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Destabilizing Identity: The Works of Dorothy Cross

Aileen Dowling
University of Central Florida

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DESTABILIZING IDENTITY:
THE WORKS OF DOROTHY CROSS

by

AILEEN O. DOWLING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Art History
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to analyze Dorothy Cross's sculptural, installation, and video works in relation to Ireland's Post-Conflict struggle with its cultural and global identity. Throughout the course of history, Ireland's identity has always been in question, sparking new interest over the last thirty years in producing an Irish identity discerned by "hybridity, multiplicity, and mobility."¹ Declan McGonagle states that the traditional Irish constructs of gender and sexuality were primarily challenged by Dorothy Cross during this period of rapid sociopolitical change.²

Cross consistently deconstructs pre-Christian Mother Ireland and patriarchal Catholic Ireland in her early sculptural works, and ultimately transitions towards communicating a collective identity rooted in loss and desire.³ The constructions of gendered, cultural, and collective identity are dismantled across multiple media throughout Cross's oeuvre, which can be analyzed through a synthesis of poststructuralist, postmodern, and French feminist theory. In evaluating Dorothy Cross's destabilization of identity, I will expand the literature on contemporary Irish art during the nation's turbulent time of globalization, which has been underemphasized in the study of contemporary European art.

¹ Robin Lydenberg, "Contemporary Irish Art on the Move: At Home and Abroad with Dorothy Cross," *Éire-Ireland: a Journal of Irish Studies* 39, no. 3/4 (2004): 145.

² Declan McGonagle, Fintan O'Toole, and Kim Levin, *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political* (London: Merrell Publishers Ltd., 1999): 19.

³ Enrique Juncosa and Sean Kissane, eds, *Dorothy Cross* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2005), 16.

DEDICATIONS

To Kailyn, Jennifer, Emily, and Jerryan— my dearest friends over the last three years, you have shown me the meaning of true friendship.

To Fiona— the greatest sister out there, one of the most passionate individuals I have ever met.

To my parents, Frank and Mary— who provided the most incredible childhood and who offer continual support. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for pushing me to reach higher, go farther, and dream bigger.

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A CHALLENGE TO TRADITIONAL THOUGHT

As one of Ireland's most successful contemporary visual artists, Dorothy Cross has created a space within Irish art that investigates themes relatively untouched previously. Throughout the course of history, Ireland's identity has always been in question, sparking new interest over the last thirty years in producing an Irish identity discerned by "hybridity, multiplicity, and mobility."⁴ Cross embraces this shift in contemporary Ireland by investigating the political, social, and cultural landscape of Ireland through witty and uncanny sculptures, installations, and videos.

This research endeavor focuses on Cross' destabilizing of traditional aspects of identity in Irish culture—the prominence of the mother, the claims of authentic experience, and the collective feelings of death and loss—through postmodern applications of found-object art and performance. This argument concentrates on Cross's early artistic period during the late 1980s and 1990s primarily due to the situation of the visual arts in Ireland. During the 1980s, men were the proponents of contemporary art in the spirit of Expressionism, producing an extremely biased representation of the male perspective and an interest solely in the two-dimensional.⁵ Consequently, Cross directly contrasted this fascination with the canvas and produced works deeply rooted in the misconstructions of gender, nationalism, and collective experience.⁶

In addition, this research implies a variety of theoretical methodologies to examine Cross's work. Contextual analysis is utilized primarily to gain a concise, comprehensive understanding of the unique political and social landscape in Ireland during the early period of Dorothy Cross's

⁴ Lydenberg, "Contemporary Irish Art on the Move, 145.

⁵ Cullen, Fintan, ed, *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 152.

⁶ Tessa Jackson, *even: Dorothy Cross* (Bristol: Arnolofini, 1996), 6.

career. Throughout this thesis, contextual analysis also provides important insight into traditional notions of Irish thought and culture. The majority of this argument relies heavily on the incorporation of theory, whether it be post-structuralism, feminism, or postmodern theory. Each of these theoretical frameworks aid in reading Cross's work, as they each interrogate traditional modes of thought and each provide a basis for exploring *how* and *why* Cross produces engaging, and sometimes controversial, work.

Biography

Dorothy Cross was born in Cork, Ireland in 1956 and received her early artistic training both at home and abroad.⁷ She enrolled in a foundation year at the Crawford School of Art in Cork and continued her education at Leicester Polytechnic in England concentrating in jewelry and 3D design. Shortly thereafter, Cross won a jewelry competition, which funded her post-graduate degree in printmaking at San Francisco Art Institute in California. Cross reflected on her time at San Francisco Art Institute as the first time in her career she was forced to discuss the meaning and implications of her work. Enamored by Samuel Beckett's plays, Cross's work hid behind Beckett for their message and meaning. Once Cross emerged from the shadows of Beckett, she discovered an entire foundation of what excited her about art and thus allowed her to form her own artistic vision.⁸

During her time in the United States, her work openly confronted controversial topics in Irish society, deconstructing the concept of the pre-Christian Mother Ireland and the patriarchal aspect of Catholic Ireland. For her MFA show *Matriarchal* in 1982, Cross created a series of prints

⁷ Robin Lydenberg, *GONE: Site-specific works by Dorothy Cross* (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2005), 11.

⁸ Dorothy Cross in conversation with the author, July 25th, 2016.

depicting various frontal views of the female body. Cross described this series of images as a confrontation with Ireland and its obsession with ‘Mother Ireland.’ While still in San Francisco, Cross created a series of “fetish boxes” entitled *Ireland Boxes*, which were small boxes with a glass face that displayed small clay maps of Ireland, prints of breasts, and other cultural iconography. Within this brief period in San Francisco, Cross managed to challenge long established traditions of femininity and fetish in Irish culture.⁹

Cross remarks on her return to Ireland during the early 1980s as a “dark time”—a nation riddled with internal strife, an economic downturn, and a lack of gender equality.¹⁰ During this time, Cross explored themes surrounding the Catholic Church and the controversial abortion referendum of 1983 in her exhibition of *Contraptions* at the David Hendricks Gallery in 1985.¹¹ *Contraptions* can be considered a foil to the earlier *Matriarchal* series, for Cross discusses the Catholic Church’s strong connection to the phallus as a symbol of power. Cross considers the Church and the phallus as one in the same, since the Church creates its dominance through the “hierarchy of the father.”¹² *Contraptions* makes witty jabs at the Church in an attempt to dismantle its archaic, patriarchal system.

As a multimedia artist examining unexplored areas of Irish culture, Cross quickly began exhibiting throughout Ireland as early as 1988, and by 1991 she was showing internationally with solo exhibitions in London, New York, and Philadelphia. In 1992, Cross was invited to participate in the Edge Biennale in London and Madrid, exhibiting two site-specific installations. Cross

⁹ Patrick T. Murphy and Tom Weir, eds, *Ebb* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1988), 17.

¹⁰ Dorothy Cross in conversation with the author, July 25, 2016.

¹¹ Dorothy Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput Press Ltd, 1998), 200.

¹² Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 18.

became the first woman to represent Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1993, receiving widespread acclaim that propelled her international reputation and her participation in the Istanbul Biennial (1997) and the Liverpool Biennial (1999). Today, her work can be viewed at the Tate Modern, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and other public collections throughout the United States and Europe.¹³

¹³ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 11; 111.

MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD: IRISH WOMEN'S MOVEMENT OF THE 1980s AND 1990s

In the mid-1970s, Ireland experienced rapid sociopolitical change with the development of the women's movement and its introduction into the European Community. From this moment forward, Ireland would set itself on a trajectory that would provide equal opportunities to women, finally granting autonomy in the workforce.¹⁴ This chapter aims to establish how the abrupt acceleration of women's rights during the 1970s and the continuing fight for abortion and divorce during the 1980s and 1990s would establish a generation of women artists, specifically Dorothy Cross, who would engage with the social issues of contemporary Ireland in their often provocative, thought provoking works.

Since the introduction of the Celtic Revival and the post-independent state in the early 20th century, Ireland has grappled with its identity, often stuck in a cultural establishment riddled with conservatism.¹⁵ Many sociopolitical factors influenced Ireland's late interest in improving women's rights. For centuries, Ireland was a "traditional society with strong rural agricultural tradition," resulting in the late industrialization of the 1960s. Consequently, the rise of women's rights came alongside the rise of industrialization as women were able to separate themselves from the traditional, domestic rural lifestyle. Additionally, Ireland's dedication to the Catholic Church strongly shaped the nation's perspective on women's rights, which were very few and far between prior to the 1970s. Catholicism's close relationship to Ireland's sense of nationalism, and ultimately the regulation of women's bodies, can be linked to the conventional notion of Western

¹⁴ Margaret Fines-Davis, *Gender Roles in Ireland: Three decades of attitude change* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

¹⁵ Lydenberg, "Contemporary Irish Art on the Move, 147.

culture's expression of a nation's experience through the female body.¹⁶ The Church became inherently linked with the state, influencing the educational system, the lack of state funded child care, and general attitudes towards major women's rights issues.¹⁷ The Catholic Church played a fundamental role in the lethargic progress of three of the most heavily debated social issues for women: contraception, divorce, and abortion.¹⁸

With Ireland's introduction into the European Union, much of their legislation regarding women required examination and revision. In 1973, Ireland removed the marriage bar which required women to forgo their careers upon marriage. Women as a result were beginning to be treated as equal in the work force, and by 1975, women were afforded equal pay and employment. These rapid developments greatly affected women's freedom and participation in the workforce. As the 1970s came to a close, women were struggling to gain a front on rights issues that were strongly entwined with the church, specifically the right to contraception.¹⁹

Reproductive Rights and the Abortion Referendum of 1983

Contraception was widely embraced by Irish women, regardless of the fervent objection from the Catholic Church who eventually adopted the "bona fide" stance of access to married women only in regards to limiting family growth. The Contraception Act Campaign (CAP) formed in 1976 by Irishwomen United (IWU) incorporated a variety of women's groups and family planning organizations in order to pass legislation surrounding access to contraceptive pills. CAP used both legal and "direct action tactics," such as selling contraceptives illegally and opening a

¹⁶ Geraldine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change: Race, Sex, and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

¹⁷ Pat O'Connor, *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1998), 37.

¹⁸ Fines-Davis, *Gender Roles in Ireland*, 90.

