

# Consumerism and its competitors -a Dublin sojourn (or, The last city-break of the noughties).

Paul O’Kane September / December 2009

(An abbreviated and illustrated version of this text was recently published on the website of CIRCA the Irish based International Arts Journal at [http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show\\_item.cgi?post\\_id=5143&type=articles&ps=publish.](http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5143&type=articles&ps=publish.))

There are paintings by the Irish modern painter Jack Yeats that feature the smudgy rush of the modern crowd in rather murky colours all his own. By chance, returning from Dublin, I found in a South London flea-market a stylish vintage paperback edition of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* with a cover featuring just such a painting by Yeats. But was there any truth or accuracy in the representations made by those two monuments of Irish modernism, Joyce and Yeats? Did they describe, with any accuracy, their moment, their life, their times, the *feel* of their environment in the way we might continue to strive to achieve?

No proof remains of time as it passes other than in artifacts and descriptions, in the novel, the photograph or painting, the newspaper archive, the archaeological museum, the wrinkling skin and unreliable memories of the elderly, and of course in the graveyard, such as Joyce described in the ‘Hades’ chapter of *Ulysses*. And so, this is all we trust, to believe that there is and was such a thing *as* the past, in order to have an image against which and with which we attempt to build a future, taking the past as an unlikely record collection, a scratched and warped miscellany that we mix and

remix to provide the soundtrack for the present. In the process certain events become repetitious loops, well-worn grooves or tracks conveniently jumped-over, while certain events or artifacts are raised to special, even divine status. In Dublin you can join a queue of international tourists, pay 10 Euros (currently equivalent to £10) and, and, after a tour of the grounds, glimpse of ‘The Book of Kells’, a magnificently illuminated pre-modern tome, demonstrating a marriage of art’s extraordinary responsibility for care and consideration with the devout servitude found at the extremes of Christian faith. Certain novels, paintings, films or photographs, a particular diary, a lock of hair or item of clothing might be singled out for special attention in the search to believe we know what the past was really like, and yet, even the most animate and apparently accurate of these records –the cinematic archive perhaps- soon acquires a patina of nostalgia, incongruity and anachronism which endears it to us only as that very charm simultaneously undermines its verity by compromising our critical faculty.

Modernists like Joyce and Yeats went out on a limb to tell us how it is, audaciously refusing sedentary academic procedures and inventing their own forms and styles in order to ‘cut-to-the-chase’ and get to the truth of Dublin life in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But like us, they were surely haunted by the sense that there *is* no ‘how it is’, if only because the modern artist’s gifts are so consciously subject to a peculiar vision and willingly misled by the vicissitudes of a chosen medium so that, along with the self, typewriters and oil paints have their say in the matter, interrupting and informing any grand human endeavour to accurately describe reality.

I certainly don’t mean to compete with great figures like Joyce and Yeats, but I have

recently returned from a brief, first visit to Dublin with a reel of swirling images unprocessed in my mind and want to use this empirical experience as the basis for a meditation on our present economy, our cities, our relationship to history, modernism, postmodernism and post-post modernism. The fact that this little sojourn took place amid an almighty fall -a collapse of confidence in an economic boom with which we had become worryingly familiar for a decade, and during which many new socio-economic and techno-social phenomena have emerged, tempted me to title this 'The Last City-Break'. But the 'Sojourn' of my present title refers both to my actual journey and to the journey this paper will take, meditating and stumbling through the various images, attempting to assemble them into a useful whole. As with any collection of memories, some assert themselves more energetically than others while some of those that in future will seem most important may have presently escaped my attention, and yet, I suspect, all are relevant and valuable, as every glimpse of experience contains a potential significance if considered with a questioning mind and a will to utilise it for the purposes of interpretation and representation. Once subject to the enhancing effects of memory, every glimpse is capable of temporarily colouring-in our vague outline of the world in a way that is more ingratiating than presumptuously professing any knowledge of it. When we wield memory as both our process and our medium we are unable to deny our seduction by the charms of its mediating effects. By comparison, political, economic, or scientific thought that tries to view the present world as a menu of ills to be cured by some not-too-distant future merely deludes itself with its presumptuous and prejudicial sense of right and righteousness. Its deluded belief in accuracy and objectivity speaks in denial of an ego whose real and underlying interest is always visible behind any idealistic scenery thrown up to convince both speaker and audience.

