in Ireland, and work through their cultural inheritance to reshape and, in some cases, reaffirm conceptions of Irishness.

Genesis of *Aisteach*

Aisteach emerged from *Grúpat*, a sound-art collective consisting of ten alter egos, which Walshe invented between the years 2007 and 2009 (she added an eleventh artist in 2010). Walshe received funding for this venture from the South Dublin County Council at the height of the Celtic Tiger. The alter egos include Turf Boon, a sculptor,

¹⁰ Raymond Deane, ‘Exploding the Continuum: The Utopia of Unbroken Tradition’, *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historical Debate*, Culture in the Republic: Part 2, 4/4 (Dublin: The Ireland Institute, 2005), 100–15: 103.

¹¹ *Aisteach* has been described briefly in Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), and an article by composer and musicologist Rob Casey has examined it through the lens of heritage studies; Rob Casey, ‘*Aisteach*: Jennifer Walshe, Heritage, and the Invention of the Irish Avant-Garde’, *Transposition*, 8 (2019) <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/3110/>. *The Other Irish Tradition*, an anthology featuring experimental writings by Irish authors, contains a brief introduction to *Aisteach* and several entries on fictional Irish artists taken directly from the project; Rob Doyle, *The Other Irish Tradition* (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018). Further information on *Aisteach* can be gleaned from an interview with the composer published as part of a recent book, Franziska Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe. Spiel mit Identitäten* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2017)—the only extensive work on Walshe’s music to date—as well as several media articles.

sound artist, and musician who creates art using found objects (such as his Kuscheltiermarimbaphon, a marimba composed of stuffed animals); Violetta Mahon, a recluse who builds holy grottoes ‘in fields, along roads, and [in] various rural and urban landscapes’;¹² and the Dowager Marchylove, a drag queen interested in the sounds of the world around her who is an alter ego of another made-up artist, Niall Quinlan.¹³ Information about these figures is available on Walshe’s website, milker.org, which she designed to look like a ‘fake corporation’ with different departments in which one can find her compositions.¹⁴ This website functions as another way in which she constructs and presents an alternate identity.

A year after the commission for *Grúpat* ended, Walshe curated an exhibition at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York called *Irish Need Not Apply*, for which she invented Pádraig Mac Giolla Mhuire (1924–92), who was allegedly an early practitioner of drone music. For this exhibition, Walshe also displayed ceramics that she claimed were used by Robert Boyle (1627–91), an actual Irish chemist, for alchemical experiments. She also said they were on loan from the National Museum of Ireland. The concept for Mac Giolla Mhuire came about during a conversation Walshe had with Tony Conrad, a composer and violinist who performed drone music with La Monte Young in the Theatre of Eternal Music, which was founded in New York City in 1962. Walshe and Conrad were discussing drone music and its contested origins, when she wittily claimed the practice could have started in Ireland.¹⁵

Irish Need Not Apply marked the first time Walshe created artists from the past. As she notes, ‘[I]n that show ... I started exhibiting works that played with the idea of created history’.¹⁶ While *Grúpat* is also a fictional history because Walshe had to imagine the backgrounds of its artists, *Aisteach* is different because all its members lived and worked exclusively in the past. *Aisteach* artists also differ from those in *Grúpat* because, in Walshe’s view, they function as distinct personae; conversely, the *Grúpat* artists, all born within five years of Walshe, represent her contemporary alter

¹² Jennifer Walshe, *Violetta Mahon*, <http://milker.org/violettamahon/>.

¹³ Jennifer Walshe, *The Dowager Marchylove*, <http://milker.org/thedowagermarchylove/>.

¹⁴ Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 118.

¹⁵ Louise Gray, ‘Jennifer Walshe Spins a Fine Tale’, <https://www.musicworks.ca/featured-article/profile/jennifer-walshe-spins-fine-tale/>. Mac Giolla Mhuire would later be entered into *Aisteach*.

¹⁶ Barry Mc Hugh, ‘Making History: Jennifer Walshe’, <https://paintingintext.com/2018/10/18/making-history-jennifer-walshe/>.

egos with whom she could have worked and whom she could have befriended when she was growing up (if they existed).¹⁷

Walshe revealed another future member of *Aisteach* in August 2011, when she exhibited work by Caoimhín Breathnach at the Roscommon Arts Centre, alongside art by *Grúpat* members Turf Boon and Freya Birren. Walshe had recently bought a home in Knockvicar, County Roscommon, when Breathnach, she said, ‘sort of started happening in [her] head’.¹⁸ The fictional artist supposedly created ‘subliminal tapes’, for which he recorded sounds onto cassettes, ‘before subjecting the tapes to a wide range of physical processes, such as burying, burning or encasing them in various materials such as velvet, paper or moss’.¹⁹ These tapes were allegedly found in a cottage in Knockvicar, the same town to which Walshe moved, after his death in 2009. In September 2012, Walshe collaborated with composer and improviser Tomomo Adachi, composer Alessandro Bosetti, and artist and poet Cia Rinne for a concert in Berlin sponsored by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). This concert, entitled *MAVOtek*, traced connections between MAVO, a real Japanese Dadaist group active from 1923 to 1925, and, according to the programme note, ‘European Dada, especially Irish Dada’.²⁰ Before her performance, Walshe presented a lecture about the Irish Dadaists, a group she had recently invented. The Irish Dadaists, active from c1920 to 1922, were also known as the Guinness Dadaists, Walshe explained, because the three most active members of the collective, Dermot O’Reilly, Kevin Leeson, and Brian Sheridan, worked for the Guinness brewery in Dublin. These men created drawings and sculptures, held performance events, and composed sound poetry using the Irish alphabet, which Walshe performed after her talk.

¹⁷ McHugh, ‘Making History’. Eldritch Priest has analysed the relationship between Walshe and her *Grúpat* characters as navigating the interstices between fiction and reality, arguing that ‘*Grúpat* is as real and as meaningful as Thomas Mann’s Adrian *Leverkühn* is insofar as the respective fictional quantities of each excite (incite) discourse in a bid to capture some kind of difference’. Eldritch Priest, *Boring Formless Nonsense* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 210.

¹⁸ Mc Hugh, ‘Making History’.

¹⁹ Jennifer Walshe (ed.), *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde* (Dublin: Milker Corporation and the Aisteach Foundation, 2015), 105.

²⁰ Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, ‘berliner künstler-programm des daad’. berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/veranstaltungen_druck.php?id=729.

Overview of *Aisteach*

The climax of Walshe's historical output arrived in 2015, when she and several collaborators released the first works under the auspices of *Aisteach*. Walshe and some of her collaborators marked the launch by performing selections of music by *Aisteach* composers at The Little Museum of Dublin in January 2015. Walshe's collaborators were Irish and Irish-based artists from different backgrounds, including academia, music, sculpture, film, knitting, sound art, and literature, who were all engaged with avant-garde disciplines in some way. Walshe encouraged the collaborators to engage with the 'idea of Irishness', but otherwise gave them creative license.²¹ As she explains:

[T]he brief was, it can begin in the 19th century, has to end by 1985, and we had a huge spreadsheet online. If somebody wrote the Dadaists, they put it, ... so that we didn't get ten articles that all overlapped. But other than that, I just wanted people to feel very, very free.²²

Written in musicological or journalistic styles, the articles on *Aisteach*'s website provide background information on these figures and present arguments about their significance. All imaginary figures in this release of *Aisteach* are artists, except for Chancey Briggs (1892–1970), a philanthropist who sponsored unusual events such as 'an all-male silent performance of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* in the foyer of Cork Opera House in 1956'.²³ On the website, one can sort the entries by themes, such as 'Traditional Music', 'The West', 'Vocal', and 'Feminism'. The fake artists covered a wide range of avant-garde disciplines, such as noise music, electronic music, Fluxism, Minimalism, Surrealism, Futurism, indeterminacy, and Dadaism. In some cases, *Aisteach* creators knew the artists and disciplines they wanted to create and researched to determine where they could develop them. In other cases, *Aisteach* creators scanned the history of Ireland and found ideas they then fleshed out. All the figures were invented, except for Reverend Joseph Garvan Digges (1858–1933), who is considered the father of Irish beekeeping.²⁴ Figures invented at this point included Sr. Anselme O'Ceallaigh (1940–88), a composer and conductor who performed drones on the organ that she considered 'a form of contemplative prayer';²⁵ Billie Hennessy (1882–1929), a

²¹ Casey, 'Aisteach'.

²² Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 132.

²³ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 111.

²⁴ 'Mohill Connections for Father of Irish Beekeeping', *Leitrim Observer* (18 July 2012), <https://www.leitrimobserver.ie/news/farming-news/82666/Mohill-connections-for-Father-of-Irish.html>. Tom Carr, 'Blast From the Past', <https://www.irishbeekeepersassociation.com/blast-from-the-past.html>.

²⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 116.

painter and composer who used the concept of automatic writing to create her work;²⁶ and Zaftig Giolla (1906–59), a traditional fiddle player and composer who combined field recordings of marshes and bogs in Galway with electro-mechanical sounds produced by a theremin and intonarumori ‘noise box’.²⁷ The collective also released a book, which contains all the materials from the website except for the recordings, mounted exhibitions, and produced concerts. Both the website and book contain a disclaimer confessing the project is fictional. The website’s disclaimer is located under the ‘About Aisteach’ tab, and the book’s disclaimer is in the foreword. Walshe cites *UbuWeb*, a digital archive of real avant-gardists, as a significant inspiration for the design of *Aisteach*’s website.²⁸

Aisteach continues to expand as more people contribute to it. The most recent exhibition, called *The Worlding*, occurred in Sligo in September 2018, introducing more fictional artists into Irish history. These artists include a ‘nun who teaches a bird how to sing’;²⁹ Gobnait Sheehan (1901–58), an artist and filmmaker who transported arms for the First Cork Brigade of the IRA during the Irish War of Independence;³⁰ and Philippa Byrne/Áine Ní Dhomhnaill (1902–?), an Irish-American writer best known for her play *Galatea’s Manners* (1936), in which ‘a mad scientist creates an artificial woman—who, because she was created as a fully-formed adult in the lab, has not been socially conditioned to defer to men or tiptoe around their egos’.³¹ Part of *Aisteach*’s disclaimer—‘If you feel there’s something we missed, something you want to have happened and would like to bring into being, please let us know’—reflects the expansive nature of the project. *Aisteach* thus acts as an open call to rewrite Ireland’s cultural history.

After *Aisteach* publishes the sources on these Irish avant-garde artists, they take on lives of their own. In 2017, Julia Douhin and Phillipa Stafford, who are based in Australia, designed a performance on a beach of Tasmania inspired by the work of

²⁶ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 103.

²⁷ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 4.

²⁸ Jennifer Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqbCcvuB21s&t=1493s&pbjreload=10>.

²⁹ Mc Hugh, ‘Making History’.

³⁰ Doireann Ní Ghríofa, ‘Gobnait Sheehan’ in Jennifer Walshe (ed.), *Lives of the Irish Avant-Garde*, vol. I (Dublin: Aisteach Foundation, 2018), 1–14.

³¹ Jack Fennell, ‘Philippa Byrne/Áine Ní Dhomhnaill’ in Jennifer Walshe (ed.), *Lives of the Irish Avant-Garde*, vol. II (Dublin: Aisteach Foundation, 2018), 1–10.

radio operator, composer, and sound artist Róisín Madigan O'Reilly as part of their Sisters Akousmatica radio project.³² At least one website has written about *Aisteach* art as if it were real.³³ Also, an Irish broadcaster contacted Walshe about the Guinness Dadaists and then planned on completing a documentary about them with her.³⁴ More recently, Tom Roseingrave made a radio documentary that presents the *Aisteach* artists as real historical figures, supporting his case by interviewing living contemporary creators, including Alice Maher and Kevin Barry, about their alleged encounters with the imaginary *Aisteach* artists.³⁵

***Aisteach's* desire to change the history of Irish art and music in modernity**

In a similar way to Eco, Walshe believes people in Ireland must have created unusual art or thought of doing so, but their cultural or physical context did not provide them with the necessary opportunities: 'It was happening all the time, but a lot of this stuff was lost. Or it was found in a suitcase and half of it had rotted away in the Irish damp'.³⁶ Although it is unlikely these *Aisteach* artists could have existed because of historical conditions in Ireland throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'the impossibility of determining whether what we see could really have happened', writes Giovanna Zapperi in her feminist analysis of contemporary art employing archival documents', opens up a liminal space between documentation and desire that engages the reader's imagination'.³⁷

The driving force behind *Aisteach* is a desire to rewrite Ireland's past. This desire, which 'mediates the relationship between past, present and future', addresses the absences and gaps in Irish music history, constructing 'alternative forms of knowledge'.³⁸ In a literal sense, *Aisteach* rewrites history by writing through previous

³² Mc Hugh, 'Making History'. Julia Douhin and Phillipa Stafford, 'Waves are Waves', <http://www.sistersakousmatica.org/locate/waves-are-waves/>.

³³ *Stair na hÉireann | History of Ireland*, <https://stairnaheireann.net/2016/02/08/roisin-madigan-oreilly/>.

³⁴ Gray, 'Jennifer Walshe'.

³⁵ 'Stranger Than We Thought | The Lyric Feature', Tom Roseingrave (producer), first broadcast 29 March 2020, RTÉ lyric fm, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/lyric/21742160>.

³⁶ Ian Maleney, 'A Droning in the Eire: Jennifer Walshe on the Irish Avant-Garde' <https://thequietus.com/articles/17777-jennifer-walshe-aisteach-foundation-irish-avant-garde-interview>.

³⁷ Giovanna Zapperi, 'Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art—Feminist Perspectives', *Feminist Review*, 105 (2013), 21–47: 33.

³⁸ Zapperi, 'Woman's Reappearance', 27.

literature. As Walshe explains, in conceptual poetry ‘they talk about writing through a text, and I imagined I was writing through *Modern Music* by Paul Griffiths’.³⁹ In rewriting the past, the *Aisteach* creators build a national tradition of artists with whom they can connect. Reflecting on her relationship with these figures, Walshe says:

My feeling is that these should be parallel histories that should exist. I need them to exist because they justify my existence as an artist. It makes sense to me that these people were my ancestors.⁴⁰

Walshe even claims actual kinship with the *Aisteach* artist, Caoimhín Breathnach, whose name translates as Kevin Walshe. When audiences in Ireland ask her if she is related to him, she tells them he is her great-uncle. Walshe emphasizes the significance of this relationship by calling him ‘the persona in *Aisteach* that’s closest to [her]’, saying he fulfils her desire for a link to Irishness that is ‘strange’ and ‘working with outsider culture’.⁴¹ With *Aisteach*, then, Walshe not only invents a tradition, but also rewrites her own past.