¹⁹ Fines-Davis, *Gender Roles in Ireland*, 5.

stall in Dublin's Dandelion market. With these successful strategies, CAP outlined six main objectives to their campaign which included the legalization of contraception and its fair and legal use for "all those who wish to use them." CAP also outlined methods to improve counseling, education, and training as to benefit the overall understanding of contraceptives and their usages. After an extremely active and rigorous campaign by CAP and other radical feminist organizations, the Family Planning Act, which legalized contraception for married couples only, passed in 1979. The Family Planning Act was a step forward, but it did not meet many of the original demands for "free, public family-planning services." Further legislation would not be introduced until 1985.²⁰

As the radical women's rights movement of the 1970s began to dissolve, women were now upon the ultimate battleground for equality, the 1983 Abortion Referendum. Ireland was now riddled by high unemployment and emigration levels, causing the women's rights movement to downsize its activism. Feminist and lesbian activist Ailbhe Smyth remarked on the ideological shift of the 1980s:

These were to be difficult and demoralizing years, leading many feminist activists to a point of weary disenchantment. In retrospect, the encounters of the 1970s over contraception, rape, equal pay, appeared as mere skirmishes, a phony war, prior to the battles of the 1980s against the serried ranks of church and state, staunch defenders of the faith of our fathers and the myth of motherhood.²¹

Abortion, a historically fundamental social issue for Irish women, propelled to the frontlines of the women's rights movement through an anti-amendment counter movement beginning in 1981. For Irish women, even those previously involved in the women's movement, found abortion an extremely difficult topic to address. Abortion was rarely discussed among friends, and especially

²⁰ Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 143-4.

²¹ Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, 156-8.

not addressed through public speeches and campaigns. At the beginning of the anti-amendment movement, some women thought it would be impossible to establish a political faction that provided the right to openly choose.²² With strong oppositional tactics from the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC), the Catholic Church, and the conservative Fíanna Fáil party, the Abortion Referendum resulted in a “majority of more than two-to-one in favor” with fifty-three percent of the electorate going to the polls. Sixty-six percent voted in favor of the referendum, with the majority of support from rural counties in the nation.²³ The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act, signed into law October 7th of that same year, contained extremely dangerous and ambiguous wording, reading:

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.²⁴

In hindsight, the Anti-Amendment campaign approached the issues rather cautiously. Ultimately, the movement needed to mobilize in a much more organization fashion in order to illicit the ideal, anti-amendment response from the electorate.

Divorce Referendums of 1986 and 1995

The issue of divorce began to transform from the private to the public sphere during the mid- to late-1980s, focusing primarily on public debate and, in some cases, legal action. With the introduction of various talk shows, women spoke out for the first time about traditionally ‘private’ experiences such as abuse and violence. As domestic violence transitioned into the forefront of newly established public discourse, Irish women were now acutely aware of the reality

²² Connolly, *The Irish Women’s Movement*, 160-8.

²³ Connolly, *The Irish Women’s Movement*, 166.

²⁴ Connolly, *The Irish Women’s Movement*, 243.

surrounding the “abuse of male power...by ‘respectable’ men.”²⁵ This newly given attention to abuse and violence afforded Irish women the opportunity to validate their experiences and situate themselves within society as to propel and instigate change. Most women who publicly spoke out were from middle-class educated backgrounds, but the groundwork had been established by women throughout the nation from various socioeconomic backgrounds and ultimately aided in the foundation of a movement that aimed to deconstruct much of the traditional, patriarchal system established in modern Ireland.

The initial divorce referendum in 1986 proposed a “no-fault” divorce, which allowed separation “after five years of marital breakdown.” Initially, support for the referendum was exceptionally positive with over three fifths of the electorate in favor of the new legislation. However, this support quickly reversed due to two prominent factors: the role of the Catholic Church and the economic dependency of married women. The provocative nature of divorce legislation created an imbalance to the traditional familial system that had been established in Ireland for centuries. Women were involved in a strict familial tradition supported by the church and the state, and they often were unemployed or underpaid which created a dependency on the husband. The Catholic Church’s support for the traditional, nuclear family was a driving force, but the dependency of women seemed to be the lynchpin to the ultimate failure of the first referendum. Without legislation in place to secure the safety of and economic stability for newly separated women, the 1986 referendum was left to its own demise. Consequently, the state introduced loose legislation in order to protect women, but this would surely not be enough to ensure the full safety of women and their (possible) children.

²⁵ O’Connor, *Emerging Voices*, 144-6.

Nine years later, a second referendum was introduced to amend the Constitution to allow for divorce. Unlike the previously unsupported 1986 referendum, all political parties and the Church supported the additional legislation to the Constitution. Passed by a slim margin, women could separate from their significant others if they had lived together for at least four years and no reconciliation could be achieved between the two parties.²⁶ The successful introduction of divorce into contemporary Irish society allowed for discourse surrounding the sociopolitical position of women. Irrelevant to the ultimate discussion of the referendum campaign, the well-being of women was now introduced into public discourse, compared to previous issues which only addressed the ideological preferences of the Church and the state.

Reclamation of Women in the Visual Arts

The sociopolitical turmoil surrounding women's rights to contraception, divorce, and abortion in Ireland during the 1980s and 1990s was occurring simultaneously with women's efforts to reject conventional art forms that were overladen with a tradition of art history they were often excluded from. It is important to clarify that these efforts by women artists in Ireland were not isolated, for those in the United Kingdom and the United States were engaging in similar discourse. This shift within women's art practices is reflected in Ireland as well as internationally, as artists were producing more works through "mixed media, installation, video, photography, sculpture, and performance."²⁷ As interest in deconstructing the male-dominated history of art continued to increase, many efforts were made in Ireland to reincorporate women and emphasize their importance to the entire history of Irish art. The role of women in 20th century Irish art has often

²⁶ O'Connor, *Emerging Voices*, 47-8; 146-7.

²⁷ Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 3.

been undermined until recent years, due to the fact that women were the main proponents of modern Irish Art. Artists such as Mainie Jellett, Evie Hone, and Nano Reid were vital to the progression of Irish modernism in the early 20th century with the introduction of cubist abstraction. Deemed “the single greatest force for change in art in Ireland between the two world wars,” Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone would solidify themselves as prominent women artists within traditional Irish art discourse.²⁸ However, the importance of women artists would diminish towards the later-20th century with the retirement of artist May McGuinness from the Irish Exhibition of Living Artists (IELA) in 1970. The organization reorganized into an all-male committee, and the number of women exhibiting dropped from “28 in 1961 to 3 in 1972.”²⁹

Dorothy Cross’s early work directly engaged with sociopolitical topics that were directly related to the Irish women’s rights movement of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly reproductive rights and abortion. In 1982, Cross’s MFA show *Matriarchal* criticized the fetishization of the female body in Irish culture, specifically the nation’s obsession with “Mother Ireland.”³⁰ Three years later in 1985, Cross challenged the 1983 Abortion Referendum with her first solo exhibition *Contraceptions* at David Hendriks Gallery. Cross’s early career establishes how she interacts with complex themes of gender, culture, and the church in both her sculptural and installation works of the 1990s.

In 1987, the National Gallery of Ireland made the first major attempt to re-contextualize Irish women artists with its exhibition *Irish Women Artists: from the Eighteenth Century to the*

²⁸ Eimear O’Connor, ed, *Irish Women Artists, 1800-2009: Familiar but Unknown* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 29-31.

²⁹ O’Connor, ed, *Irish Women Artists*, 33.

³⁰ Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 17.

Present Day by contrasting them against a selection of contemporary women artists. Dorothy Cross was one of the many contemporary women artists juxtaposed against those artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. Cross exhibited three-dimensional forms composed of strong, clean, and precise lines that addressed the issue of place. Inspired by a visit to India, Cross created tall, hard-edged sculptures that intended to represent place, Ireland, and non-place since the viewer cannot reconcile any imagery in the work. *Ireland* is a representation of Ireland without any visual language the viewer can recognize, challenging concepts of identity and nationalism.³¹

The parallels between the women's rights movement and the re-contextualization of women artists in Ireland proves to establish how artists like Dorothy Cross were able to transform political messages into provocative, successful works of art. Cross engaged in many of the exhibitions of the 1980s and 1990s at the National Gallery of Ireland, the Douglas Hyde Gallery, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Her direct engrossment with the controversies of women's rights, specifically abortion, contraception, and the myth of motherhood in her early works creates a powerful political statement in terms of dismantling identity both culturally and gendered within the sociopolitical situation discussed earlier in this chapter.

The inclusion of the women's rights movement in this chapter helps to demonstrate how women were gaining traction on a variety of women's rights issues. However, problems surrounding the traditional mystification of Irish women and the fetishizing of women in Irish culture still require analysis and critique. As Ireland moved from the idyllic 1970s fight for rights, women were provided the opportunity to directly participate with such issues through artistic

³¹ Joan Fowler, "Contemporary women artists: Practices and issues into the future," in *Irish Women Artists: From Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, ed. Elizabeth Mayes et. al. (Dublin: The National Gallery of Ireland and the Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1987), 74.

expression. As a main proponent of challenging traditional Irish discourse, Dorothy Cross utilized conventional iconography, such as the udder, that not only represented Irish culture but also the customary domestic role of married mothers. Along with Cross, women such as Alice Maher, Kathy Prendergast, and Alanna O’Kelly began to question the roles of women in contemporary Irish culture. Collectively, this new generation of contemporary artists were strongly supported by the newly established Irish Museum of Modern Art, who incorporated these women in their provoking travelling exhibition *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political* in 1999.³² With such recognition, Dorothy Cross and her contemporaries expressed their discontent with not only the traditional dialogue surrounding Irish art, but also the representation of women in both Irish art and culture.

³² Declan McGonagle, et al. *Irish Art Now*, 1.

RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

As Cross's artistic perspective strengthened, the writings of French feminists of the 1970s begin to become extremely relevant to her work. "Politique et psychanalyse" and other progressive intellectual groups established post-1968 believed that societal change could not occur without the dismantling of the symbolic order, which in Lacanian terminology refers to "the order instituted within the individual by language" that is ultimately determined by the father figure.³³ Essentially, they believed that the order of the world was not a natural order, rather an order established and enforced by men, relating to Dorothy Cross's belief that the Church is synonymous with the phallus. The writings of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva address the similar outlooks of Cross and these French avant-garde groups, who were aiming to demolish the symbolic order through pulling directly from the order itself.³⁴ In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how Dorothy Cross utilizes traditionally gendered symbols in Irish culture to challenge phallogocentric norms and to reconstruct female identity.