By comparison, memory is a vehicle that sidelines and sacrifices self, opening up more promising, less linear, vertical or dialectical pathways for thought as the immensity and mystery of passed time immerses understanding in something both sensual and sublime. In short, memory is an episteme, a special means by which to comprehend, value and orient the world. But the crucial point -after this formal digression- is that memory is an important part of the method I will use in what follows.

I can concur with Yeats that Dublin is indeed a crowded place, and with Joyce that I *am* indeed one of that crowd, embroiled and entangled with city, self and others, my own experience occasionally blurring the boundaries between. The packed tram on which I rode one afternoon crashed a little later into a bus, seriously injuring several and illustrating the slightly ludicrous rush of intersecting lives that, perhaps more than anything else, defines our experience of modern cities. The September weather in Dublin also confirmed Yeats' murky palette who's expressive dashes of myriad colours sometimes resolve themselves as an overall muddy grey, like the outcome of a naive expressionism that goes too far in asserting the artist's freedom to test the limits of self and medium. The city is a built environment, with its limits and its suburbs, its name, its streets and buildings, but it is also the crowd, of shoppers, workers and tourists, peppered with a few high officials and lowly beggars who, in their respective ways remain marginal to the workaday majority. Like cold islands in the rushing sea of people, timeless stone seats of government, law, religion, education and culture resist, with varying success, the curious and desiring mass that is today democratically empowered to access almost every space, however sacred or profane.

It should be noted, for the record, that in the late Summer of 2009 Dublin is the most expensive city I have ever visited, and the intimidation of my paltry UK pound by the rampant Irish Euro, quickly becomes as significant an aspect of the environment as the grey sky and chilly air pervading the city. A man in an unknown city feels anew and for real the withering wind of everyday economics. Far from his hard-won havens and secret finds, whereby an affordable routine has been pinched back from the demanding city, the stranger abroad fears most to eat or sleep lest these basic needs annihilate his budget and make a mockery of his dream of 'relaxing' and 'enjoying' that strictly modern notion of 'a holiday'. Thus, a traveler may see, not only a city's famous views with fresh eyes, but the fundamental truth of a life rendered unpalatably, unacceptably economic.

The city is colonized with brands and logos ('brandscape' is a newly coined term this summer), shop-fronts have converted Georgian streets into malls that promise everything. All is possible, available, visible, just within reach and yet, to me at least, so expensive that I soon feel like Gulliver in a tale Swift omitted from his collection of 'Travels' as I pass through a land where locals deal in an enormous currency incompatible with my own small change. The only solution is to look for alternatives, competitors to consumerism's sport, to seek out sanctuary from the prevailing demand and tease out some grace and favour from the dizzy fever of mutual exploitation to which Yeats' modern crowd have sacrificed themselves in post-modernity.

Consumerism's own history and myth will tell you that it was after the great

economic collapse of 1929 that the 'powers that be' -banks, governments and industrialists- needed and agreed to expand the hitherto strictly bourgeois realm of consumerism to include and invite the working classes as a means by which to re-stimulate economies and re-boot crashed capitalism. Thus mere producers were magically transformed into co-consumers, driven on to market by concocted desires arising around them in the simultaneous birth of mass advertising. Something similar happened 50 years later when, in 1979, Thatcherism and Reagonomics further extended the bourgeois paradise so that working people would be pleased to buy publicly owned homes, pay for publicly funded educations and would celebrate this image of respectable prosperity with Latte's and Paninis indulged *al fresco* on gum-strewn pavements far-removed from the stylish influence of the Mediterranean sun. At the same time, previously sacred, 'ring-fenced' institutions -such as education, health and culture- were forced to participate in a similarly business-like manner, judged according to the 'objective criteria' of market performance, profitability and client-satisfaction (gleaned by dubious research methods) and managed by incoming experts who, rather than being sensitive and sagacious regarding the specialist enterprise they were required to lead were informed by generic and homogenizing business philosophy.

Perhaps this is enough to define what consumerism is, to remind us that it is no more but no less than a dominant 'ism' -a philosophy or belief system which currently delimits and determines our social and economic environment, the environment to which today's artists and cultural producers must respond. If we think of the art of the 1930s that could be said to arise in response to the 1929 crash, we might consider the utopian Bauhaus designers, Le Corbusian architects, Russian constructivists,

Futurists, Cubists, Expressionists, Dadaists and Surrealists, Duchamp, Picasso, and we could also consider Hitler's anti-modernist condemnation, as "degenerate", of this wild bunch of largely Left-driven experimenters. But on reflection -and Hitler aside- it is only the *avant garde* of Dadaists, Surrealists and perhaps the unique figure of Duchamp who seem to have truly confronted and engaged with the new issues and fears of the 30s. The other examples cited, developed in one way or another relatively introspective post-Impressionist experiments in form and psychology that had been pursued since the 1880s.