The construction of *Aisteach*

When Walshe was growing up in Ireland in the 1980s, she was introduced to a number of contemporary composers through a series of articles in *The Sunday Times*. She recalls being fascinated by La Monte Young; however, none of his music was readily available to her, and she had no opportunity to hear such work in Ireland at the time. Instead of acting as a hinderance, this absence became Walshe’s path to creative imagining:

I remember reading about La Monte Young, and him putting somebody inside a double bass during a piece, and what his music sounded like, and these crazy frequency proportions and installations that lasted forever in his Tribeca loft. And I’ve since been to the Tribeca loft ... and seen him perform, but to me there was a magic in the imagination of what that music sounded like.⁴²

³⁹ Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 131.

⁴⁰ Gray, ‘Jennifer Walshe’.

⁴¹ Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories’. In one interview, Walshe said, ‘*Aisteach* introduced me to strange dead weirdos who I’ve viewed as my great uncles and aunts, and great-great granddaddies and grandmammies artistically’. Mc Hugh, ‘Making History’.

⁴² *Arena*, ‘Historical Documents of the Irish Avant Garde edited by Jennifer Walshe: Interview with Abie Philbin Bowman’, first broadcast 1 April 2015, RTÉ Radio 1, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/radio1/20756882>.

What Walshe imagined was actually music by herself, which sounded very different to the music by Young the article described.

Aisteach constructs itself through such experience. The archive, Walshe says, has ‘to do with this imaginative space that opens up in people’s heads, which computers can help create but they can’t access’.⁴³ At one exhibition featuring a supposed ancient stone circle from Knockvicar and alchemical apparatuses from invented experiments attributed to Robert Boyle, both of which Walshe claimed were on loan from the National Museum of Ireland, audience members approached Walshe and shared stories they imagined about the work on display. The art fascinated them as the Young article fascinated Walshe.⁴⁴

Aisteach creates imaginative realms by researching history and then determining how avant-garde artists could have emerged from it. As Walshe has commented:

The whole thing with *Aisteach* was that there was no way to go back and just say okay these things happen[ed]. We had to go back and look at history. It was like looking at a tarmac carpark and [thinking] there’s a tiny crack there, maybe a seed could just land in that crack and there be just enough dirt that that seed could grow into a plant.

To illustrate how this works in practice, in one case, the creators located a genuine newspaper article on alleged black mass sites in Northern Ireland during the Troubles—an account the British government fabricated, and printed and sold in Northern Ireland to discourage fighting—and used it to imagine a musical story; they invented the Kilbride and Malone Duo, noise musicians appropriate for the aesthetic of this supposed black mass site, and situated them in this fictive context, thus filling in an absence in Irish compositional history. As Walshe says, the aim was to ‘find pieces of reality that smack of surreality... And then trying to make pieces of fiction that we buff enough so that they feel like they could be real’.⁴⁵

In its imaginative design, *Aisteach* participates in an alternative Irish tradition that includes works by Laurence Sterne, Beckett, and Joyce. Most influential for *Aisteach*, though, is Flann O’Brien.⁴⁶ Walshe has lauded him as *Aisteach*’s ‘great spiritual ancestor’; he is ‘a given condition. You absorb it as if it’s in the water, growing up in

⁴³ Jack Chuter, ‘Interview: Jennifer Walshe’ <https://www.attnmagazine.co.uk/features/9159>.

⁴⁴ Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories’.

⁴⁵ Casey, ‘*Aisteach*’.

⁴⁶ Flann O’Brien was a pseudonym. The man’s legal name was Brian O’Nolan.

Ireland'.⁴⁷ Because of O'Brien, she says, working with multiple identities is an 'instinctual way of working' for her.⁴⁸ The *Aisteach* disclaimer even says the creators 'like to think Flann O'Brien would have approved' of the archive.⁴⁹ O'Brien wrote several novels, including *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), his widely-acknowledged masterpiece, and from 1940 to 1966, penned a column called 'Cruiskeen Lawn' for *The Irish Times* under several pseudonyms, the most prominent of which was Myles Na Gopaleen, Irish for 'Myles of the Ponies'.⁵⁰ In 'Cruiskeen Lawn', O'Brien enacted witty dialogues between his multiple personas and wrote commentaries and stories that satirized Irish culture.⁵¹ Many of his articles took current events as starting points for his digressions into fantasy. One can view his column as a model for *Aisteach* because of the way it presented imaginative stories through an official, public platform;⁵² the manner in which it combined reality and fiction, evoking a simultaneous impression of foreignness and familiarity; and how it employed creative personas.

In a homage to its 'great spiritual ancestor', *Aisteach* includes a made-up article attributed to Flann O'Brien, writing under his pseudonym Myles Na Gopaleen for 'Cruiskeen Lawn'.⁵³ The article, which imitates Na Gopaleen's style, describes the lives and works of four made-up Irish Dadaists. Jim Paddy O'Mackitty composed perplexing poems that could have been sound-poetry; Oisín O'Dubhghaill was known for performance-based art targeting civil servants on their way to and from work in Dublin (O'Brien himself could have been one of these fictive targets because he worked as a civil servant in the same city); Brian Bealaithe painted off-colour

⁴⁷ 'In Conversation: Jennifer Walshe & Rob Doyle', Irish Composers, uploaded 15 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkoWFZrPIdU>.

⁴⁸ Gray, 'Jennifer Walshe'.

⁴⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, xi.

⁵⁰ The 'Na Gopaleen' pen name comes from Dion Boucicault's play *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), which is itself an adaption of a novel by Gerald Griffin called *The Collegians* (1829). At times, Niall Montgomery and Niall Sheridan contributed to 'Cruiskeen Lawn' under the pseudonym as well. Christine O'Neill (ed.), *Niall Montgomery Dublinman. Selected Writings Introduced by Christine O'Neill* (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2015), 92.

⁵¹ Maleney, 'A Droning In The Eire'.

⁵² *Aisteach* designs itself as an open-access archive, and 'Cruiskeen Lawn' was published in one of the most influential national newspapers.

⁵³ 'In Conversation: Jennifer Walshe & Rob Doyle'. This article only appears in the *Aisteach* book. It is likely that *Aisteach* affiliates itself with Flann O'Brien's journalistic work and not his novels because the latter are more stringently modernist and hence more difficult to assimilate.

shamrocks, platonic forms, and spiders; and Helmut O’Cinnéide tried ‘to raise and speak to the spirits of dinosaurs’, which was ‘frowned upon’ by society.⁵⁴ ‘Na Gopaleen’ accounts for the obscurity of these artists by explaining that little or none of their output survives. He also demonstrates the effects of the environments in which these men worked (three lived in Ireland, the fourth in Algiers). Institutions associated with the establishment brushed these artists aside; O’Cinnéide’s posthumous play was banned from performance, and one newspaper wrote that ‘as for [O’Mackitty’s] paintings, why bother discussing them at all?’⁵⁵ The article could indicate that an avant-garde tradition never stood a chance of success in the hostile environment of Ireland. In another interpretation, one could read it as succumbing to an oft-repeated historical narrative of failure in the historicization of Irish art and music. This potential problem runs throughout *Aisteach*, which exaggerates actual historical conditions in Ireland, assuming they would have thwarted an avant-garde musical tradition, when in reality this tradition did not exist primarily because of the lack of necessary infrastructures. Furthermore, in claiming that censors from the Department of Defence shut down the imaginary underground concert series Dunne’s *Dérives*—hosted in the backroom of one of Dublin’s first gay bars, Bartley Dunne’s, in December 1964—after they ‘accidentally picked up the thread of its existence’, and that the Royal Irish Academy of Music fired a made-up professor named Theresa Flynn in 1968, after she destroyed a grand piano ‘with a blunt hammer’ as part of her performance of John Cage’s *0’00’’* (1962) in the main hall of the RIAM, *Aisteach* extrapolates the censorship of film and literature in Ireland to cover music as well.⁵⁶ This decision could be interpreted as a way of giving music greater prestige by making it important enough, or enough of a threat to those in power, to make them restrict it. While this depiction of history is understandable because the contemporary artists believe they do not have a tradition with which they can engage, it imparts a misleading impression of the Irish past and obscures any real sense of the Irish art and music that was created, potentially discouraging a healthy investigation of the artistic and musical contributions to cultural heritage in Ireland in the 1800s and 1900s.

