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Aisteach: Jennifer Walshe, Heritage, and the Invention of the Irish Avant-Garde

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Aisteach: Jennifer Walshe, Heritage, and the Invention of the Irish Avant-Garde

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Rob Casey

Introduction

- 1 On the 13th of September 2012, Japanese composer and improviser Tomomo Adachi collaborated with composer Alessandro Bosetti, artist and poet Cia Rinne, and composer Jennifer Walshe in staging *MAV0tek*, a Dada influenced lecture/performance at the Villa Elisabeth in Berlin. Adachi, who at the time was a participant in the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) Artists-in-Berlin residency programme, conceived *MAV0tek* as a performance-research project focusing on the work of the early twentieth-century Japanese Dadaist group MAVO and, according to the DAAD concert programme note, on its “connections with European Dada, especially Irish Dada”.¹ Jennifer Walshe, an Irish experimental composer-vocalist, presented a pre-concert talk on the subject of the Guinness Dadaists, a group of Irish working-class artists who, in the early 1920s, marked themselves out as having both revolutionary Dadaist and political affiliations. She explained that the Guinness Dadaists—so named because the group’s members were in the employ of the Guinness brewery in Dublin—staged intermedia performances, comprising sculpture and sound poetry. Drawing upon archival documents that she indicated were held at Trinity College Dublin, including surviving artist diaries, notes and sketches, Walshe demonstrated how the Guinness Dadaists managed to interrogate Irish concepts of identity, heritage and nationalism, while tracing a syncretic path between the twin aesthetics of Celtic Revivalism and Joycean Modernism.²

- 2 Walshe followed her introductory talk with an illustrative performance of some of the group's surviving politically charged sound poetry, affording the audience an opportunity to hear the phonetic excavation performed upon the Irish language by the hitherto unknown Guinness Dadaists and which, presumably, had not fallen upon the ears of any audience since the Irish Civil War (1922-23). However, Walshe's apparent unveiling of this small corner of the Irish avant-garde was a deliberate fiction. The Guinness Dadaists had never existed. Her decision to conjure them into existence was born from a desire to identify with a historical Irish avant-garde, to situate her voice within a cultural heritage that embraced the experimental, maverick and strange. Despite searching the *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* and the archives of the Contemporary Music Centre (the national repository for music by Irish composers), Walshe's efforts to unearth a tradition of Irish avant-garde music turned up nothing. Being confronted with this absence in the CMC archives ignited in her a passion for bringing to light the repressed work of marginalised or forgotten Irish outsider artists, and composers and performers of early experimental music. An avant-garde tradition might serve as a rebuke to the orthodoxy of conservative cultural, political and religious heritage that shaped the social conditions of the Irish state. Though frustrated in her search for documentation of an Irish avant-garde, Walshe did not accept the absence of evidence as evidence of absence. The reality of the seeming historical void with which she was confronted, was, in her eyes, a symptom of repression rather than evidence of non-existence. For Walshe, the heritage of Irish avant-garde music retains at least a form of metaphysical, if not material, existence:

There is a lot missing from that archive. And there's a lot missing, not just because it's missing because it existed, but there's a lot missing because it never existed, because there was never space for it to exist, probably outside of people's heads.³

- 3 Emboldened by her performance of fictional Guinness Dadaist works at the *MAV0tek* concert, Walshe conceived *Aisteach*, a website that would serve as "a repository and archive for historical documents, recordings, materials and ephemera relating to avant-garde artistic projects in Ireland since the 19th century".⁴ *Aisteach*, an Irish word, means strange, peculiar or queer. The site features essays, images and recordings relating to early Irish practitioners of DADA, drone and microtonal music, noise, improvisation, sound poetry, sound art, electroacoustic and radio artists, and other ostensibly niche musical practices. However, this is not rootless modernism or music without place. It is music steeped in custom, mythology and language, and that roots the avant-garde in a distinctly Irish vernacular. The recordings regularly use the syntax or instrumentation of Irish folk culture to deliver tropes of the twentieth-century avant-garde in a way that, to Walshe at least, seems to be an almost inevitable evolution of folk practice. The Uilleann pipes, for example, which in 2017 were inscribed on UNESCO'S Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, have, for Walshe, an obvious affinity with minimalist drone music. Of the pipe playing, she observes, "You have these drones, so it seems completely natural that you'd get rid of all the diddly-eye bit...you sort of hose that off so you just have this core of the drone that's in there".⁵ Recordings credited in the archive to the trio of Uilleann piper and accordion player Pádraig Mac Giolla Mhuire, fiddler Dáithí Ó Cinnéide and tin whistle player Eamon Breathnach, describe an early form of practice that marries minimalist drones with flurries of upper register patterns suggestive of a distinctly Irish union of the music of La Monte Young and Evan Parker. The only extant recording of another Uilleann piper, Ultan O'Farrell, is evidence, the archive contests,