***Ebb* (1988)**

In 1988, Cross held her first major solo exhibition entitled *Ebb* at the Douglas Hyde Gallery. As a pivotal exhibition in Cross's career, *Ebb* confronts the dualism of sexuality by incorporating sexual ambiguity to blur the boundaries between male and female.³⁵ Cross challenges gender norms through an evolution of the psyche, evaluating how men and women are perceived in society as opposed to depicting physical images of the male and female. This fusion

³³ Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds, introduction to *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 32

³⁴ Marks and de Courtivron, eds, introduction, 33.

³⁵ Robin Lydenberg, "Dorothy Cross: Beyond Feminism," *Éire-Ireland: a Journal of Irish Studies* 34 (1999): 212.

of gendered characteristics in *Ebb* holds a uniquely unreal quality, for these found-object sculptures are not loyal to their original time and place. Instead, they adhere to a set of dreams envisioned by Cross, in which multiple levels of interpretation can be discussed.³⁶

Additionally, *Ebb* contains four sculptural pairings that represent ‘male’ and ‘female’ relationships. These partnerships, however, do not reflect strictly male and female, rather they show the masculine aspects of the female alongside the feminine aspects of the male. Tensions can arise in such partnerships, but Cross’s pairing *Mr. and Mrs. Holy Joe*, 1988, depicts the fluid nature of such relationships by essentially demonstrating how both genders are equally important to one another. This interconnection between the masculine and the feminine Cross addresses is referential to Hélène Cixous’s influential 1975 essay “Sorties,” in which she outlines how all binary oppositions in the



Figure 1: Dorothy Cross, *Mr. and Mrs. Holy Joe*, 1988, painted wood, enamel pipe and collar, plaster holy statue hands, muslin, clamp, and hook. 343 x 61 x 81 cm.

universe— activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, father/mother, head/heart, intelligible/sensitive, and logos/pathos— rest on one principal opposition: man/woman. She states that all aspects of human culture, whether it be “art, religion, family, [or] language,” rely and expand on this oppositional system.³⁷ Cixous’s oppositional theory calls into question phallogocentric society’s fascination with a hierarchal system organized by men, and Cross seems to

³⁶ Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 5-6.

³⁷ Hélène Cixous, “Sorties,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 91.

questions many of the same aspects present in patriarchal, Catholic Ireland. Consequently, *Ebb* seeks to confuse the traditional notions of gender, specifically the feminine, in Irish society.³⁸

In *Ebb*, Cross explores the concept of motherhood with her piece *The Mother*. According to Dorothy Cross, “the idea of the mother is something very solid and unmoving and yet that’s half the problem with the mother.”³⁹ *The Mother* is perhaps the most complicated sculpture in *Ebb*, and



Figure 2: Dorothy Cross, *The Mother*, 1988, painted wood, aluminum, sieves, bronze, large bulb, rope, rusty marine hook, tin bath. 232 x 245 x 275 cm.

Cross emphasizes this complexity when she states that *The Mother* “has an aspect of herself that has incredible possibilities, of whimsy and mystery, and madness.”⁴⁰ *The Mother* is composed of an arched center that leads to a diving board on which a small replica of her *Shark Lady in Balldress* sculpture with small bathtub placed below.⁴¹ The replica of her 1988 *Shark Lady in a Balldress* is to be understood as the mother’s child and its placement on the diving board-like structure is intentional and significant. *The Mother* is

unique to the *Ebb* series because she is a single entity, not paired with a masculine counterpart.

Thus, the mother is independent of a life partner and her child is about to become independent

³⁸ Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 13.

³⁹ Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 18.

⁴⁰ Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 20.

⁴¹ Murphy and Weir, eds, *Ebb*, 20.

from her. She is now about to be without her source of identity, her motherhood. However, Cross does not interpret this loss as negative, rather as a physical representation of the strong bond between a mother and her child. The mother is not harboring her child, instead she encourages her child to create its own identity separate from hers.

The Mother brilliantly allows for a variety of interpretations relating to Cross's viewpoint on the mother, ultimately relying on the viewer's perspective. The mother can be seen as sacrificing her identity as a mother in order for her child to create its own in reality, or the mother can be seen as losing the only identity society has allowed her to possess. Regardless of how the viewer chooses to interpret *The Mother*, Cross projects found-objects in such a manner that the viewer is forced to reevaluate their definition of not only the mother, but of female identity in its entirety.

Power House (1991)

In the spirit of unconventionality, Dorothy Cross established her studio in an abandoned electrical plant on Dublin Bay. Cross took up a rather rugged and industrial portion of the plant, the pump house. Other portions of the plant had been leased to filmmakers and businessmen, however Cross decided to challenge herself by dealing with the unheated, untouched pump house. The mental and physical resilience needed to work in such an inhospitable space enhances the thematic exploration Cross would undertake, the power dynamics of men and women.⁴² Cross's sheer singular presence within the previously male populated electrical plant alludes to her confrontation with gender relationships— a woman now presides over a typically male dominated

⁴² Melissa E. Feldman and Patrick T. Murphy, *Dorothy Cross: Power House* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1991): 7.

space. Remnants of male authority linger throughout the plant—stained urinals, books on military strategy, “newspaper clippings of Nazi war veterans, airplane models, a picture of the Virgin Mary”—still remain inside workers’ lockers.⁴³ Cross allowed this space to permeate her work, collecting mementos from the abandoned lockers and transforming signal boxes into sculptural pieces.



Figure 3: Dorothy Cross, *Screen/Ladies Changing Room*, 1991, installation.

Cross makes one of her most gendered statements with her installation piece, *Screen/Ladies Changing Room*, which is composed of an old screen found within the pump house. Cross drilled four pairs of small, eye-level holes through the screen in order for viewers to discover what hides behind. As the viewer peers through, a row of four bronze hardhats nailed to the wall become visible. Hardhats are typically associated with the masculine aspect of manual labor, and Cross plays on this association by placing an erect nipple on the crest of each. As a result, the symbolic

⁴³ Feldman and Murphy, *Power House*, 7; 9.

representation of femininity dominates what was originally deemed masculine. The domination of the nipple could be referential to Ireland's 1973 removal bar, which forced women to quit their jobs upon marriage, for Cross is demonstrating women's ability to hold control in the workplace regardless of their gender or marital status.⁴⁴ This also calls upon the notion of male authority because the hardhat is object used for protection—a quality most men project onto the women in their lives. Cross is making the bold statement that the woman is capable of protecting herself.

In contrast, *Screen/Ladies Changing Room* can come to represent the dilemma of the concept of public versus private spheres that exists within the public realm and the role of desire.⁴⁵ The piece now evolves into a factory changing room, transforming the drilled holes into peepholes. The viewer, who was originally a very passive player, now transforms into an active voyeur, peering through at the unaware women on the other side. Pushed into the corner of the space, the screen and its peepholes insinuate that the erotic and sexualized belong to “secret, intimate places.”⁴⁶ The peepholes are intended to be concealed, often hidden within portions of the psyche. The changing room, often considered a private space for the body, has been become a public theater in which the bronze hardhats become the object of the viewer's gaze.⁴⁷

Virgin Shroud (1993)

In 1990, Cross was invited to visit Norway for the Artscape Nordland Project, where she encountered a cow udder in the form of a sieve hanging behind a door. In pure awe, Cross became

⁴⁴ Fines-Davis, *Gender Roles in Ireland*, 5.

⁴⁵ Juncosa and Kissane, eds, *Dorothy Cross*, 13.

⁴⁶ Juncosa and Kissane, eds, *Dorothy Cross*, 13.

⁴⁷ Juncosa and Kissane, eds, *Dorothy Cross*, 13.

fascinated with the cow as an object utilized outside of its traditional role. Throughout Irish myth, the cow has often been related to “goodness, dependability, [and] domesticity,”



Figure 4: Dorothy Cross, Virgin Shroud, 1993, cowhide, muslin, satin, wood, plaster and iron. 201 x 81 x 120 cm.

dimensional representation by incorporating the one aspect of the cow that is traditionally discarded in the tanning process—the udders.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the *Udder* series proved to be Cross's

specifically connecting the udder to nurturing and suckling.⁴⁸ Cross tackles each of these associations of the cow, ultimately blurring the traditional symbolic convergence of the woman and the cow. Often associated with the land, the cow can become an emblematic representation of woman's connection to the land, fertility, and prosperity. Even in modern culture, the cow is present in the modern woman's life, for she is often deemed anything from a “mad cow” to purely “a cow.”⁴⁹ Many artists in Ireland have attempted to deconstruct the cow, but

Cross goes beyond a two- or three-

⁴⁸ Jackson, ed, *even*, 6-8.

⁴⁹ Róisín O’Gorman, “Caught in the Liminal: Dorothy Cross’s *Udder Series* and Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats...*,” in *Reimagining Ireland: Liminal Borderlands in Irish Literature and Culture*, ed. Dr. Eamon Maher (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2009), 109.

⁵⁰ Lydenberg, “Beyond Feminism,” 220.

most poignant challenge to gendered identities. The udders provoke an automatic questioning of assumptions regarding the male and female, the human and animal, and the private and public.⁵¹

Virgin Shroud, created in 1993, is Cross's most recognizable work from the *Udders* series due to its monumental size and direct allusion to the Virgin Mary and the concept of Mother Ireland. Here, Cross drapes a cow hide over her grandmother's 1914 wedding gown. The anonymous figure faces away from the viewer, prohibiting any reference to the body. Cross deviates from the traditional depiction of the female form in classical art, where the fabric falls sensually to emphasize the breasts and curvaceous female form.⁵² The teats are placed strategically around the head, asserting a new status and ultimately asserting their traditionally neglected beauty.

The concept of Mother Ireland is extremely poignant in this piece, for the mere silhouette of the figure calls for association with the Virgin Queen herself. This direct correlation to the Virgin Mary alludes to the Irish concept of Mother Ireland. With Ireland's separation from England in 1922, Irish culture turned towards an abjection of the body, stripping the woman from her sexual, maternal, and even nurturing nature in order to preserve the nation's morality. Motherhood became idealized and even revered, sparking a strong fascination with the Virgin Mary.⁵³ In his 1933 book *The Old Love of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Ireland*, Reverend James Cassidy exclaims that during this reinvention of the Virgin Mary it echoed "...what must have been a marked devotion of ancient Ireland, devotion of the family to the Mother of the Holy Family."⁵⁴

⁵¹ O'Gorman, "Caught in the Liminal," 107.