Following the 1979 adjustments made by Thatcher and Reagan it was New York that felt the new paradigm first and hardest, and it was there that the first sense of postmodernism as a symptom of unfettered and unchallenged consumerism was felt most deeply and was most vigorously responded-to by artists. Artists like Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton intelligently walked a new thin line between complicity with and artful critique of their new economic environment, showing, as much as possible, how to rescue the speculative, enquiring and nuanced values of art and the artist from this single-minded tsunami, utilising an *arriere garde* strategy. Blue-collar American democracy had already discouraged post-WW2 artists from perpetuating the European *avant-garde's* role of leading culture by proudly surging forward in blinkered experimentation. And these 80s artists also recognised that strategies developed in the radical, liberal atmosphere of the 60s and 70s had been outnumbered and out-manuevered by forces which would no-longer allow art, culture or just about anything else to oppose or be an alternative to a totalizing vision of a business-like model of the world. Steinbach went shopping, Koons used the savvy he'd acquired working the stock markets (with a precedent in

Gauguin) and recalled the desiring machine of his father's shop window (this precedent from Duchamp), fused with the unabashed embrace of narcissistic consumerism originally tapped by Warhol (the last shaman of American capitalism). In the UK Damien Hirst aped this new model of complicity, but seemingly without the sophistication of his American idols, getting hastily in to bed with the same mogul (Charles Saatchi) who's advertising had helped the reactionary coup that placed blue-rinsed conservatism firmly in power. Hirst pleased himself by pleasing both market and institutions who could use his example to re-stimulate interest in art as a realm of powerful spaces toting intimidating objects.

As one comedian put it at the time, 'today every revolutionary works to a strict budget' and henceforth the artist would even be trained according to the Hirst/Saatchi axis, transforming art schools into quasi-business institutes, churning out market-savvy petit-entrepreneurs and thus efficiently curtailing art's broadest and most speculative ambitions, making it neatly compatible with the tastes and demands of other professions, professionals, consumers and tourists, or whom artists would henceforth provide a humble service.

But that was the 1980s and 90s, here we are in 2009 and the pronouncement that 'Thatcherism is dead' has recently rung in the air. The popular French critic and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud recently visited London with the corresponding - but oddly anachronistic - message that 'Postmodernism is dead'. The UK seems about to slide into an election that will be won more by apathy and default rather than any dynamic or inspiring political force. Meanwhile an atmosphere of cultural relativism and multiculturalism successfully propagated in the past ten years of New Labour

government is rapidly being turned sour, re-interpreted as a zone of dangerous tensions by the significant and barely contested rise in the confidence of the right and its most extreme factions. Consumerism is in question, embarrassed by its irresponsible, credit-driven crashes and crazes, unsure whether to be prudent or spend its way out of crisis. Artists look around, wondering what is their role in all this. Are the arts an alternative after all, something to turn now that all else has failed? Something that *can* still turn when everything else seems set on disastrous tracks? Does it remain, despite all, a space of invention and imagination, subjectivity, idiosyncrasy and irrationality, capable of carving out alternative values? Can it promote an alternative economy, surreptitiously formed within and despite the official economy? Or do the arts simply sink or swim with the rest, going down with the ship, shrugging shoulders and waiting to be bailed out -like the banks- by understanding governments?

As modernity, consumerism, and postmodernity progressed in the world, they were encountered and negotiated by different nations and different cultures at different times and at different speeds. In Dublin you get the sense of a country that has embraced consumerism thankfully, and with an unusual degree of enthusiasm, perhaps because -as one local commentator put it - it provides a 'new religion'. Concurrent with the embracing of the Euro, consumerism provides a means by which Ireland can throw off its repressive and recently roundly discredited religious mores, as well as a way to gleefully sever the historical subservience to the UK and its often baleful influence on Irish economic affairs, so that, having fought the hard and long battle against colonial subjugation for a national Republic, many Irish today prefer to regard themselves as proud 'Europeans' above all. In Dublin, everyone seems swept