of drone music being documented in Ireland as early as 1910. Elsewhere in the audio collection, the composer and mathematician Eylieff Mullen-White appears as a proto-Eliane Radigue figure, working with synthesizers and tape to create slowly unfolding microtonal soundscapes. *Os Ard*, a work by composer Róisín Madigan O'Reilly, is her translation into the Irish language of the German artist Kurt Schwitters' sound poem *Ursonate*. The composer and field recordist Zaftig Giolla's music is described as mixing landscape recordings of Galway with experiments in electronic music derived from Edgard Varèse and John Cage. The resulting music is said to have given form to a "Futurism of the fen and the bog".⁶ The musical examples repeatedly represent strands of the international avant-garde through what is termed in the archive as a "Hiberno-filter". What is notable is that rather than breaking with the past, the *Aisteach* avant-garde is a rooted, historicised movement, an inevitable by-product and celebration of vernacular culture and heritage.

- 4 It is ironic therefore, that all of the archive entries are fictive, products of the imagination of not just Walshe, but a number of musicologists, musicians and writers she solicited to collaborate on the project. *Aisteach* is a collective hypothetical, a "revisionist exercise in what if?".⁷ Its very existence, though based on non-existence, is a forceful contribution to the discourse around the production and conservation of intangible, specifically musical, cultural heritage. Through *Aisteach*, Walshe confronts issues of desire, imagination and subjectivity in the production of knowledge; and the appropriation, mediation and exoticization of heritage. This article will situate *Aisteach* within the wider practice of using archives to make art, summarise how key debates in wider heritage studies are directly or indirectly addressed by the fictional archive, and contextualise the project within Irish heritage discourse.

Art and (Fictional) Archives

- 5 Jennie Gottschalk has written that there is some precedent for exploring imagined histories in experimental music, pointing to pieces by the composers Johnny Chang, Catherine Lamb, Meredith Monk and Gabriel Dharmoo.⁸ However, the most notable parallels to Walshe's *Aisteach* are found in the visual arts, where creative use of archives and interrogation of the process by which they are constructed has held a deep fascination for a number of contemporary artists.⁹ The representation and production of historical narrative serves as the basis for works by, amongst others, Christian Boltanski, Renée Green, Tacita Dean and Andrea Geyer, all of whom continue to be drawn to the formal and material qualities of the archive. However, it is in the fictive archival projects by Lebanese artist Walid Raad, and the collaborative work of US artists Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye that we find the closest equivalents to Walshe's *Aisteach* project. Raad created the online *Atlas Group* (1999) as a repository for works that he created or "found" that address the devastation wrought in Lebanon by its civil wars.¹⁰ He re-dates the pieces he makes and assigns authorship of them to a cast of fictional artists and organisations. Raad is explicit in his intention that the project be a site of inquiry, a serious interrogation of the very real functions and performance of archiving and the means by which social and political discourse is governed by the process of data collection. *Atlas Group* exhibitions are accompanied by a presentation, given by Raad, in which he lectures on the work of the fictional contributors to the archive. Plants are placed in the lecture audience to ask pre-ordained questions that

will hint at, and ultimately reveal, the ruse being played on uninitiated audience members. The website, though not inclined to immediate revelation of its artifice on the homepage, ultimately declares the fiction in quite matter of fact terms. When the user clicks on the “See the Archives” link, they are prompted to choose between three file types: files produced by and attributed to *The Atlas Group*; files produced by *The Atlas Group* but attributed to anonymous sources; and files produced by *The Atlas Group* and attributed to imaginary individuals or organisations. It is tempting to read Raad’s file categories as an admission, or confession, of deceit, but they are a statement, rather than a confession—a statement of fiction, a truth that all archives are “a social construction, a metaphysical process of selection”¹¹ and that this should be reflected in their taxonomy. The blunt manner in which the fiction is expressed lends Raad’s digital archive a Kafkaesque quality. With no regard to reason or truth, the archival terms of engagement have shifted. How are we to exert judgement over an archive that makes no pretence of authenticity?