⁵² Jackson, ed, *even*, 8.

⁵³ Meaney, *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change*, 4; 10.

⁵⁴ Meaney, *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change*, 13.

During the early 20th century, esteemed Irish writers such as William Butler Yeats and Sean O’Casey had rediscovered their interest in Mother Ireland through the figurative woman “Cathleen Ni Houlihan.”⁵⁵ She is a woman riddled with traditional stereotypes, representing Ireland’s archaic ideas about women’s place within culture as domestic, fertile beings. She is a woman forced to comply with a “sacrificial order,” giving her life and body in the name of the church.⁵⁶ Ultimately, Cathleen is the Virgin Queen and Cross’s use of the shroud makes this allusion all the more fitting. The figure plays a domestic role of anonymity as she is draped with an animal representing the domestic—the cow.

Cross’s allusion to the Virgin Mary also calls upon themes addressed by the French intellectual groups of the 1970s. Julia Kristeva’s book *Stabat Mater* challenges aspects of maternity in Western culture, in which she discusses the “myth of the Virgin Mary” and her representation as a principally non-speaking individual throughout religious texts.⁵⁷ Kristeva highlights that the Virgin Mary primarily appears in the Gospels in relation to Christ’s life and his crucifixion, providing little background on the life of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁸ Cross’s depiction of the Virgin with her back turned to us in anonymity is referential to Kristeva’s argument, for she is concealed and presenting very little of herself for observation. Kristeva also argues that very little is offered of the Virgin’s body, saying: “We are entitled only the ear of the virginal body, the tears, and the breast.”⁵⁹ Cross pushes this image of the Virgin one step further by concealing everything,

⁵⁵ Alston Conley and Jennifer Grinnell, eds, *Re/dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 1997): 11.

⁵⁶ Conley and Grinnell, eds, *Re/dressing Cathleen*, 11.

⁵⁷ Kelly Oliver, introduction to “Maternity, Feminism, and Language,” in *French Feminism Reader* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000): 155-6.

⁵⁸ Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1986), 164.

⁵⁹ Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 172-3.

entitling the viewer to nothing than a non-existent form. Cross could arguably be alluding to a notion Kristeva highlights in *Stabat Mater*, that the Virgin Mary is a being that is impossible for any everyday woman to attain for she must remove all “earthly” condition—i.e. her sexual body.⁶⁰ In the context of Irish culture, the adoption of Kristeva’s theories in relation to Cross’s work seems particularly relevant. Kristeva asserts that throughout the course of Western culture, women have been reduced solely to the maternal body. This results in the abjection, or casting off, of the “woman, the feminine, and the mother” and ultimately strips women of their complex existence.⁶¹ This abjection of the maternal body is reflected in Ireland’s denouncement of the entire feminine body in response to upholding the nation’s morality.

Virginal Shroud can also be analyzed through the deconstruction of the ‘sanctity’ of marriage, especially within the context of the exceedingly religious, patriarchal Irish culture. Professor of English at Boston College, Robin Lydenberg, stresses that the use of both Cross’s grandmother’s wedding gown and the shroud can be seen as “the deadening effect of marriage.” The figure wears a white silk wedding gown, sealing her coming fate as a virgin bride, while she is shrouded with an animal’s body that traditionally denies such an emblem of purity, virginity.⁶² Lydenberg asserts that Cross brilliantly asserts dominance in *Virginal Shroud* through representing the Virgin Queen, the Irish symbol of the feminine ideal, shrouded in cowhide in which its teats came to form a crown of power. This interpretation by Lydenberg holds value in that it aids in establishing the manner in which Cross desires to reform Irish concepts of the woman and her

⁶⁰ Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 181.

⁶¹ Oliver, introduction, 156.

⁶² Lydenberg, “Beyond Feminism,” 224.

‘femininity,’ which according to Cross could come from beyond associations with the domestic and the fertile.

The Motherland Trope

“The motherland trope... in all its guises, is like a pin which connects sexual stereotyping with political and cultural dominance of the Irish” – Clair Wills, 1991⁶³

Throughout her early postgraduate career, Dorothy Cross focused heavily on “Irish cultural and political history” while attempting to dissect the still prominent traditional Irish societal norms.⁶⁴ In Irish culture, the Virgin Mary had become a symbol of the feminine ideal, a woman prided on her domesticity and her repressed sexual nature. As women’s rights gained traction in the 1970s in Ireland, women artists began to dismantle these cultural tropes projected onto women, most notably the “motherland trope” as Clair Wills identifies in her 1991 essay “Contemporary Irish Women Poets: The Privatization of Myth.”⁶⁵ Women, up until this time, were trapped in this notion of nurturing beings in service to the patriarchal society. As women artists began to dominate the Irish art world, this particular concept would be completely dismantled, and Cross would arise as an artist deeply interested in challenging her nation’s cultural norms.

Cross primarily concentrated on the dissection of pre-Christian Mother Ireland, the dismantling oppositional system of gender difference, and the Irish obsession with motherhood. She reclaims Cathleen Ni Houlihan from an early 20th century Irish symbol of the domestic and fertile, transforming Cathleen into a woman brimming with sexuality and eroticism previously repressed by the overbearing, patriarchal Catholic Church. Cross engages with French feminist

⁶³ Meaney, *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change*, 41.

⁶⁴ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 12

⁶⁵ Meaney, *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change*, 41.

discourse in *Ebb* and *Powerhouse* through the emphasis on a binary oppositional system in which women are subservient to men, such as head/heart, intelligible/sensitive, and logos/pathos. In both of these exhibitions, Cross aims to disrupt this dichotomy through the application of traditionally masculine iconography, such as the hardhat in the case of *Powerhouse*. Additionally, Cross involves Mother Ireland in her early works from *Matriarchal* and *Ebb*, but she does not bluntly challenge motherhood until her convergence of the cow and the Virgin Mary in *Udders*, specifically *Virginal Shroud*. This is where Cross shows her closest alignment to French feminist discourse, for her work directly engages with the concept of abjection, casting off the corporeal feminine body. These early series, in essence, come to represent Cross' fascination with the symbolic order, engaging aspects of the masculine and the feminine in order to obscure and exaggerate the primarily phallogentric Irish state.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Lydenberg, "Beyond Feminism," 221.

RURAL, RELIGIOUS, AND REVOLUTIONARY: DECONSTRUCTING A NATIONAL IDENTITY

The final decade of the 20th century proved to be a period in which Ireland directly addresses its own culture crisis. With the conclusion of the Troubles with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Irish artists were directly engaging with many complex topics regarding cultural and national identity as to challenge what it meant to be “Irish.” Dorothy Cross, along with many of her contemporaries, sought to break down traditional Irish symbols and disprove the claim of an underlying universal Irish experience.⁶⁷ Thus, I argue that Cross’s culturally themed works can be readily applied to Colin Graham’s theory of the deconstruction of Irish authenticity in order to dismantle traditional notions of Irish nationalism intending to produce a universal Irish identity.

“Authentic” Ireland: Reevaluating Ireland’s Post-Colonial Status

Popular discourse surrounding Irish culture revolves around placing the Irish within postcolonial and post-national theory, and thus locating Ireland within a structural relationship of the colonized and the colonizer.⁶⁸ Describing the relationship between Ireland and Britain in such simplistic terms, however, does not serve to depict Ireland’s rare position within colonialism. Colin Graham highlights the nation’s difficult placement within postcolonial theory, saying:

“Irish culture, at once western and colonized, white and racially other, imperial and subjugated, became marginal in the sense of existing at the edge of but within two experiences, with a culture that epitomizes the hybridity, imitation and irony latent in colonial interchanges.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ McGonagle, et. al., *Irish Art Now*, 24-5.

⁶⁸ Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 140.

⁶⁹ Graham, *Deconstructing*, 141.

Essentially, Graham emphasizes Ireland's liminality as a colony on the edge of Western Europe, included but excluded all at once. Since the Good Friday Agreement, Ireland has been in search of its cultural and national identity within its new role as a nation in the post-modern, post-industrial, and globalized world. Graham discusses this national investigation of identity as a search for an Irish "authenticity," in which Ireland essentially lays "claim to an undeniable essence as a pure expression of the 'real,' the obvious, and the natural."⁷⁰

Graham's approach to deconstructing the Irish culture crisis is particularly applicable when discussing the works of Dorothy Cross, who often incorporates witty and ironic plays at an "authentic" Irish culture in her installation pieces. In Graham's *Deconstructing Ireland*, he discusses the theoretical basis of authenticity outlined by Jacob Golomb in *In Search of Authenticity* and Theodor Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* and applies these theoretical understandings to Irish culture. Graham creates three major periods of the search for authenticity in Irish culture: Old Authenticity, New Authenticity, and Ironic Authenticity. His discussion of Ironic Authenticity— which hinges on the relationship of the postmodern, the ironic, and the authentic— is appropriate when interpreting Cross's works that play on dismantling cultural and national identity.

Caught in a State (1991)

In 1991, Dorothy Cross participated in an exhibition at Dublin's infamous Kilmainham Gaol entitled *In a State*. Invited by Project Arts Centre curator Jobst Graeve along with twenty-one other Irish artists, Cross engages directly with the concept of an Irish national identity in her installation piece *Caught in a State*. The work takes place in one of Kilmainham Gaol's cells, in

⁷⁰ Graham, *Deconstructing*, 133.



Figure 5: Dorothy Cross, *Caught in a State*, 1991, installation.

which a fetal pig is placed on a bed of straw visible through the open door of the cell. Nearby, Cross hangs a calendar depicting a living adult pig in the same cell, photographed “through the peephole of its *closed* door”. Originally, Cross wished to have the living pig inhabit the cell in order to create a much wittier dialogue with traditional Irish stereotypes. Issues with conventional museum displays, health codes, and city officials, Cross was prohibited from exhibiting a living pig.⁷¹

Drowned in vibrant green illumination, the installation challenges numerous stereotypes surrounding Irish identity. The overall green hue serves not to reflect a heroic, nationalistic representation of the ‘Emerald Isle,’ but to highlight the British’s dehumanization of the Irish as pigs who were only fit for exile in rural lands.⁷² Throughout modern Irish history, Britain has

⁷¹ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 21.