Scarcity of resources and the role of the internet

Aisteach opens up imaginative space by referring to a scarcity of resources on the fake Irish artists. The only extant resources from the Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers are ‘a

⁵⁴ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 127.

⁵⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 127.

⁵⁶ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 8, 21.

collection of postcards’;⁵⁷ none of the early films by Gobnait Sheehan survived a fire in 1923;⁵⁸ Stephen Graham presents ‘the only concrete documentary evidence that survives of [the Keening Women’s Alliance’s] activities’;⁵⁹ and the best-known play by Philippa Byrne is ‘the only one to have been preserved’.⁶⁰ These scarcities invite audiences to imagine how other works by these artists could have sounded or looked. The paucity of materials therefore acts as a benefit, just as the absence of an avant-garde tradition in Ireland served as a trigger for *Aisteach*. In this way, the project is a by-product of the world before internet access, when people could not easily obtain recordings and needed to imagine what music sounded like, and is also an oblique commentary on how increased access to music provided by the internet has paradoxically led to a decreased engagement with it. Audiences today only need to complete a quick search online to find music, and they feel less of an imperative to do so because they can access it at any point. Because of the internet, there is also much less of a need to attend concerts and listen to radio broadcasts.

Although *Aisteach* reveals its fake nature, each entry does not include the disclaimer. An online user could therefore read or skim an article on an artist, listen to some of their music, and then leave the website with the false belief that they existed. *Aisteach* exploits this type of cursory consumption through its design. Most of the articles are less than 1,000 words, are written in short paragraphs, and contain images that can engage readers. Online users might perceive some of the other articles as too long or academic and might be impelled to stop reading.⁶¹

As a result, there has already been some dissemination of information about the fictive artists as if they were real. Stair na hÉireann, an Irish history blog, wrote a post about Madigan O’Reilly in February 2016.⁶² The post, which is very close in content to the original article on the composer, lists *Aisteach* as its source; however, the author did not specify that Madigan O’Reilly never existed. Other bloggers in turn shared the

⁵⁷ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 65.

⁵⁸ Ní Ghríofa, ‘Gobnait Sheehan’.

⁵⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 15.

⁶⁰ Fennell, ‘Philippa Byrne’.

⁶¹ Accessing online content on one’s phone has especially contributed to such practices.

⁶² Every year since 2018, the same blog has re-published the content from its original post on 21 January to commemorate the birthday of Madigan O’Reilly. *Stair na hÉireann | History or Ireland*, <https://stairnaheireann.net/2020/01/21/otd-in-1903-birth-of-roisin-madigan-oreilly-in-dublin-at-aged-13-she-became-the-youngest-member-of-cumann-na-mban-3/>.

post, and social media users accessed, liked, and shared it. In creating an archive that seems authentic as a medium for disseminating fake knowledge, *Aisteach* obliquely argues that one should question and inspect online sources. Commenting on the validity of information on the internet, Walshe says:

I would hope we are becoming more used to the idea that we go online, and we might not necessarily trust the sources of news we are getting, because there was Sheryl Sandberg and Jack Dorsey testifying to the United States Congress about Russian actors having influence, these Russian ads that have been on Facebook to try to sway the election, to sow deception.⁶³

Walshe herself has urged her students to investigate the agendas and disclaimers of websites.⁶⁴ One of her students once wrote about a *Grúpat* character—the Irish-Japanese artist Ukeoirn O’Connor—as if he were real, saying where and when he was born without specifying or perhaps realizing he never actually existed.⁶⁵

***Aisteach* and authenticity**

The construction of every archive involves an array of selection processes that reveal the biases and subjectivities of those who are deciding what to include, and what to exclude. Because of this ‘metacultural process of selection’,⁶⁶ every archive is vested with power, ‘whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize’.⁶⁷ Despite its productive aims, *Aisteach*’s archival design also grants it its own power to privilege and to marginalize different historical narratives.

Aisteach engages with the archival convention of authenticity by situating its artists in the real past and by designing itself to look like an archive through the inclusion of ephemera, scores, images, letters, and other resources. The project thus subverts the authenticity and trust inherent in archives; situates the archive as a medium for cultural investigation; questions how an archive is constructed; defies the inauthenticity that it establishes in its disclaimer; prompts audiences to consider the historical conditions in Ireland that thwarted the creation and development of this

⁶³ Mc Hugh, ‘Making History’.

⁶⁴ *Arena*, ‘Historical Documents of the Irish Avant Garde: Interview with Abie Philbin Bowman’.

⁶⁵ *Arena*, ‘Historical Documents of the Irish Avant Garde: Interview with Abie Philbin Bowman’.

⁶⁶ Pablo Alonso Gonzalez, ‘From a Given to a Construct: Heritage as a Commons’, *Cultural Studies* 28/3 (2014), 359–90: 369.

⁶⁷ Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, ‘Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory’, *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 1–19: 13.

avant-garde tradition; and opens up spaces for audiences to imagine realistic artists and works. Although *Aisteach* authenticates itself, anyone with a working knowledge of Irish history would find aspects of it risible and unbelievable.

Many of the *Aisteach* entries contain bibliographies, footnotes, and/or endnotes, which can invoke a feeling of trust in the unsuspecting reader. The entry on Sinéad and Fiachra Ó Laoire references Dr. Barry Walken, a fictional musicologist who supposedly wrote a paper on these siblings in 1988, stimulating interest in their work.⁶⁸ Teresa Flynn was allegedly quoted in Terence Brown's real book *Ireland: a Social and Cultural History 1922–1985*, justifying her performance of Cage's *0'00"* as a 'homage to the student demonstrations of May 1968'.⁶⁹ Flynn's quote connects her to a wider historical context, yet also underscores that such demonstrations did not actually occur in Ireland. Her supposed inclusion in Brown's text confronts the paucity of Irish art musicians in social and cultural histories as well.⁷⁰ *Aisteach* claims *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* described Ultan O'Farrell, the uilleann piper known for performing drones that lasted about 45 minutes, as an early practitioner of drone music in the nation.⁷¹ This inclusion could be read as Walshe's response to her search for avant-garde artists in Irish history because when she checked this encyclopaedia, she could not find such figures in it.⁷²

A common thread running throughout *Aisteach* is the connection between the fictive artists and the real avant-garde. This relationship situates the *Aisteach* figures in broader historical contexts, shows how they could have affected real avant-gardists, and conflicts with actual Irish history, in which musicians did not extensively engage with the avant-garde until the 1960s. Pauline Oliveros apparently cited Ultan O'Farrell as an influence in a 1972 interview;⁷³ the Kilbride and Malone Duo allegedly played with John Zorn and Lydia Lunch in New York and Boston and were featured in films by 'maverick 'no-wave' Irish film-maker Vivienne Dick' after emigrating to America in

⁶⁸ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 111.

⁶⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 8.