up in and swept away by consumerism in a way that serves as a good illustration of the whole phenomenon. Consuming must be quick, almost hysterical. Choice is set before us, but theatrically, focusing our eyes on staged merchandise at the expense of any significant alternative that may lie beyond. We necessarily engage in the drama of choice and yet feel little choice to do otherwise, coerced into arriving at a decision according to the time-frame of the shopping opera. Given ponderous or idiosyncratic degrees of consideration (of the kind that artists might utilise in the slow-moving, painstaking studio environment) consumerism just wouldn't work. The precise pace required of consumerist decision-making is ideally a leisurely activity, perhaps originally influenced by acquisitive *grand tourism* or the delightful aesthetic delectations of the salon back in the days before it was allowed to proliferate among the lower orders. Today the rhythms of shopping all-too-soon lead to congestion, crushes, queues, so that some consumers have even died in a frenzy of shoppers grown desperate about the opening of a new superstore. The rush and crush is now exacerbated by the current loss of commercial confidence; the cornucopia has been exposed as mythic and this religion too is in crisis as the drug wears off and 'retail therapy' no longer keeps human realities at bay.

At times like this the consumers (is that really what we call people?) might need another reason-to-be. 'I shop therefore I am' ran the famous 1980s slogan represented by the artist Barbara Kruger to wittily expose the fact that, under Thatcherism and Reaganomics consumerism had achieved the status of a total world view, a satisfactorily comprehensive philosophy or belief system, albeit one that denied itself by pretending it's totalitarian ambitions were natural -the classic move of hegemony. But what happens if 'I shop therefore I am' and shops are closing down?

Do I too consider closing down? Where are alternatives now when we need them? For a generation now consumerism has haughtily paraded its dog-eat-dog, competitive individualism as a way of life to which any other ism is satirised as naïve, cranky, or 'sad', but is consumerism itself not in need of competitors, and doesn't every dominant force necessarily depend on its other (its 'Barbarians' as Cavafy put it in his eponymous poem) to understand its own identity?

Dublin's magnificent National Gallery of Art is free to enter and -when I visited on a Sunday afternoon in September- not at all crowded. A collection and a city that are both new provide a great opportunity for building knowledge, consolidating and expanding a personal and evolving mosaic of art history. Here you can wander among wood-panelled, neo-classical spaces admiring the accomplishments of a long history of painters. Many fascinate, and for varying reasons, technical or historical. Occasionally, some quirky interest draws me closer to examine certain paintings and I know these shifts and emphases will be different should I come here again. An old-fashioned idea of art as being good for the eyes and the soul seems increasingly confirmed with age, which is perhaps why so many retirement holiday schedules target and prioritise art treasures, filling the world's great museums with Nike-shod 70 year-olds, simultaneously enraptured and drained, contesting the precious space in front of masterpieces with half-asleep South-East Asian teenagers sent on similar whirlwind tours of high culture. A new city and a new collection gives you the chance to see paintings you've heard much about but previously seen only through the diminishing effects of photography. Here, for real, and for the first time, I come to Caravaggio's 'The Taking of Christ', and my growing suspicion concerning how much can be gleaned from looking at photographs of paintings is confirmed. It may

be post-post-modern to say this, but in many cases you must see the 'real thing' to understand why this particular artefact has forged a place for itself in the history of art. And only in art's physical presence might we also learn just what qualities a work of art needs to possess in order to be acknowledged, savoured, and cherished by posterity. Caravaggio's sole contribution to the Dublin collection literally 'outshines' competitors from various centuries represented in the collection, not only because of its truly extraordinary technical prowess and bravado but because it remains such a potent and current political symbol of enduring human concerns. Shortly after seeing it I wrote to a painter friend saying in Johannesburg saying it felt like the most modern and most political artwork in the world today (and that is really something to say to a Soweto-born South African artist).

It would take too long and become too much of a diversion to begin unpicking the current value of the biblical scene composed so idiosyncratically by Caravaggio, but suffice to say that it is difficult to look at 'The Taking Of Christ' and not be reminded of contemporary riot police in their formidable armour and their often brutal responses to popular dissatisfactions with globalising consumerism. The arm of Roman law stretches long across almost the whole painting as the state asserts control over the unruly alternative offered by the disruptive Christ. One belief system is sold-out to another for a few pieces of silver, and the worldly state renews the dominance of a rational mode of managerial governance. Along with Christ - we might feel - the painting represents the 'taking' of all that is precisely *not* measured in economic quantities, and which we thus hold dear.