⁷² Lydenberg, *GONE*, 23.

attributed the pig as a “critique of Irish consumption, laziness, intractability, and squalor.”⁷³ The porcine association applied to the Irish was utilized by the British as a means of satirizing Ireland’s desire for independent statehood at the beginning of the 20th century, in which cartoons depicted politicians conducting tests on pigs to gauge their political understandings. Alluding to the “novelty of the learned pig,” the Irish were shown as naïve and primitive beings unsuitable for autonomous rule.⁷⁴ Dehumanized, the Irish are trapped in a state in which they are tied to the rural, the domestic. Displaying the fetal pig on a bed of straw (fig. 4.3), Cross cleverly aims to demonstrate how Ireland’s national identity is not produced through Ireland’s own view of itself, but also through the descriptions and visualizations from the outside world.



Figure 6: Dorothy Cross, *Attendant* (detail), 1991, installation

⁷³ Borbála Faragó and Kathryn Kirkpatrick, eds, *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 63.

⁷⁴ Faragó and Kirkpatrick, *Animals in Irish Literature*, 64.

Cross's participation in *In a State* at Kilmainham Gaol is significant for it's a national heritage site filled with stories about the harsh realities of Irish history. Often viewed solely as "a single narrative of English oppression and Irish resistance, a museum of suffering, [and] a sound-box echoing with last words," Kilmainham Gaol has been romanticized, transformed into a space in which macho-heroism dominates. Narratives are contested. Individuals are forgotten. Kilmainham Gaol embodies much of the European conflict of the late 20th century: the local and global dreams of utopia and the disillusion of such dreams by the ordinary individual.⁷⁵ Entitling her

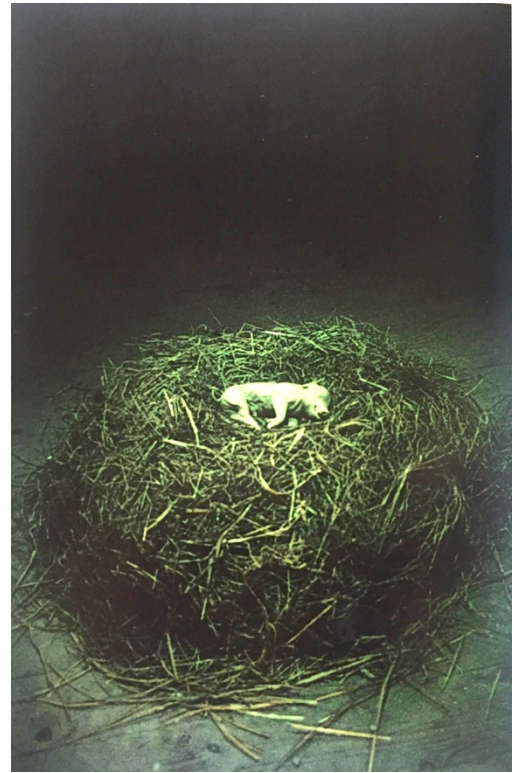


Figure 7: Dorothy Cross, *Caught in a State* (detail), 1991, installation.

work *Caught in a State*, Cross reveals her very criticism of this representation of Kilmainham Gaol and the sentiment surrounding Irish history. Cross alludes to the possibility that maybe national and cultural identity "constitute a form of entrapment."⁷⁶ *Caught in a State* allows for the viewer to visualize symbols that make up these structural systems of identity and renegotiate how they fit within those systems.

***Attendant* (1992)**

Cross's dialogue with Ireland and England's tumultuous relationship did not cease with *Caught in a State*, rather it opened further channels of exploration. The following year, Cross

⁷⁵ Fintan O'Toole, ed, *In a State: an exhibition in Kilmainham Gaol on national identity* (Dublin: Project Arts Centre Ltd., 1991), 13.

⁷⁶ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 22.



Figure 8: Dorothy Cross, *Attendant*, 1992, installation.

created *Attendant* in conjunction with the Edge Biennial in London, in which she created an installation piece in an “abandoned Victorian underground *pissoir* in a mixed immigrant neighborhood in the East End” of London. Calling upon the Victorian disgust of the body and bodily functions, Cross engages with masculinity and the maternal in a culturally driven setting.

As viewers descend into the installation, they are met with two directional signs guiding them to either the left or the right. Playing on the traditional signage of “Gentlemen” and “Ladies,” Cross replaces these signs with “England” and “Ireland” respectively.



Both options, however, lead to the same dilapidated space inhabited by Cross’s bronze sculpture. Two urinals cast in bronze are seen next to one another, formed into the geographical shape of Ireland and England. Below each of the urinals, a pipe protrudes



Figure 9: Dorothy Cross, *Attendant* (detail), 1992, installation.



Figure 10: Dorothy Cross, *Attendant* (detail), 1992, installation.

as anatomically-correct penis in disguise. The pipes curve towards one another and aim towards a singular drain in the floor directly below.⁷⁷

The urinals depicting geographical representations of both Ireland and England call upon cartography in terms of discussing cultural identity and colonization. Claire Connolly asserts that “maps operate within the dialectical structures of colonialism, existing both as technology of political control—a way for the oppressor to know the oppressed— and as a means for a once oppressed community to know itself, symbols of national consciousness.”

Connolly discusses how cartography has transformed into a cultural symbol with maps as the cultural objects, now holding almost little to no political significance or power.⁷⁸ The cultural objects are now simply a visual representation of Irishness, which Cross wittingly deconstructs in *Attendant*. These unmarked, unlabeled maps have now become empty receptacles in which participants can claim their national identity and relieve themselves, only to discover that the

⁷⁷ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 3.

⁷⁸ Claire Connolly, “Postcolonial Ireland: Posing the Question,” *European Journal of English Studies* 3 (1999): 260-1.

phallus-shaped pipes dispense towards one another “to pun, in good Joycean fashion, upon the meaning of ‘the meeting of the waters.’”⁷⁹ *Attendant* transforms machismo and nationalism essentially into a pissing contest, playing on the all-too-familiar saying from both nations—taking the piss. Cross furthers this play by making the penises of both nations the same size, exclaiming that both hold equal stakes in the game.

Demystifying the “Authentic” Irish Experience

Caught in a State and *Attendant* both play to Graham’s assertion of Ireland’s claim to authenticity. Both site specific installations engage in the concept of Irishness within political and cultural context. *Caught in a State* highlights Kilmainham Gaol’s ultimate claim to the authentic—“its ‘birth’ being ‘rooted in revolution.’”⁸⁰ Kilmainham Gaol’s own visitor brochure demonstrates such claims in its opening line:

Opened in 1796 as the County Gaol for Dublin, Kilmainham Gaol has, at crucial moments, held within its walls most of the key personalities involved in the struggle for Irish independence.⁸¹

This opening statement, consequently, utilizes a heroic revolutionary-based narrative as its accreditation for authenticity. Visitors are thus supplied with an experience of Irishness, of the struggle for independence, and of the sense of nationalistic unity. Cross subverts this sense of authenticity



Figure 11: Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.

⁷⁹ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 38; JoAnna Isaack, ed, *Laughter Ten Years After* (New York: Hobart and William Colleges Press, 1995), 26.

⁸⁰ Graham, *Deconstructing*, 138.

⁸¹ *Kilmainham Gaol: Visitor’s Guide*, (Dublin: The Office of Public Works, 2016).

by creating a space in which the viewer cannot help but realize their current presence in a past world—preserved writings of past inmates scribbled across the walls juxtaposing Cross’s all too artificial calendar. An interesting, and possibly overlooked, aspect of *Caught in a State* is the conscious decision to depict the month of May on the calendar found within the cell. Kilmainham Gaol was the location of the execution of the seven leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, all of which were routinely executed by the British in May of 1916.⁸² Cross intentionally chooses the month of May as to make a deliberate connection and association to the revolutionary leaders trapped and slaughtered here by their enemies. Cross ironically establishes a space illuminated in green, making the obvious reference to Ireland’s association as the Emerald Isle filled with luscious green fields, yet Cross shines the light on the dead fetal pig calling into question how the Irish view themselves and how they themselves are viewed.

Robin Lydenberg offers another interpretation of the green colorization of the installation, claiming that the straw parodies “the traditional Christian narrative scene.” Thus, Cross is referencing Ireland’s strong association with the Catholic Church to demonstrate how the installation shows the “birth and degradation” of Irish national identity. This analysis by Lydenberg references, yet again, a denial of authenticity. Lydenberg states, “By exaggerating the green ‘colorized’ view of nationalistic history and by giving body to the degrading stereotype of the Irish as pigs, Cross exposes both as ideological constructions.”⁸³ Ireland, and specifically Kilmainham Gaol in this analysis, aims to project an authentic “Irish” story filled with the sacrifices of “brave” and “heroic” men to which all can relate and celebrate. Cross shows that this

⁸² “The Executed Leaders of the 1916 Rising,” *Taoiseach.gov.ie*, last modified 2013.

⁸³ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 25.

claim is weightless, for there is no ultimate or universal Irish experience. Ireland's deep connection to Catholicism is also brought into question, as Cross breaks down how the Church has influenced this claim of the authentic Irish experience. The Church can no longer be considered a universal experience for the Irish, alluding to a new period of change.

Attendant proposes Cross's most humorous play on the authentic. Established as a symbol of cultural and national identity, the map plays into the role of perpetuating Irishness. As the 1990s come to a close, however, many even question the authenticity behind such a claim. Fintan O'Toole elaborates, "...the map of Ireland is a lie. The lie of the land is that there is a place called 'Ireland' inhabited by the Irish people, a place with a history, a culture, a society."⁸⁴ Cross appears to participate in this dialogue, expressing that the mere decision to lay claim to a national identity is essentially meaningless as both will ultimately merge in the drain found below. *Attendant* states that the map has transformed once more, now from a cultural symbol to a powerless object. The map, once stripped of its political and imperialistic significance, has now been stripped of its national and cultural significance. The map can no longer represent a place of authentic Irish experience. Fintan O'Toole writes, "While the place itself persists, the map, the visual and ideological convention that allows us to call that place 'Ireland' has been slipping away."⁸⁵

Caught in a State and *Attendant* involve a political and cultural specificity rooted in both the past and the present. Analyzing these installations side by side shows Cross's continued exploration of demystifying of an "authentic" Irish experience. *Caught in a State* focuses on dismantling the macho-heroic narrative of Kilmainham Gaol and its overwhelming role in

⁸⁴ Fintan O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (London: Verso, 1997), 4-5.

⁸⁵ O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land*, 2.