- 6 By contrast, Walshe’s statement of fiction is genial and solicitous. A dropdown menu on the *Aisteach* website links to a disclaimer that thanks the user for “reading the fine print” and makes the “confession” that “all the composers and artists on this website are fictional”.¹² Where Raad demurs from contextualising *The Atlas Group*, Walshe offers the explanation that *Aisteach* is an “exercise in what if?, a huge effort by many people to create an alternative history of avant-garde music”.¹³ The what if-ness of *Aisteach* is mirrored in Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye’s *Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993-96).¹⁴ Leonard’s photographic archive accompanies Dunye’s film *Watermelon Woman*, a film in which Dunye seeks out Fae Richards, an African-American lesbian actress who played minor, mostly uncredited, walk-on roles in Hollywood films of the 1930s and ‘40s. Dunye’s film is a fictional documentary about an actress, Fae Richards, who never existed. The character of Richards acts as a foil for Dunye’s fruitless quest to unearth the history of black queer representation in American cinema. The *Fae Richards Photo Archive* is Dunye’s desire to articulate a heritage with which she can identify. This work is perhaps closest to the desirous spirit of Walshe’s *Aisteach* project. Like Dunye, Walshe desired to create a fictive heritage, when official archives produced no evidence for the one she sought.

Make and Do Heritage

- 7 By identifying this void in Irish musical heritage, Walshe found that her desire was free to fill the space where the Irish avant-garde was not. I mean here to use the word “desire” according to the terms in which Giovanna Zapperi employed it in her discussion of feminist perspectives on the archive.¹⁵ For Zapperi, desire is predicated on imagination and intuition. Archival work is not an exercise in dispassionate objectivity but is conditioned by subjective emotions, which help situate the artist in her historical conditions. Zapperi contends that desire “mediates the relationship between past, present and future, positioning the artists’ subjective voice in the process of constructing alternative forms of knowledge”.¹⁶ The artist and archive are mutually productive, contingent on formal operations of assembly and recombination and the subjective affective experiences produced by performing those actions. It is within the interstices between archivist and archive that knowledge, history and heritage is formed. Regina Bendix has observed that concepts such as tradition and authenticity

are borne from vested interests, outside political and academic actors who instil value in privileged areas of culture. She contests that “cultural heritage does not exist, it is made”.¹⁷ Making heritage is a performative act.¹⁸ Zoe Leonard, Cheryl Dunye, and Jennifer Walshe interrogate this performance through desires for inclusive histories. Walshe explains:

If you're only ever told in school that your predecessors are these, in my case, all of these dead men, there is not a lot of space to imagine that you have any position in that narrative, you know. Whereas if you can imagine a whole pile of different people, you know, there is more space for you to say, “Maybe I can be part of that”.