⁷⁰ The recent four-volume *Cambridge History of Ireland*, for example, does not contain any reference to art music in Ireland. Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vols. I–IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷¹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 131–2.

⁷² Casey, 'Aisteach'.

⁷³ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 131.

the mid-1970s;⁷⁴ and Máirtín O’Heaney supposedly corresponded with George Brecht about a collection of ‘sound schemas’ by himself and fellow Irish artists.⁷⁵ The author of the entry on O’Heaney claims these sound schemas ‘suggest a burgeoning Fluxus-influenced experimental composition scene in Ireland’.⁷⁶

It is perhaps unsurprising that Cage appears several times in the archive, given his significance in experimental music. The American composer inspired public performances by the Keening Women’s Alliance and indirectly connected to Andrew Hunt (1860–1946), a hedge-school teacher whose musical practice incorporated elements of occultism and proto-Fluxism. Erik Satie influenced Hunt, who owned a score of *Trois Sonneries de la Rose+Croix* (1892) and dedicated his *Poem for Kettle, Mantel and Table* (1918) to Satie.⁷⁷ Hunt’s music, in turn, influenced Henry Cowell, who allegedly referenced its ‘pioneering Spirit’ in a letter to the Irish poet John Varian in 1917.⁷⁸ *Aisteach* also claims that Cowell owned copies of Hunt’s *Automatic Music-Making* (1893), *Poem for Kettle, Mantel and Table*, and *Whhhsst!* (1931). In 1933, Cowell tutored John Cage, ‘whose meditative and open-ended approach to sound’, the article claims, ‘was perhaps foreshadowed by Hunt’s pieces, most especially *Whhhsst!*’,⁷⁹ which is for a singer who extemporizes a ‘one-note hieratic vocalization interspersed with long periods of silence using the word “Whhhsst.”’.⁸⁰ The article thus positions Hunt along a linear axis of composers who developed experimental music, offering him as a proto-Cage and increasing the impact of Irish culture and Irishness in the international avant-garde.

Aisteach inspects several examples of real avant-gardists visiting Ireland and imagines how their trips could have affected or involved the fake Irish artists. These connections allow *Aisteach* to create almost historically plausible accounts. In 1937, Andrew Cullinane, an Achill-based musician and dramaturgist who incorporated elements of surrealism into his practice, allegedly travelled with Antonin Artaud, a French dramatist who in fact came to Ireland ‘to plant an elaborate walking staff ...

⁷⁴ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 112.

⁷⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 77.

⁷⁶ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 77.

⁷⁷ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 138.

⁷⁸ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 138.

⁷⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 139.

⁸⁰ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 139.

into the base of Croagh Patrick'.⁸¹ The author of the article claims Artaud had a direct influence on Cullinane's works such as *Garçons condamnés à carboniser (Boys Condemned to Burn)* (1937), a play he allegedly wrote in response to a true story about the tragic deaths of ten young men from Achill in a fire that broke out in a bothy where they were sleeping in Kirkintilloch, Scotland on 16 September 1937.⁸² By inserting Cullinane into the actual account of Artaud's visit, *Aisteach* imagines how Artaud could have affected artists in Ireland at the time. Furthermore, because Artaud's real actions seem unreal, *Aisteach* creates even more confusion in the reader and argues that Irish history contains strange elements that could have triggered alternative art.

Another example of a visit by a real avant-gardist occurred in 1979, when Cage travelled to Ireland to record sounds that Joyce described in *Finnegans Wake*. After collecting these sounds, Cage arranged them in the order they appear in the novel and added a live accompaniment by traditional Irish musicians. The composer called the resulting piece *Roaratorio* (1979). The article on the Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers claims the pseudonyms of these fake artists appear in pencil on the back of photos from Cage's visit, thus implying they had some effect on Cage.⁸³

Aisteach imagines connections between the invented avant-garde artists. The archive thus situates these figures in a national tradition. Such relations between fictional artists mirror how O'Brien treated his pen names in his column for *The Irish Times*; he imagined personas and then invented interactions between them. The Keening Women's Alliance apparently used a text that is 'believed to be extracted from Zaftig Giolla's *Eyre Square Encyclical*'⁸⁴ and was rumoured to have had two performances at Dunne's *Dérives* in 1963.⁸⁵ Andrew Hunt called Billie Hennessy a 'True Gnosister of the Art' in a diary entry from 1919.⁸⁶ Chancey Briggs sponsored artist retreats on Achill that were inspired by Cullinane's theatrical experimentation.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 87.

⁸² Ranging from 13 to 23 years old, the young men were seasonal emigrants who worked as potato harvesters in Scotland. Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 89–91.

⁸³ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 65.

⁸⁴ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 25.

⁸⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 16.

⁸⁶ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 138.

⁸⁷ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 11.

These connections prompt audiences to imagine a world where these artists affected each other.

The authors of the *Aisteach* articles, aware of the imaginary figures, wrote comparisons between them that contribute to the impression of historical authenticity. The author of the article on Hunt traces an intersection between Hunt and Hennessey, who employed ‘similar compositional approaches’ and drew inspiration from Satie’s music and ‘resolute individualism’.⁸⁸ Cullinane, Majella Munro argues, did not experience ‘the extreme condemnation with which other avant-garde interventions, such as those of Chancey Briggs, were met’.⁸⁹ Digges’s unusual realization of *The Honeysuckle & The Bee*, a song found in the first edition of *The Irish Bee Journal*, which he edited, is ‘hypnotic and drone-like and bears some similarities to the much later works of Sr Anselme O’Ceallaigh’.⁹⁰ These intertextual connections bind the articles in *Aisteach* together and reinforce the impression that this tradition existed.

Musical examination

Walshe believes official institutions have historically favoured and funded precisely notated instrumental works.⁹¹ The *Aisteach* catalogue, in response, privileges non-traditional methods of notation and improvised music (it does not include any traditionally notated scores among its resources), generally lacks complexity, and leaves out several major strands of avant-garde music, including serialism, in its many forms and stages; New Complexity; spectralism; the Manchester School; collage music; and polystylism. Given the current omission of several avant-garde musical genres, one wonders whether the project could be too restrictive to critique Irish artistic modernity effectively. The limits in *Aisteach*’s scope could also make it difficult for contemporary composers who engage with the omitted genres to connect with this alternative history. The project’s open design, which allows modern artists to contribute what they would have liked to have happened in the Irish past, could

⁸⁸ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 137–8.

⁸⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 99.

⁹⁰ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 71.

⁹¹ Casey, ‘*Aisteach*’. In one interview, Walshe commented: ‘[Y]oung composers are told that the path to success is winning competitions and getting performances by big-name ensembles. So they trawl through Gaudeamus Foundation news or whatever, and all that is available to them are competitions for pieces which are 10–12 minutes long, for flute, oboe, violin and piano or some such ensemble, and everyone knows that if you were to submit a non-traditional score you would not have a hope’. James Saunders (ed.), ‘Jennifer Walshe’ in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 343–52: 348.

provide a way to address these potential issues.⁹² On the other hand, Walshe and her collaborators deliberately chose to write compositions that they attribute to the *Aisteach* artists in styles that establish previous links to the traditions with which they currently affiliate, finding their artistic ancestors by fabricating them. Whatever genres or styles did not interest them were consequently left out of the collection. To imagine and develop the musical voices of the fake artists, *Aisteach* creators wore masks that allowed them to communicate their positions on the historical conditions in Ireland that they believe disenabled the creation of an avant-garde tradition, thus supporting Oscar Wilde's dictum that, 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth'.⁹³

Recordings of music allegedly by the fictional artists add a further layer to the project. In some cases, recordings supposedly capture performances by the *Aisteach* artists. *Aisteach* creators corroborate this claim by manipulating their recordings. For instance, they designed a recording of a performance allegedly by Ultan O'Farrell—the uilleann piper who played long, uninterrupted drones—to sound like it was recorded on wax cylinders in 1910.⁹⁴ In other cases, *Aisteach* presents performances by contemporary musicians who have 'rediscovered' the work.