Ireland's claim for an authentic Ireland rooted in revolution and defiance. Cross goes one step further in *Attendant*, humorously depicting how claiming a national identity (whether that be Irish or English) is ultimately worthless as national identities do little to illustrate a person's own lived and individual experiences. Cross's use of cartography in *Attendant* highlights that as emigration has defined and even continues to define Ireland, it must become "a country whose map is no more nor less than the chart of personal experience and personal journeys."⁸⁶ The political and cultural strife surrounding national identity now seems trifling, for the newly established post-modern world is globalized.

In both installations, Cross demonstrates how Ireland's claim to authenticity as a rural, religious, and revolutionary nation does not exist. Cross's installations both fit into Graham's newest period of authenticity—Ironic Authenticity—for *Caught in a State* and *Attendant* incorporate the postmodern, the ironic, and the authentic rather seamlessly. With the clever utilization of a relatively postmodern medium (that is, the site-specific installation), Cross is able to establish what Ireland has deemed "authentic" and completely revert it with witty, and often ironic, jabs incorporating genitalia and taxidermy. *Caught in a State* and *Attendant* serve as platforms to challenge the authentic and ask the audience, "Do you believe in an underlying universal Irish experience?"

⁸⁶ O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land*, 3.

DEATH, LOSS, AND THE ANIMAL

The utilization of the animal has been an underpinning throughout Dorothy Cross's oeuvre since *Shark Lady in a Balldress* in 1986. Throughout this thesis, many of the works discussed either employ or engage with the animal. Cross references the animal directly through taxidermy in the *Udders* series, which creates witty gender-driven works with the use of cow hide. In her site-specific installation *Caught in a State* (1991), Cross places a preserved fetal pig at its center. Later, she revealed that the original installation called for a live adult pig, but due to regulatory issues she was prohibited.⁸⁷ These works hinge on relationships with *the other*, and Cross cleverly incorporates the animal to explore gender and cultural difference. As her artistic career progresses, the animal—whether through taxidermy, preservation, interaction, or performance—becomes an integral part of circumnavigating more expansive experiences and emotions. This chapter aims to discuss how Cross utilizes many aspects of the animal to investigate the narrative of a collective experience centered around loss and death.

Critical Animal Studies & the *Postmodern Animal*

Prior to the postmodern era, interest in the animal in art was almost nonexistent. In Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, he outlines that the postmodern:

“...stands for the forms in which imaginative thought necessarily challenges the complacency of the age, an unthinking ‘consensus’ of politics and of taste which would prefer ‘to put an end to experimentation,’ ‘to liquidate the heritage of the avant-gardes,’ and instead ‘to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.’”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 21.

⁸⁸ Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), 18.

According to Steve Baker in *The Postmodern Animal*, Lyotard's formulation of postmodernism is particularly relevant when discussing and questioning the animal, since "no rethinking of human or animal identity" will occur as animals in art and philosophy are used for "solace and pleasure."⁸⁹ For Baker, attempting to define and discover the *modern* animal is crucial in order to understand the development of the animal within postmodernism. He asserts that there is no modern animal present in the 20th century. Looking back to the modernist ideals of formalism and abstraction, issues concerning the human body and its representation were few and far between. The lack of the animal can further be explained by the shift to "anthropomorphic sentiment" by the "self-consciously serious modernist avant-gardes." The only avant-garde movement of the 20th century that referenced animals to show "a premodern affinity to nature" was the Blue Rider group—and specifically Franz Marc who integrated his bold utilization of color with depictions of horses. Interest in the animal would appear briefly once again in the late-1960s and 1970s Italian movement Arte Povera, which used the animal to negotiate and "re-establish" the individual in "modern, post-war industrialized society."⁹⁰

Baker looks to contemporary artist Mark Dion who notes that "in 'the slick world of Conceptual and media-based art' in the early 1980s, 'no one seemed interested in problems of nature.'"⁹¹ The animal seems to have appeared rather abruptly and clumsily in contemporary art, solidifying the conclusion that there was no modern animal for reference. Rather, the inclusion of

⁸⁹ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 18.

⁹⁰ Most notably, Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis produced the legendary installation *Untitled (12 Horses)* in 1969 which consisted of twelve horses tied to the gallery walls, forcing the viewer to encounter the live animal and ponder their relationship with it. Christiane Schneider, "Animals Looking at Us," in *Animals*, ed. by Raimond Gaita and Christiane Schneider, (London: Haunch of Venison, 2004), 5.

⁹¹ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 20.

the animal in postmodern art “serves to resist or to displace fixed meanings” established over the last century in politics and philosophy.⁹²

Examining the role of the animal in postmodern art leads to discussing the role of anthropocentrism, the view that humans are central to ethical and environmental concerns. According to Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar in their influential work *Interspecies*, contemporary animal studies:

“complicates notions of nonhuman agency by destabilizing the centrality of language, consciousness, and cognition (attributes constituted as singularly human)... and it navigates tensions between deconstructing anthropomorphism and the premature embrace of the posthuman.”⁹³

Livingston and Puar introduce the term *interspecies* to contemporary animal studies to discuss the relationships between human and nonhuman biological life and how these relationships affect current politics. *Interspecies* seeks to decentralize human-centered discourse in the “political and social worlds.”⁹⁴

Upon reflecting on the writings of Baker and Livingston and Puar, the role of the animal in Dorothy Cross’s work comes into question. Does her utilization of the animal perpetuate anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism? Does her interest in the animal and nature shift from challenging major political and social institutions to an over simplified and romanticized commentary on human’s role in nature? These questions plagued me while analyzing the following works. However, this chapter explores Cross’s interest in nature, particularly the animal, and how she creates a space within her work that does not place human above animal or vice versa. For

⁹² Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 20.

⁹³ Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar, “Interspecies,” *Social Text* 29, no. 1 (2011): 3.

⁹⁴ Livingston and Puar, “Interspecies,” 4.

Cross, the experiences and emotions of death and loss are not singularly human, but rather they exist between human and nonhuman identities.

***CRY* (1996)**

The site-specific installation *CRY* was realized during a three-month residency at ArtPace Center for Contemporary Art in San Antonio, Texas. Reflecting on the history, culture, and geography of Texas and the converted gallery space, Cross produces *CRY* in response to an amalgamation of unexpected happenings during her residency: “fifteen pages of churches listed in the local phone directory, the frequency of fires in the dry landscape, and the fire-fighting technique developed to control them, and the snake breeder’s farm she discovered down the road.”⁹⁵ Interacting with the gallery’s former self, Cross installs a walk-in freezer in the middle of space. Entering two at a time, the viewers encounter dozens of frozen snakes placed on “frost-coated shelves, looking as if they might at any moment uncoil and slither off.” Behind the walk-in freezer, Cross places a firefighter’s protective silver gloves and helmet on the floor and dramatically lights them ablaze.⁹⁶



Figure 12: Dorothy Cross, *CRY*, 1996, installation.

⁹⁵ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 81.

⁹⁶ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 81.

Cross's use of snakes and fire relates to her direct surroundings in Texas, and she intentionally decides to incorporate items from Ireland "as a foreigner bringing her own baggage": a postcard of Francis Danby's 19th century painting *The Opening of the Sixth Seal* and one of the three casts of her work *Kiss*. Danby's depiction of "final judgment and annihilation" hangs across from the freezer recreated on "sheer fabric kept in motion by a set of oscillating fans." In front of the Dansby reproduction, Cross dug a hole in the gallery floor, leaving the remnants adjacent. For Cross,



Figure 13: Dorothy Cross, *CRY* (detail), 1996, installation.

rich and "hybrid" site—land torn between desert Texas and rural Ireland.⁹⁷

Cross is perplexed by the contradictions surrounding death in these cultures, America's aversion and Ireland's embrace:

"I am interested in how death used to be integrated into society and ritual, and no longer is, especially in America, where death is totally denied...In Catholicism, you're told life is preparation for death; death is the ultimate, whereas [in America] it is the opposite (qtd. in Colpitt)."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 81-2.

⁹⁸ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 81.



Figure 14: Dorothy Cross, *CRY* (detail), 1996, installation.

Stemming from this interest in the contradicting concepts of death, Cross references cryonics, “a process by which dead bodies are frozen in liquid nitrogen until they can be revived or cloned at some later date.” *CRY* plays on cryonics and the idea of mourning death, the period of lament that occurs with and without science or religion.⁹⁹ The influence of culture is central to *CRY*, directly investigating humans’ interaction with morality.

Cross’s selection of the snake for *CRY* is by no means coincidental or superficial.¹⁰⁰ Throughout the 1990s, the snake became a motif in her sculptural

works beginning with *Irish Coronation Chair* in 1984.¹⁰¹ The snake reappears as a central figure in a number of works produced in 1995 including *Bandaged Snake*, *Convention*, and *Lover Snakes*. Cross dissected and removed a snake’s heart for *Bandaged Snake*, displaying the heart inside a

⁹⁹ Lydenberg, *GONE*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ Cross writes of how she selected each snake for *CRY* in *tate* magazine: “There is a snake farm beside a freeway outside San Antonio, Texas. In October, I visited there with Linda Pace. I asked the owner, John Mellyn, what he did with his snakes when they died. He brought me round the back, behind cages of iguanas and vats of rattlers, and opened three domestic freezers, which bulged with frozen snakes. He allowed me to burrow alone, up to my elbows, in reptiles, breaking through the ice and plastic bags to select the most beautiful snakes. He showed me how to determine their sex, a hidden affair with a syringe-type probe. He told storied of the snakes. I chose one that had been alive the week before. She has died giving birth. She was a large, beautiful, butter-coloured albino boa.” Dorothy Cross and Lewis de Soto, “Heat and Cold: Projects by Dorothy Cross and Lewis de Soto at ArtPace in San Antonio,” in *Tate: the art magazine* (London: Tate, 1996), 49.