Proceeding through the National Gallery, the grand halls of pre-modern painting turn to Romanticism and Impressionism with a nice touch from the curators as the grand wood panelling gives way to more modern, white-painted ironwork screens supporting pale blue panels like the skies of a *plein air* Parisian suburb against which the paintings are hung, thus symbolising the early modern escape from the academy and its traditions into the realism of the street and suburb, then away from the crowd too as daring new modern painters ran increasingly towards light itself as a kind of saviour. But here it's only a curious little square painting by Delacroix, depicting the Greek orator Demosthenes, that burns itself into my psyche, perhaps because it illustrates the myth that Demosthenes rehearsed his rhetoric and speeches with gravel in his mouth, and by the noisy sea, so that when he came to speak in the forum freed from these impediments, his mouth would be the most mobile and his voice loudest and clearest of all, reaching out clearly and convincingly above the noise of the crowd.

However apparently conservative the function of galleries and museums might be, and howsoever they are funded, they continue to provide some sense of alternative to the overarching economy. Despite the fashionable proliferation of pricey café's and restaurants in which we are invited to dally just out of sight of the artworks themselves, the peculiar valuation of art, by audience and market, contemporary media and by posterity, remains thankfully mysterious, elusive, disruptive and mercurial, always slightly irrational and beyond the logic of consumerism. At best, we could hope that the recent, populist revolution which has so greatly increased the audience for art, is secretly performing a Bretonian transformation of the mass

consciousness and not -as is often feared- merely popularising art in such a way as to eliminate its most mysterious forces and functions.

Even if much of the paraphernalia is similar, the experience we have in a museum, in front of an archaeological or art historical artefact surely remains an alternative to the experience of shopping. In both cases we are forced to wander, look, pass on from object to object, ('grazing' as some theorists put it) always encouraged by the artful traditions of display, contextualisation, explication and presentation. But even if the museum shop offers numerous affordable mementoes of its treasures in the form of umbrellas, headscarves, pens and mouse-mats, the very fact that what we see in the museum or gallery is beyond our means of acquisition transports it to a higher realm and may serve to bring into question the central value of acquisition that drives our every day *rationale*. Thus, an apparently conservative function, and the longest traditions of art, can be turned radical and disruptive. Meanwhile, the shopping experience, intent on stimulating desire, does not want us to observe and retain its merchandise merely in memory but on the contrary, hopes for its goods to dissipate and be dispersed as rapidly as possible, their primary value is only at the point of sale, and so the apotheosis of the consumable commodities is the perfume which greets visitors to the grandest stores -sometimes sprayed directly onto the arriving customer- and which evaporates as its very *raison d'etre*.

Having digested the National Gallery, followed by the Hugh Lane collection (where you can worship the deified remains of St Francis Bacon's eternally embalmed studio), the Archaeological museum, the orientalist Chester Beatty's Library museum (all free of charge) I found myself dutifully immersed in representations of Irish

political history within a series of disused Jails and military buildings left over from British Imperial rule and often ill-suited to their new function as providers for art, tourism and education. The general design followed by the occupying forces seems to have been a huge exercise yard or parade ground surrounded on four sides by wings in which to house prisoners or soldiers. When these wings are converted into galleries and museums their narrow form means they are unable to avoid producing history as a claustrophobic linear narrative, no matter how inventive the curators try to be with their display devices. One of these buildings is devoted to the National Museum of Modern art which struggles to inspire curators with its long narrow buildings allowing insufficient space to stand back from a painting and curtailing the possibilities offered to curators and installation artists who might hope to use space more inventively. Meanwhile the huge unused expanse of the grim exercise yard outside and below seems to mock all this restriction as if some over-efficient military logic scored a resounding victory over powers of imagination so treasured by the arts.

When the city's crowds and prices overwhelm us, my partner and I take trains out to Howth and Bray marking the limits of public transport and the metropolitan zone at the extremities of Dublin bay. On an airy walk around Howth's circular peninsula you can gain a perspective on the city as a whole. A few cargo ships wait in the uncrowded bay and an occasional ferry heads in the direction of Wales. As we negotiate the rugged path and admire late summer wildlife we also pass the dream homes of Dublin's wealthiest residents, great old baronial manors with 30 rooms or equally spacious but thoroughly neo-modern cubes of minimal glass and wood, all gazing out over tumbling gardens, on across the Irish sea. Perhaps as a symptom of these shifting economic times we occasionally came across homes that are equally impressive but

rendered doubly 'dreamy' in that they are closed-up, windows blinded with rapidly nailed ply, their gardens returning to nature. Such houses will always exert a special power over the human mind, arousing in us some fear or vision of our own body once vacated at some future time by its vital, animate spirits.