The music in *Aisteach* groups into different avant-garde disciplines. Some pieces fall into a Fluxist school. These include Andrew Black's *Caoineadh AB* (1953), a lament printed on palm-sized cards that instruct the performer to create shapes and images with an instrument;⁹⁵ Caoimhín Breathnach's *Song Roll 5* (1984), aleatoric music

⁹² Of course, although *Aisteach* declares itself an open archive—the disclaimer invites audiences to submit their ideas to Walshe—in reality, Walshe guided the curation process by including friends and colleagues who would contribute works broadly considered 'experimental'. Therefore, it is possible that there are strict limits to the level of openness within the developing archive that will continue to restrict it to the experimental wing of the avant-garde tradition.

⁹³ At the launch of *Aisteach* on 31 January 2015, Nick Roth quoted these lines before performing a piece. Richard Ellman (ed.), *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 389. The creators also used masks in writing the articles on the fake artists. Some pseudonyms are Dr. Leopold Robartes, ostensibly an academic whose surname could refer to Michael Robartes, a recurring Yeats character involved in the realm of the occult; Sloan Ravenscroft, a blogger for a radio station in New Jersey; and Julian A Dalton, a journalist for *The Irish Times*. Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 29, 73, 134.

⁹⁴ Walshe refers to this process as 'trickery in post-production'. *Arena*, 'Historical Documents of the Irish Avant Garde: Interview with Abie Philbin Bowman'.

⁹⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 38.

realized through a graphic score notated on a piano roll;⁹⁶ and Andrew Hunt's *Automatic Music Making* (1893), which tells the performer to focus on a 'magical image' and then 'let the [eternal] music play'.⁹⁷

A few other works fit into a Dadaist category. Examples are four sound poems allegedly by the Irish Dadaists, but in reality by Walshe, included in a track called *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde Volume 1: Dada* (1921). Three of these pieces are for electronics and voice; the fourth is for voice alone. In the first, a singer chants over a sonic backdrop comprised of electronic hums, tics, and grinding noises reminiscent of overtones produced by a saxophone or oboe; fast and repeating textual fragments alternate with a recurring chant in the second; the third combines electronic scratches, a woman speaking indecipherable words, and a tune that sounds like a folk song; and the fourth uses standard gestures such as rising and falling scales that mimic speech patterns. Walshe invented these fake artists because of the absence of Dadaism in Irish history and the importance the genre has held in her development as a composer. Walshe's decision to depict these Dadaists as Guinness employees creates an international appeal that plays off the stereotype linking the company to Irishness. Walshe's grandfather even worked for Guinness, which strengthens her affiliation with these artists she invents. Her presentation of the article on the Guinness Dadaists at a public discussion with the Irish author Rob Doyle in 2016 possibly reflects her predilection for this artistic group.⁹⁸

One can label other works as 'noise music'. In *The Death of King Rí-Rá* (1910), attributed to Sinéad and Fiachra Ó Laoire but actually by Walshe, performers strike their bows on the strings of prepared instruments called 'ruaillebuailles' to create 'subtones, undertones, and scratch tones'.⁹⁹ Giolla allegedly composed *Prismatic Sounds* (1958), an 'electric bog piece'.¹⁰⁰ A recorded excerpt of this piece on the *Aisteach* website consists of sounds that he ostensibly recorded in a bog near his home in Galway and a melodic passage played on a theremin.

Several works fall into a minimalist school. Walshe has suggested a link between drone music, a subgenre of Minimalism, and the Irish language. From an etymologist she learned there are several Irish words for different types of droning. Walshe 'really

⁹⁶ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 109.

⁹⁷ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 136.

⁹⁸ 'In Conversation: Jennifer Walshe & Rob Doyle'.

⁹⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 110–11.

¹⁰⁰ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 4.

loved' 'dordán' because it connects etymologically to the Irish mythological heroine Deirdre.

I think [drone is] the core [of the early Irish avant-garde], because you have the uilleann pipes and you have these drones, so it seems completely natural that you'd get rid of all the diddly-eye bit. You just sort of hose that off so you just have this core of the drone that's in there.¹⁰¹

In *Virtue IV* for organ by Sr. Anselme O'Ceallaigh, a wall of sound expands over a single drone, growing in magnitude and intensity as the composition adds more pitches. In the recording attributed to Ultan O'Farrell, the uilleann piper plays a single, continuous drone for seven-and-a-half minutes. In this recording, *Aisteach* omits the melodic material in the uilleann pipes, leaving behind only the drone; it uses a traditional form of Irish culture—traditional music, which carries connotations of a more essentialist national identity—and alters it to invent an avant-garde discipline. There is thus a deliberate incongruity between the materials *Aisteach* uses and the products it creates; the materials represent older, stereotypical elements of Irish culture that the products subvert, thereby moulding alternative versions of Irish history and expression that broaden conceptions of Irishness in art. It is therefore also possible to say this avant-garde tradition arose from the established normative tradition in Ireland.

Other examples in the *Aisteach* catalogue that support this interpretation include a performance by the Guinness Dadaists in which Kevin Leeson created a wall hanging made from barrel braces in front of which Dermot O'Reilly placed 'a pile of potatoes' that he stood on to perform, 'wearing a green jacket which he had twisted out of shape with wire';¹⁰² the meetings of The Keening Women's Alliance followed a performance schedule that included a solo introit and a 'wordless section of unloosed keening from all in attendance', demonstrating a feminist and politicized weaponization of traditional Irish culture;¹⁰³ and *Transubstantiate* (1975), in which the Kilkenny Engagists dressed as priests, bishops, and nuns and performed various acts that criticized the influence of the Catholic church in Ireland (one performer stripped naked and cut himself in the thigh with a crucifix, another masturbated 'while using a set of rosary beads', and a third 'stuffed pieces of turf and crushed Communion wafers into her vagina').¹⁰⁴ A duo playing tin whistles 'in unorthodox keys' and with 'non-standard

¹⁰¹ Maleney, 'A Droning In The Eire'.

¹⁰² Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 122.

¹⁰³ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 15–16.

¹⁰⁴ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 125.

playing techniques’ accompanied these acts with dissonant distortions of musical selections from the orders of the mass.¹⁰⁵ In the first, third, and fourth excerpts from a CD of music by Mac Giolla Mhuire that was allegedly released by Radió Telefís Éireann in 2015 (the CD never actually existed, the ‘excerpts’ were created for the purpose of this *Aisteach* entry), flurries of dances whirl in a tin whistle over sonorous drones in the uilleann pipes. These distorted dance tunes also demonstrate how *Aisteach* bends traditional elements of Irish culture to develop its alternative national tradition.¹⁰⁶ In parodying the insular Irish past, *Aisteach* reimagines the relationship Irish artists hold with their collective history, functioning as a way for them to deal with their heritage. ‘If we are going to exoticise, let’s exoticise ourselves for our own ends’, Walshe says.¹⁰⁷

Such a transformation of Irishness is apparent in how several *Aisteach* artists use the Irish language, as well. These artists did not engage with the language for nostalgic reasons; instead, they employed it as an anti-sentimental device that fashions alternative expressions of national identity. The Guinness Dadaists worked with Irish for political reasons; they were not ‘looking to folk culture for a sense of identity’, rather they ‘used Irish as a medium’ that they ‘sought to weaponize’.¹⁰⁸ Madigan O’Reilly translated *Ursonate* (1932) by Kurt Schwitters into Irish. The title of her translation *Os Ard*—which translates as ‘Out Loud’—emphasized ‘her political interest in making the Irish language once again the dominant sound in Irish public life’.¹⁰⁹

In other cases, *Aisteach* uses the Irish language to target Irish audiences. The Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers operated under ‘pseudonyms thought to be anagrams of Nationalist Irish ballads including: *Oró Sé do Bheatha* ‘*Bhaile* (a rebel song popularized by nationalist poet Padraic Pearse) and *Amhrán na bhFiann* (*The Soldier’s*

¹⁰⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 125. The *Aisteach* website includes recordings of the ‘Introit’, ‘Gloria’, and ‘Alleluia’, which comprise the first three movements of the work.