¹⁰¹ In this very early work, the snake is positioned in a circular formation as to suggest eternity and renewal. Given Cross’s Irish heritage, the serpent also beckons an association to Saint Patrick and his banishment of snakes from Ireland. Paul Bonaventura, *even: Dorothy Cross*, eds. Tessa Jackson and Josephine Lanyon (Bristol: Arnolfini, 1996), 19.

small glass-lid box next to the snake's bandaged body.¹⁰² In *Convention*, Cross places twelve snakes in a circular formation with twelve speech bubbles escaping their mouths. They have been brought together to communicate, yet their speech bubbles are empty. Frustrated and disempowered, the snakes reflect the "bafflement and inadequacy" humans experience throughout life.¹⁰³ Cross creates the emotional work *Lover Snakes* in which two snakes are entwined with their silver encased hearts located outside their bodies, evoking a "sensuous embrace" and despair simultaneously. Speaking about the work *Lover Snakes*, Cross remarks:

"The snake is a neutral thing sexually in that it is very difficult to tell the male from the female. When I first began working with them I was tempted to sexualize them, but I have decided against that. More than anything else, I am interested in common mortality, common love and common struggle, and the snake provides the perfect metaphor for that commonality."¹⁰⁴

Through the creation of these works, Cross views the snake as misunderstood, "systematically abused over time," and ultimately seeks to reclaim the snake's identity.¹⁰⁵ Globally, the snake calls upon many associations— "emblematic wisdom and empowerment, procreation and longevity, even the hope of rebirth and immortality" while also representing "death and disease, sin, lecherous temptation, and cunning duplicity." As far back at the Old Stone Age and ancient Greece, the snake has been the most common animal form in myths, legends, and folklore. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the "heraldic staff of Hermes" was composed on intertwining snakes to signify "healing power and medical art," while Medusa's hair was transformed into serpents "so awful to behold that any viewer would turn to stone."¹⁰⁶ In Ireland,

¹⁰² Lydenberg, *GONE*, 86.

¹⁰³ Bonaventura, *even*, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Bonaventura, *even*, 19-20.

¹⁰⁵ Bonaventura, *even*, 20.

¹⁰⁶ D. Wilfred Abse, "Snakes and Us," in *Mental Zoo: Animals in the Human Mind and its Pathology*, eds. Salman Akhtar and Vamik Volkan (Madison, Conn: International Universities Press, 2005), 201.

the snake is most well known in the legend of St. Patrick, who is said to have banished snakes from the nation in the 5th century. In Irish Christianity and the legend of St. Patrick, the snake embodies evil, notably “malicious envy,” that has been expunged from the nation and its people.¹⁰⁷

Within *CRY*, Cross creates an environment oozing with the uncanny. As the viewer walks through the stark, steel freezer, dozens of snakes begin to surround the viewer within the space, allowing them to experience a combination of confusion, loss, and, unintentionally, fear. Here is where Cross interacts with what Baker calls *botched taxidermy*. Compared to the traditional aesthetic appeal of the animal in art, the postmodern animal is “that of a fractured, awkward, ‘wrong’ or wronged thing,” appearing as “an image of difference, an image of thinking difficultly and differently.”¹⁰⁸ Cross presents preserved snakes that are not beautifully positioned or aesthetically pleasing. The audience is blatantly aware of their physicality and their lifelessness. They appeared twisted and contorted at times. Something about them seems off, referring back to that “small uncertainty that they may revitalize, if unfrozen.”¹⁰⁹

In their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of “a Body without Organs,” in which Deleuze attempts to conceptualize how bodies are not prearranged or organized but entities that can be formed or reformed. A BwO, consequently, is an unavoidable occurrence that is “already accomplished the moment you undertake it [and] unaccomplished as long as you don’t.” Since a BwO’s organization evolves, there is a strong possibility for it to be botched or altered in the process.¹¹⁰ Deleuze argues that interferences with

¹⁰⁷ Abse, “Snakes and Us,” 209.

¹⁰⁸ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 54.

¹⁰⁹ Frances Colpitt, “An Interview with Dorothy Cross,” (San Antonio: [ArtPace]: A Foundation for Contemporary Art: 1996).

¹¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. By Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 149.

the body— hypochondria, paranoia, mental illness, substance abuse, and masochism— do not produce a botched BwO as one would expect, rather they produce “a program of experimentation” that allows the body to become as close to a BwO as possible.¹¹¹ The BwO is derived however one desires, not depending on an omnipresent, transcendental power to organize it. Essentially, the BwO opposes authority. In Baker’s reading of BwO, he places emphasis on the translation of *rater*, which in this case is ‘to botch,’ and interprets the process of BwO rather negatively. He reads the BwO as something that can go terribly, horribly wrong and denounces Deleuze’s theory.¹¹² However, Deleuze allows the body, or in this case the animal, the autonomy of its body. The animal is permitted to shape itself accordingly, distancing itself from the cultural connotations and symbolism often placed on it.

Cross’s snakes in *CRY* challenge the construction of authority, namely cultural associations of death and loss, through Baker’s theory of *botched taxidermy* and Deleuze’s ‘body without organs.’ Departing from Baker’s reading of BwO, Cross’s snakes almost evoke the sense of becoming an organism as they appear froze in time. The viewer squeamishly looks to the snakes’ bodies, unsure death even occurred. They are located in this state of reformation and self-organization that Deleuze asserts, while simultaneously referencing Baker’s botched, or fractured, animal. This fractured nature is the cornerstone of *botched taxidermy* as it relies in not only the animals themselves but also in the competing forms of knowledge about animals—zoological, historical, anthropological, among others. Cross introduces another form of knowledge, nanomedicine, as a way in which to understand the molecular components of the body and the

¹¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150-1.

¹¹² Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 63.

animal. Cross's work relies on this fractured, *inexpert* knowledge of the animal and advance scientific discovery.¹¹³ Through this reading, the snakes in *CRY* focus heavily on the physicality of death and the intersection of science and technology in contemporary society.

***Midges* (2000)**

Midges, a 12-minute DVD, opens with a closely cropped arching tree branch located in an isolated forest. Panning throughout the forest, which is absent of any signs of human life or interaction, the viewer happens upon a figure lying across the branch. As the viewer slowly approaches, the figure transforms into a nude female body, dangling lifelessly across the branch. She does not flinch upon the viewer's arrival, nor does she ever address the viewer directly. The only movement felt is the small insects encircling her. The viewer retreats, panning the forest once more. Upon the viewer's second encounter, the figure rises to scratch her body before relaxing to her previous position. The viewer withdraws one final time, and the figure has disappeared. A "sense of foreboding" fills the work as the viewer shifts away from the now absent figure.¹¹⁴

Robin Lydenberg offers the only substantial reading of this work in her essay "Ways of Seeing: Recent Work Dorothy Cross" from a primarily Freudian context. Lydenberg writes that the title "alerts us that the video is not about sexual difference, but something so insignificant that, despite having the power to animate life, might escape our vision."¹¹⁵ Lydenberg stresses Cross's reexamination of the "Surrealist dream of a chance encounter with a naked woman in the forest"

¹¹³ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 73-4.

¹¹⁴ In my discussion with Dorothy Cross, she shared that *Midges* originally utilized a close male friend as the central figure. During the filming process, the man was unable to withstand the midges, and Cross decided to use her own body for the work instead. As a result, she had no initial preconceived ideas surrounding the use of the female nude. For Cross, *Midges* is not dependent on the use of the female form—it was merely utilized by convenience. However, she is aware and conscious of the female body in the work and understands the connotations that are derived when viewing the piece.

¹¹⁵ Robin Lydenberg, "Ways of Seeing: Recent Work by Dorothy Cross," *Contemporary* (January 2002), 30.

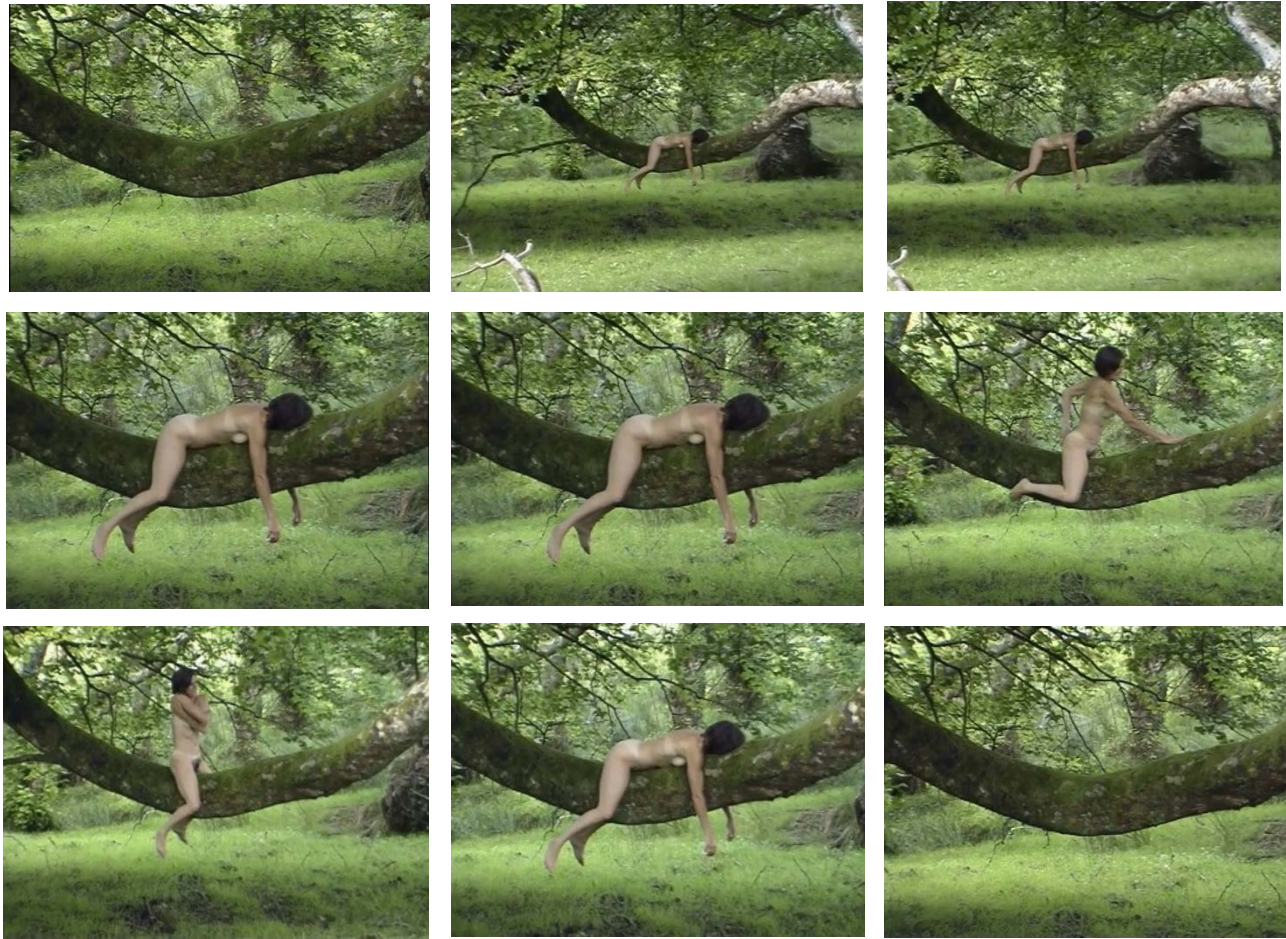


Figure 15: Dorothy Cross, *Midges* (stills from video), 2000, DVD, 12 minutes.

in which the occurrence of death is far more significant than sex or gender. Lydenberg references Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, paraphrasing the work as "where he imagined inanimate matter irritated into living, only to seek a return to the peace of the inorganic." The figure alternates between animate and inanimate states, and the camera returns to the figure only to "lose its object and its origins."¹¹⁶ When exhibited at Frith Street Gallery in London, Cross placed a photograph of the tree across from the video projection but from the vantage point of the "now absent body."

