



Mark O'Kelly installation, image courtesy of eva International



Gimena Blanco, installation at Limerick School of Art and Design, image by Mathew Gidney

# Exit Limerick

EMMA MAHONEY REVIEWS STATIC, LIVERPOOL'S 'EXIT LIMERICK' PROJECT, WHERE GRADUATES FROM LIMERICK SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN AND THOSE FEATURED IN EVA INTERNATIONAL 2012, WERE GIVEN LIVE CRITIQUES.

**WHEN** a work of art is reviewed it is rare that the artist should come face to face with the reviewer in a forum staged to interrogate the nature of the critical process. This is precisely what happened at the 'Exit Limerick' debate held at Limerick School of Art and Design (LIT) on 15 June. The lecture theatre was crammed with students, some enthusiastic, some ambivalent and others disgruntled, all with one goal in mind: to meet the critics who had dared to write about their work for a four-page insert in the Limerick Leader.

'Exit Limerick' is the fifth iteration of a project by Static Gallery, Liverpool, wherein members of the art world (including critics, writers, curators and artists) are invited to review the work of graduating fine art students. By way of acknowledging the subjective nature of the critical process, each artist is given, not one, but two separate reviews. 'Exit' was first initiated by Paul Sullivan and Becky Shaw in three art colleges in Liverpool in 2003. The agenda was twofold: to offer critical reviews to newly graduating artists, and to assess the role and value of art criticism. Static further complicated its project by inviting art world figures in positions of power to review the work of 'untested' artists. They also (intentionally) staged the project without the permission of the universities.

The results of this first undertaking were far more political than its instigators could ever have first anticipated. For a start, the reviewers, who were initially happy to be involved, grew reticent, possibly because they did not know what would happen to these artists five years down the line. What if they gave a damning review to a future art superstar? What repercussions would this have? Doubtless, they were also anxious about their own reputations, particularly as each artist was being reviewed twice; what if the other reviewer 'got' the work when they completely missed the point?

However, these tensions paled in comparison to the 'real' political impact of the project. A few of the graduating artists used the glowing reviews they had received from directors of major national public galleries to challenge their degree results – and won. It is in this ripple effect that the validity and integrity of 'Exit' resides. In his introduction to the recent Berlin Biennial catalogue, Forger Fear, Artur Zmijewski calls for an art that produces "substantive tools for acting on the world": 'Exit' could be perceived as such a tool.

'Exit' started off as a form of institutional critique – an attempt to expose the mechanisms, power structures and politics of the art world from the outside – yet in 'Exit Limerick' this power relation has shifted. Rather than an attack from the outside, 'Exit Limerick' is a collaboration between an increasingly established artist-led initiative (Static) and the establishment (eva International 2012). A collaboration such as this gives rise to a problem: how to maintain that element of criticality when the critical distance that originally produced so much productive tension collapses.

In order to answer this question, the exact nature of this collaboration deserves further interrogation. 'The establishment' in question here could be categorised as an 'enlightened' one – by which I mean, one that seeks to resist becoming an instrument of our neoliberal society. Annie Fletcher, the curator of eva 2012, works for one of the most progressive art institutions in Europe, the Van Abbemuseum. Together with its director, Charles Esche, Fletcher has long been involved in the project of New Institutionalism, a process whereby art galleries and museums begin to internalise the institutional critique that was initially targeted at them in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in self-reflexive and auto-critical art institutions. The goal of these New Institutions is to promote artistic practices that challenge the status quo, and to produce new and heterogeneous publics.

Taking this historical context into account, it becomes less a question of whether Static is 'selling out' by accepting an invitation to collaborate with the 'establishment', and more a matter of expressing solidarity with an institution that shares their values. Furthermore, 'Exit Limerick' did not completely capitulate to the institution. Static made its own, non-negotiable demand. It insisted that 'Exit Limerick' should not be limited to reviewing the LIT degree show alone, but should also encompass reviews of every artist participating in eva and its fringe.

This new dynamic sought to interrogate how the critics would negotiate alternating between reviewing emerging and established artists. Would they approach the reviews differently? For some reason this aspect of the project was undermined by the fact that there was very little crossover between the critics who reviewed the eva artists and those who reviewed the LIT students. In fact, of the 19 reviewers involved in the project, only seven reviewed artists from both eva and LIT. In the reviews of these seven critics, there was definitely a difference in approach when it came to reviewing the recent graduates, which was underlined by an unwillingness to be overtly critical and a retreat to describing the work whenever the reviewer didn't really come to grips with what the student was trying to say.

'Exit' is supposed to represent a threshold – between being a student cocooned in the academy and making the first tentative steps into the art world as a solo artist – yet the inclusion of the established eva artists seemed to deviate from this goal. Moreover, their inclusion introduced a sense of hierarchy. The reviews of eva artists were listed first in the newspaper supplement, followed by the fringe artists, with the students coming last. What also stood out is that some of the major figures in the Irish art world – including Caoimhín Mac Giolla Leith, Helen Carey, Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh – only reviewed the eva artists. If the point has previously been to pair established art world figures with students, this was lost in the most recent iteration of the work.

When 'Exit' took place in Liverpool in 2003 there was another unexpected outcome. According to Static, the Liverpool John Moores University initially displayed a strong resistance to the project, seeing it as an attack from the outside, but over the course of time it began to internalise this critique and to change itself from within. What was then a traditional and conservative art department began to adopt the more contemporary and radical values it holds today. It would appear that in a project like 'Exit', the best possible outcome is to inspire radical self-questioning not just among the student body but also within the academy itself.

## EPILOGUE

The only review that was notable in its absence from the insert in the Limerick Leader was a review of 'Exit Limerick' itself, so in keeping with 'Exit's' bare bones critical style, I conclude my critique of this reviewing process with my own 100 word review paired with a second review of the same work written by Curt Riegelnigg.

## Emma Mahoney

'Exit Limerick' is the fifth iteration of a project by Static, Liverpool, wherein members of the art world are invited to review the work of graduating art students. 'Exit' is both a critical tool and an autonomous work of art, and it is precisely the tension between these two functions that make it interesting. The first iteration in 2003 was about testing the divide between public and private, establishment and anti-establishment, and the tensions that arise therein. Nine years on, it has become a collaboration between Static and eva, resulting in the loss of a little of its subversive edge to the institution.

## Curt Riegelnigg

With this review, I stack one last layer of 'meta' on to my experience of Exit Limerick and I have to admit that my underlying bafflement has not really subsided. (One point of outstanding personal discrepancy: I pointedly adjusted my metric of judgement for the LIT graduates, some critics did not.) During the fluctuating tensions of the closing discussion on June 15<sup>th</sup>, some students expressed appreciation, some cried 'foul!'. Some reviewers responded in conciliatory tones and some with schoolmarm obstinacy. Static Gallery's purposeful obstacles had reduced each critic to a sharply pronounced attenuation of himself, and disparity won the day on almost all fronts.

**Emma Mahony is a lecturer in Visual Culture at NCAD and a PhD researcher.**

**The reviews published in the Limerick Leader are available at [www.eva.ie/exit-limerick](http://www.eva.ie/exit-limerick)**

## Notes

1. Arthur Zmijewski, foreword to *Forget Fear*, 7th Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art and Verlag der Buchhandlung, Walther König, p10