¹⁰⁶ For real compositions that place Irish traditional music in an avant-garde context, see *Exultation* (1919) and *The Lilt of the Reel* (1928), by Henry Cowell. Axel Klein has argued that Cowell was the only modernist composer with ties to Irishness before the Cold War. Axel Klein, ‘How Ireland Came to Shape Musical Modernism’, paper read to the Ninth Annual Conference of the Society of Musicology in Ireland on 25 June 2011, 1–5, <https://www.axelklein.de/academic-papers/>.

¹⁰⁷ Casey, ‘*Aisteach*’.

¹⁰⁸ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 122.

¹⁰⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 55. Walshe performed *Ursonate* in a concert she curated during her fellowship at the Schloss Solitude. Saunders, ‘Jennifer Walshe’, 347.

Song; an Irish Volunteers anthem).¹¹⁰ *Amhrán na bhFiann* is not just the anthem of the Irish Volunteers; it is the anthem of the modern nation. Irish audiences know *Oró Sé do Bheatha* ‘*Bhaile*’ much better as a tune they learned and sang in primary school. Because they know these modern contexts, Irish audiences would pick up on these cultural references. Without this knowledge, non-Irish audiences do not perceive the strangeness and risibility of the project. Similarly, when audiences proficient or fluent in Irish hear the title word of the archive (*Aisteach* translates as ‘strange’), they would immediately know that something is ‘slightly afoot’.¹¹¹ Non-Irish audiences miss this trigger, and the strangeness therefore remains hidden. When reading about Fiachra and Sinéad Ó Laoire and their ‘ruaillebuailles’—experimental instruments with which they played *The Death of King Rí Rá* (1910)—those familiar with the Irish language would also pick up on the reference to ‘rí rá agus ruaille buaille’, a colloquialism meaning ‘hubbub and mayhem’, and would thus understand the joke.¹¹² Similarly, such audiences would also perceive the parody of *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde Volume 1: Dada* (1921), in which Walshe satirizes the tendency of the Irish language to adopt English words by Gaelicizing them.¹¹³ For instance, although there is a distinct term for ‘mineral water’ in Irish, Walshe sings these words in English at the top of one musical phrase, amidst Irish words and nonsense syllables that sound ‘Irish’, an act that also alludes to the macaronic nature of much Irish song.

While non-Irish audiences can access *Aisteach*, these examples engage with the Irish language so that certain audiences can pick up on insider references to Irish identity and culture. There is thus an impression that the *Aisteach* creators are attempting to figure out what a distinctly Irish artistic tradition could be, that the medium of the archive itself is Irishness, and that this history could have only happened in Ireland. This rootedness in a sense of place answers Walshe’s call for Irish contemporary compositions different than those by composers from other countries:

[I]f you were to go to a concert of Irish new music, a lot of the time you wouldn’t be able to tell that Irish people wrote it, as opposed to German people or American people. It all is this sort of common lingua franca of new music. I’m interested in, well, what happens if you can tell it apart? Because what happens if there’s something weird in the Irish DNA of it that infects it.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 65.

¹¹¹ Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories’.

¹¹² Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 110–11.

¹¹³ The technical term for this practice is *Béarlachas*.

¹¹⁴ Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 130.

Reimagining a more diverse artistic history in Ireland

Aisteach's insertion of female and LGBTQ artists into Irish history reflects the creators' concerns over contemporary representation and curation in classical music. As Walshe explains:

One thing that *Aisteach* tries to talk about is, who gets to curate? Who gets to choose what an artistic canon is and why? What do we say is worthy, and if we are making a combination of Irish music from the last hundred years, who should be in there? Who are the people making those choices and why are they in there? And with *Aisteach*, in a way we just said, 'hey, we're going to make those choices by just making it up!' Because we realized a lot of the people who would be represented (and are represented) within *Aisteach*, those kinds of people *wouldn't have been represented*.¹¹⁵

Aisteach thus confronts *Composing the Island*, a 100-year retrospective of Irish art music from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that featured a much greater percentage of works by men than women in its programmes.¹¹⁶ In response to criticism from a movement led by several Irish female composers, notably Siobhán Cleary and Jane Deasy, the festival stated that 'a retrospective of the 21st century will look very different' and they could not 'rewrite history'.¹¹⁷ Eventually, the festival added a piano recital featuring seven works by women. This programme included Walshe's *becher* (2008); before the concert was added, Walshe did not feature in the festival at all, despite her successes abroad. In an article published on the last day of the festival, Walshe said, 'That's when the true history is written, as a generation of girls don't pursue their dreams because they are constantly getting the message, whether subconsciously or consciously, that their music is not valued as much as music by boys'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Mc Hugh, 'Making History'. Italics in original.

¹¹⁶ Out of the 158 compositions in the programme, 135 were by men and 23 by women. The distribution was about the same for living composers, with 74 by men and 17 by women. Mark Fitzgerald, 'Composing Equality', *Enclave Review* 16 (2018): 13–15; Darragh Kelly, 'Composing the Feminists' <https://www.tn2magazine.ie/composing-the-feminists/>.

¹¹⁷ Fitzgerald, 'Composing Equality'. This backlash culminated in the formation of *Sounding the Feminists*, which secured a five-year partnership running from 2018–22 with The National Concert Hall. Backed by €100,000 in funds, this joint venture has resulted in several initiatives, including a Female Commissioning Scheme that selected Walshe to write a new work and a Female Composer Series featuring compositions from the Baroque to the present. Adrian Smith, 'How Sounding the Feminists Put Music and Gender in the Spotlight', *The Journal of Music*, <https://journalofmusic.com/focus/how-sounding-feminists-put-music-and-gender-spotlight>.

¹¹⁸ Kelly, 'Composing the Feminists'.