¹¹⁶ Lydenberg, "Ways of Seeing," 30.

Associating the piece with a synthesis of death and desire, Lydenberg views *Midges* as a naked woman “no longer the object of a desiring gaze but the point of origin.”¹¹⁷

While Lydenberg offers an insightful reading of *Midges*, this thesis aims to examine the work through the developing field of critical animal studies and the intersection of the animal and contemporary art. From this perspective, *Midges* interrogates Deleuze and Guattari’s the concept associated with Body without Organs, ‘becoming’ — and in this case ‘becoming-animal.’ Giovanni Aloï interprets becoming-animal as:

“a movement from *major* to *minor*, a deterritorialization in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability and identity but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement; most importantly, becoming animal... is not imitation but a matter of intensities.”¹¹⁸

Elaborating on this interpretation, Baker asserts that Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-animal revolutionized non-human discourse beyond the later writings of Donna Haraway, Nina Lykke, and Mark Hutchinson, exclaiming:

“The value of Deleuze and Guattari’s treatment of the theme in the present circumstances is not simply their remarkable assertion that these alternatives are somehow *proposed by the animal*, but lies rather in the fact that in their elaboration of the often baffling concept of becoming-animal they go beyond merely calling for the unthinkable to be thought: they offer a detailed model of how it might be done. Becomings are always, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, ‘a political affair’; to understand them is to understand something about lived experience in the world, and about the scope for shaping and experience. The becoming-animal...therefore, is not exactly the postmodern animal itself, but it will shape the ways in which both the human and the animal forms of the postmodern animal may be understood.”¹¹⁹

Midges reflects both Aloï and Baker’s readings of becoming-animal in relation to contemporary art practices at the end of the century in that Cross does not aim to position the human or the animal

¹¹⁷ Lydenberg, “Ways of Seeing,” 30-1.

¹¹⁸ Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., Ltd, 2012), 55.

¹¹⁹ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 102-3.

above or below one another in some arbitrary hierarchal system. Cross, in similar fashion to Russian performance artist Oleg Kulik, evokes the *Becoming* movement which is “a kind of ‘un-humaning’ of the human in favor of embracing new and unknown trajectories.”¹²⁰ Cross becomes an unspecified animal with her half asleep, half dead body dangling from tree limb mimicking the back of a horse. She lies there motionless apart from a brief moment to scratch herself, attempting to soothe her skin from the only other animals visible in the piece, hundreds of small fly-like insects often referred to as midges.¹²¹ Cross’s transformation into the animal is far less aggressive and less overt than Kulik, who is primarily known for his transformation into a dog in the work *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1997). Kulik, dressed in only a dog-collar, situated himself inside a dog house. Viewers directly interacted with Kulik one-on-one within the dog house. As the artist became dog, the viewer saw the “clash of significations” begin to deteriorate.¹²² In *Midges*, however, Cross does not transform into an identifiable animal, nor does she directly involve the viewer through a participatory performance. Cross’s becoming is nuanced, evoking the animal through minimal and subtle movement. Cross herself writes: “Her state is unsure, her posture suggests that of an animal; she might be unconscious or even dead as the tiny flies would be too great for any sentient being.”¹²³

Midges, based on my interpretation, adheres to ‘becoming-animal’ more faithfully than Kulik’s piece. In her essay “Becoming-Animate: On the Performed Limits of the ‘Human,’” Jennifer Parker-Starbuck suggests that Deleuze and Guattari did not intend for ‘becoming-animal’

¹²⁰ Aloï, *Art and Animals*, 56.

¹²¹ Dorothy Cross in discussion with the author, July 2016.

¹²² Aloï, *Art and Animals*, 58.

¹²³ Dorothy Cross, *Connemara* (Dublin: Royal Hibernian Academy, 2014), 22.

to reference one particular animal. In fact, the specific animal association recalls the pet, or the Oedipal animal, which is often “used for characteristics or classifications such as mythological.” Instead, the animal in ‘becoming-animal’ belongs to “a pack or multiplicity of animals.”¹²⁴ Cross evokes what Deleuze and Guattari determine is “a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.”¹²⁵ Consequently, this deterritorializing characteristic of ‘becoming-animal’ allows *Midges* to explore the “possibilities for experiencing an uncompromising sweeping away of identities, human or animal.”¹²⁶

The animal for which the name derives, midges, also plays a strong role in furthering the notion of loss and death. For Cross, the midges symbolize the “dead and abandoned [that] always carry this potential for resurrection and metamorphosis within them.” The midges, thus, represent something “so insignificant that, despite having the power to animate life, might escape our vision.”¹²⁷ Their overwhelming presence is not felt until the figure rises to scratch herself, yet even this motion does not explicitly signify the midges. They are not known unless they are named, and without their accreditation in the title their presence could be lost.

The presence of these invisible midges calls upon one of Deleuze and Guattari’s “most provocative” ideas when conceptualizing ‘becoming-animal’— “the idea of becoming through contagion.” Parker-Starbuck sees this contagion as:

“a productive shift in ‘being’ through an outside force—a force so powerful as to shift the nature of our humanness. This is a becoming from the outside in; like a contagion, perhaps the animal seeps through the skin, infecting rather than being seen as a separate construction from our identities.”¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming Animate: On the Performed Limits of the ‘Human,’” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 4 (December 2006): 660.

¹²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 249.

¹²⁶ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 102.

¹²⁷ Lydenberg, “Ways of Seeing,” 30.

¹²⁸ Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming-Animate,” 661.

Midges can also be viewed as this outside force, infecting and seeping into the skin of the anonymous figure that is located somewhere between human and nonhuman.

Convergence of Death, Loss, and the Postmodern Animal

After reading these works primarily from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, I want to return again to Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar's term *interspecies* and the question of anthromorphism that often plagues contemporary art. *Interspecies*, once again, seeks to decentralize human-centered discourse in the "political and social worlds."¹²⁹ In the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question of whether or not Cross does indeed fall into the trap of anthromorphsim while attempting to utilize the animal to interrogate concepts of death and loss, and if her interest in the animal shifts from challenging major political and social institutions to an over simplified and romanticized commentary on human's role in nature.

In contemporary art—even still sixteen years into the 21st century—anthropomorphism is almost inevitable. Humans cannot help but place symbolism on animals, consciously or not. Cross attempts to rid the snakes in *CRY* of their unfortunate mythological symbolism by emphasizing their physicality, their frozen dead bodies. *CRY* embodies the postmodern animal in that it is not placed on the freezer shelves to symbolize its former connotations, but it is located there to simply be "in all its pressing thingness."¹³⁰ Looking to *Midges*, there is almost no sense of anthropomorphism but rather the opposite. Cross locates herself between the human and non-human, neither primarily one or the other. Both works serve to question the concept of death across not only across cultures as in the case of *CRY*, but also across species.

¹²⁹ Livingston and Puar, "Interspecies," 4.

¹³⁰ Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 82.

DESTABILIZING IDENTITY: WHAT REMAINS

Throughout this research endeavor, Dorothy Cross's early work clearly exhibits an inherent interest in questioning the various facets of identity whether it be gender, culture, or collectively driven. Consequently, when the opportunity arose to interview Cross, I asked her whether or not her sense of self played any role in this interrogation and subversion. Prefacing my question, I explained that not all art necessarily calls for self-reflection on behalf of the artist, but many of her works address identity rather intimately. Her response: her work held no connection to her own identity. For Cross, it was as though she was "wearing a coat and putting on an identity" as opposed to examining her own. She believes this as critical to this early period in her career as it does not allow the viewer to "avoid their own consideration of themselves."

She recounted a story of one of her most well-known works, *Amazon*, in which a woman approached Cross on the street outside her then-Dublin studio furious over the piece. Initially surprised, Cross saw this woman's reaction as a projection of her own anxieties. Cross stresses that her work relates heavily to the relationship between the viewer and the visual, because the visual requests a uniquely powerful response from the viewer. During our conversation, Cross elaborated that "people find it very difficult to talk about the visual," and she experienced this firsthand while in graduate school unable to successfully communicate



Figure 16: Dorothy Cross, *Amazon*, 1992, cowhide, dressmaker's dummy.

the meaning on her work. I would like to think this is where her interest in eliciting the viewer's response derives. Once she understood how to verbalize not only her work but art as whole, she propelled the viewer to undergo this experience of reflection and introspection as well.

Overall, my conversation with Cross further underscored my interpretation of her early works. This research has examined how Dorothy Cross has interrogated identity by analyzing her work through theoretical and contextual analysis. The *Udders* series does not offer an alternative to traditional gender roles and identity, rather it seeks to blur the lines and create a space to investigate the constructions of gender in Irish culture. *Caught in a State* and *Attendant* do not provide another representation of Irish identity, instead they force the viewer to contemplate the formation of Irish identity itself. *CRY* does not seek to produce a unifying experience of death rather open the dialogue between how death is interpreted over difficult cultures and even different species. All of these works require the viewer to engaged with them and determine their own meaning. Cross does not propose any new types of identity and neither do I. This thesis intends to examine how identity is questioned, not determine what new forms of identity.

Therefore, much is still left to examine in Dorothy Cross's work. For instance, Cross continues to produce work today that is heavily rooted in nature and the animal in relation to her home of Connemara on the west coast of Ireland, and this body of work spanning the last fifteen or so years remains fairly untouched in terms of scholarship. This research endeavor touches on the relatively new field of critical animal studies, thus Cross's new—and old—work warrants a further examination from this theoretical standpoint.

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