At Bray, on the Southern wing of the bay, you can take a bus up to one of the finest monuments to English settlement. 'Powers Court' is a very stately home indeed -or was. Merely to negotiate its drive (unaided by the aristocratic prostheses of a horse, carriage or convertible) takes the best part of half an hour walking in awe of towering beech trees. Its 17<sup>th</sup> century grandeur once featured an enormous Rococo ballroom and the house retains its most famous feature, ornamental gardens, inspired by Versailles, which cleverly frame a slice of the Wicklow mountains beyond, giving a picturesque impression fashionable at the time of their inception, but clearly suggesting that the huge Anglicised estate extends further, laying claim to the depths of the country, optically mastering all that the south-facing windows and terraces behold.

But while the garden remains intact (and can be visited for a price) the interior of the house, after being carefully restored by an expensive ten-year programme, was ravaged by fire on the very night of its unveiling to press and public. The event is explained as 'tragic' and 'unfortunate' but can't avoid attracting conspiracy theories regarding the possible political motivations behind the supposedly accidental immolation of this colonial symbol. Having lain dormant for many years it has been rejuvenated as a shopping mall cleverly installed within the original architectural frame, replete with the compulsory but wholly incongruous escalator installed to keep

up the appearance and maintain the fantasy of department store shopping. Now, instead of moving as an increasingly enlightened group through gracefully reinstated rococo interiors while marvelling at the excessive aesthetic of a privileged past, you hurry about with the acquisitive eye of an individualist, senses numbed by muzak, as huge *SALE* signs draw attention to every home furnishing or fancy foodstuff that might provide you with a bargain. Occasionally you glimpse, from the corner of an eye, that other, silent world beyond the windows where the Euro-empowered public now calmly promenade among gardens originally designed for the entertainment of visiting aristocrats.

The local bus driver will collect you from the gates of Powers Court and, before taking you back through the nearby village and on to the trains at Bray, complete his routine by gunning the bus up into the first of the Wicklow mountains where a little lay-by marks the end of his route and a place where he is compelled to rest for five minutes before turning the bus around and heading back. Here, he spends his downtime informing us that this is the limit of the city, where only intrepid adventurers, hikers with backpacks, usually discharge. To illustrate his point we watch one of our fellow passengers disappearing off up the road as it winds and narrows into the scenery. It's one more way of escaping the crowd and consumerism and even if today's hiker is armed with a pricey GPS navigation system, credit cards and a mobile phone it's reassuring to know that there's still a faint desire for Romanticism, providing a narrow conduit through which to believe there is yet some outside or alternative to the prescribed and predictable programme of experiences provided by what seems such an over-humanised world. Even modernists like Yeats and Joyce foresaw that the sublime no-longer existed 'out there' amid storm and the

wild but somehow within the shapeless scramble and confusion of human existence, here in the confused self and its relation to others similarly compressed by the crush and crash of urban space. Today's escapes and dramas are largely virtual, heavily mediated, and the very desire to escape may have lost its function as we seem increasingly willing to comply with a more limited sense of our possibilities. The neologism 'staycationer', originally conjured by British journalists to describe credit-crunched families afraid to leave their own economic island, is perhaps more broadly applicable to today's citizens as a whole. 'I Stay Therefore I Am' might soon become our philosophical motto in these unadventurous times when technology's nimble mobility has fixed us firmly always in *its* place, ever-ready to attend *its* needs. We work, both at home and at work; we eat, on the move and at table; we correspond from train, plane or automobile as much as from the desk so that the very idea of alternative, escape or vacation has become quaint and old-fashioned. We well know the craving syndrome of checking emails on days-off, sleepless nights or holidays, and in an institutional canteen I recently heard the unsurprising agreement of two colleagues who had had both come home early from their annual fortnight's break because "I think 10 days is enough don't you?" In 1929 and 1979 the solutions to a crisis of capitalism were to bring more of us deeper into the system of commodification and exchange; of competitive individualism and compromised alternatives. In 2009 we seem on the cusp of a similar moment, so how will we fare, and how will artists and cultural producers respond? This is what my Dublin sojourn –probably the last of the noughties' 'city breaks'- makes me wonder.

**END**