Inventing the Past, Reimagining the Future: Remembrance of Irish History in *Aisteach*

In its invention of a more diverse history, *Aisteach* reimagines the importance of Irish female and LGBTQ people in the nation's artistic history. The project claims for example that Madigan O'Reilly and her husband used 2RN radio equipment in the 1920s to conduct illegal experiments that allegedly affected works by Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Lord Dunsany, thereby situating an Irish female composer in a broader literary context and offering a feminist slant on history.¹¹⁹ Such a fictionalized past also provides role models that can enable contemporary and future generations of Irish artists, underscoring the power of archivists in constructing cultural memory. Walshe has reflected on the impact of role models, saying:

Whether it's an Indian kid who wants to be a fashion designer, or an Afro-Caribbean kid who wants to be a circuit bending free improviser, or a kid from a working-class estate that wants to be a lawyer, all these kids need to see role models which make them feel those possibilities are open to them, that those paths are available.¹²⁰

This future-oriented mission relates to Terry Cook's argument that 'appraisal occurs primarily today on the records of yesterday to create a past for tomorrow'.¹²¹ As Griselda Pollock writes, 'What is included [in the archive] shapes forever what we think we were and hence what we might become'.¹²²

One could argue, however, that *Aisteach* does not fully accomplish its main objectives because it omits any artist with non-western heritage. With the exception of Madigan O'Reilly, whose mother was born in Germany, it also omits any figure with non-Irish heritage. Even though the percentages of non-white and non-Irish heritage people in Ireland were lower in the 1800s and 1900s than they are today, one questions why *Aisteach* let this historical fact get in the way of inventing a non-white or non-Irish heritage member, especially since the project fabricated and reimagined the past in the other cases. Such an addition could recognize the Irishness of those with ties to other nations. Walshe does so in *Grúpat* through her invention of Ukeoirn O'Connor, a

¹¹⁹ Kelly, 'Composing the Feminists', 61.

¹²⁰ Jack Sheen, 'Interview with Jennifer Walshe' <https://www.ddmmyseries.com/Interview-with-Jennifer-Walshe>.

¹²¹ Terry Cook, 'Remembering the Future, Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory' in Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, (eds.), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays From the Sawyer Seminar* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 169–81: 169.

¹²² Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007), 12.

composer, musician, and improviser who is Irish-Japanese, and Detleva Verens, a sound artist born in Estonia who allegedly moved to Ireland in 2004.¹²³ Audiences of non-white or non-Irish heritage might otherwise find *Aisteach's* history of Irish art unwelcoming or inhospitable because they cannot connect with the ethnicity of anyone in it.

For as much as it projects ahead, *Aisteach* looks back at an unreal past, excavating and organising the private memories of people who never existed. In this institutionalization, *Aisteach* exemplifies Michel Foucault's notion of a counter-memory, a social and political practice of memory formation that conflicts with official historical narratives, mainstream media, and the society of the spectacle by memorializing suppressed, lost, and excluded histories.¹²⁴ Sr. Anselme O'Ceallaigh mainly played her organ compositions 'for herself alone';¹²⁵ journalist Julian A. Dalton pieces together the life of Andrew Black, who was called the Sligo Secret Outsider because he performed his music in a shed generally by himself, through a study of 'scant materials and anecdotes' and interviews;¹²⁶ Stephen Graham allegedly learned about the artistic activities of the underground avant-garde venue Dunne's Dérives through oral testimonies from patrons Clancy Makem,¹²⁷ Thomas McKenna, and Brian Pace;¹²⁸ and Madigan O'Reilly executed solo and unaccompanied Primaudial Language Performances on Great Blasket Ireland and around the Dingle Peninsula.¹²⁹ (Several documents providing evidence for these works are allegedly in her private estate.)¹³⁰ Besides the alleged performances of the Keening Women's Alliance at Dunne's Dérives and Chancey Briggs's rumoured support for the same organization,

¹²³ In the mid-2000s, the Contemporary Music Centre (CMC), the central repository for new music composed in Ireland, conducted several interviews consisting of the same twenty questions with real Irish composers such as James Wilson (1922–2005) and Judith Ring (b. 1976). Supporting the fabrication of Ukeoirn O'Connor as a fictional character, Walshe answered these questions from his perspective. The interview was then published on the website of the CMC. 'What's it like to be Ukeoirn O'Connor?', <https://www.cmc.ie/features/whats-it-be-ukeoirn-oconnor-0>.

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 160.

¹²⁵ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 116.

¹²⁶ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 39.

¹²⁷ This name refers to the folk duo Makem and Clancy, active in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹²⁸ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 19.

¹²⁹ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 59.

¹³⁰ Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 59.

there is not a single direct interaction between the made-up figures and groups, which could emphasize the isolation that they faced as outsider artists in a largely indifferent society in the 1800s and 1900s, as well as reflect the lack of opportunities to collaborate in the economically underdeveloped nation.

In making these private memories public, an archival process that Jacques Derrida views as an 'institutional passage',¹³¹ *Aisteach* affirms Walshe's belief that some people in Ireland must have been creating or thinking about making experimental art; underlines how hegemonic processes of historization in Ireland can overlook and exclude personal memories, especially those of artists like the *Aisteach* figures because of their identities and because their work does not neatly fit within pre-existing narratives and traditional conceptions of Irishness; evokes and reactivates the memories of those who actually lived but were airbrushed out of history; and questions the privileging of an audience in recognising artistic achievement.¹³² *Aisteach* thus attempts to reclaim lost and hidden memories of strange artists in Irish history and re-assert their significance. These acts of retrieval pervading the archive pay homage to these ghosts and evoke a sense of melancholy for a history that never happened, indirectly arguing that the nation lost out on a chance for this artistic history and that the only way to reclaim it is by reimagining it.

History, remembrance, and Irish identity

Walshe's early experiences growing up in Ireland have determined how she has remembered national history: 'I didn't feel that it was an experimental tradition, and I really thought I'm never going to fit in in Ireland'.¹³³ One could therefore argue that *Aisteach* is aimed at her younger self as well as future generations of artists. In fact, when Walshe was creating entries for the project, she imagined she was writing through *Modern Music*, by Paul Griffiths, which she remembers being excited to read

¹³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz (trans.), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

¹³² For a related example, see the *Black Photo Album*, by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, who investigated images commissioned by black working-class and bourgeois families in 1890-1950. Because they did not fit the ideology of African people as 'natives', Ernst Van Alphen argues, these photos were 'excluded from the archives of official knowledge'. Van Alphen, 'The Politics of Exclusion', 123. See also the case of Elizabeth O'Farrell, a nurse photographed at the surrender of the rebel Irish forces on April 29, 1916. In some versions of the image, O'Farrell's boots and skirt have been painted or airbrushed out. For the original photo, see *Forgotten Revolutionaries: Cumann na mBan* <https://www.rte.ie/news/galleries/2014/0328/605105-cumann-na-mban/>.

¹³³ *Cross Currents: Episode 1* <https://www.cmc.ie/features/cross-currents-episode-1>.

in school, but ultimately disappointed by. As she reflects, '[W]hen I wrote through it, it was also about trying to make my eighteen-year old self get excited again'.¹³⁴ It bears mentioning that there was no Irish equivalent to *Modern Music* that Walshe could have read at that time, and even today there is a paucity of material on classical music in Ireland in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Aisteach* can therefore be interpreted as a response to these gaps as well.

Walshe's interest in representing Irish history and in grappling with her national identity can be connected to her experiences abroad, where she has spent considerable time for study and work:

I think there's a timely thing happening now in Irish culture where you do have people, and especially I think, you have people like myself or Donnacha [Dennehy], who were born and raised in Ireland but left and went other places, and came back and left and came back and left, and everybody is trying to figure out, what does it mean to be Irish?¹³⁵

Like Joyce moving away from Ireland and focusing on notions of Irishness in almost all of his work, Walshe's time spent away from the country, paradoxically, has brought her closer to it. Indeed, leaving the nation to gain international perspective has been at the heart of Irish artistic identity, as demonstrated by James Joyce as well as Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, and Eileen Gray, among other well-known figures. Situating itself in this larger creative context, *Aisteach* not only fills in the absence of an Irish musical avant-garde, but also asserts the significance of its alternative tradition in the annals of Irish history.

Timothy Diovanni

TU Dublin Conservatoire

¹³⁴ Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 131.

¹³⁵ Gray, 'Jennifer Walshe'.