¹⁹

- 8 *Aisteach*, though a fictional archive, acts as a foil for Walshe to construct a heritage with which she can identify, while at the same time, revealing the contingency of official archives and, to invoke Laurajane Smith’s term, “Authentic Heritage Discourse” (AHD).²⁰ As Denis Byrne points out, in most cultures, things and places are not inanimate. They are imbued with the animating presence of ghosts, spirits and deities.²¹ A universalist interpretation of anthropological sites favours the objective tangible relic over the intangible, sometimes spiritual qualities they may have signified. As such, the insistence on rational objective inquiry is as apt to misrepresent local culture and knowledge as it is to safeguard it.²² The proto-scientific vision of heritage is largely a creation of Western political institutions and the hermeneutical prejudice that underpins modern intellectualism.²³ However, whether rooted in official reality, or subjective fantasy, it is the actions taken with, around, or within buildings, monuments, sites, documents, language and ritual, that makes them “heritage”. *Aisteach* reflects Walshe’s frustration at the hermeneutical bias of official institutions which, in her view, historically favour, and fund, precisely notated instrumental works over the experimental, open process-led forms of the musical avant-garde.²⁴ As has been the case in music scholarship,²⁵ researchers have recently begun to emphasise the discursive and processual aspect of heritage.²⁶ Heritage is, Smith has argued, predicated on doing: not just the doing of cultural performance, but on the creative doing of remembering, of archiving, of commemorating and memory making, and of course, the competitive doing of list-making, upon which UNESCO’s cultural safeguards have been founded. Legitimacy is assigned not just by deeds of cultural actors in respect of a site or custom, but by a process of supposedly dispassionate ex-post-facto cultural re/construction. How the discourse around these acts is constituted helps determine how we organise and interact with the world around us. The hitherto tradition in heritage studies and heritage-making of favouring backward-looking inventories of immutable material signifiers (objects, monuments, buildings) over local behaviours, memories and emotions, inhibited our ability to develop empathic relationships with other communities, past and present. Like slowing motorists rubbernecking at the site of an accident, the custodial gaze is naturally entrained by events of the past. One advantage of the past is that it offers up identifiable, material tangibility in the form of documentary evidence which aids, and encourages, cultural selectivity. “Evidence” of course connotes a welcome patina of scientific verifiability to heritage discourse. An evidentiary “thing” may be isolated, authenticated and archived. It may be preserved from the shifting sands of contemporary culture, fixed like a mounted butterfly in a glass case, a paean to permanence, ready to receive the gaze of future heritage experts. However, what this “thingification” of culture bequeaths us, Byrne argues, is “things minus feeling”.²⁷ UNESCO’s intangible heritage list is conceived in response to such

criticisms. It recognises the expanded application of the term heritage, i.e. that it incorporates the contemporary knowledge and skills borne from oral traditions, rituals, performing arts and social practices, and proposes to create a representative world heritage list that is not merely a cataloguing of heritage valued as cultural good, but is a negotiated, inclusive repository dependent upon the participation of the communities that continue to make and transmit cultural heritage. However, as Bendix has pointed out, “Heritagisation itself has a tradition”.²⁸ And tradition is not easily adapted. Despite its better intentions, the 2003 Convention has evident partiality for practices that conform to earlier interpretations of heritage as a cultural good. It requires that applicants be in receipt of State Party support and appear on a national cultural inventory, and favours culture that demonstrates historical continuity,²⁹ all of which serve to underline the Convention’s continued implicit bias for nationalising, commodifying and historicising cultural heritage.

- 9 Cultural selectivity in the form of national cultural inventories encourages valorisation, and the monetization of heritage if it is to be thought worthy of safeguarding.³⁰ The Irish government’s *Global Ireland* initiative, launched in June 2018, highlighted the cultural and economic equivalency at the heart of government policy. One of the central aims of the initiative, in the government’s words, is to “implement a seven-year programme of international promotion of Irish arts and culture, including targeting growth markets for trade and tourism”.³¹ The monetization of culture, and the advent of UNESCO lists underwritten with the imprimatur of States Parties, cultivate heritagisation as a form of competition or cultural arms race. Despite the express aims of ICH, potential economic benefits of heritage supersede moral themes of cultural identity.³² González has argued persuasively that institutional measuring of the “value” of heritage corrupts the production and preservation of common heritage, appropriating it for profiteering private entrepreneurs and public institutions.³³ Whether by the Venice Charter (1964) or the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), the actions of UNESCO, despite their participative and inclusive aspirations, determine heritage as something to be ordained “from without”. Rules determining admission are negotiated by General Assembly, States Parties draw up national cultural inventories, and heritage is authenticated by an Intergovernmental Committee. The fact that the imprimatur of “heritage” must be conferred by committee suggests that there is no essential objective quality inherent to objects or customs that identifies them as *being* heritage. In order to win a place on heritage lists, states such as Ireland inevitably favour the extraordinary or virtuous for conservation over banal or quotidian customs which, though no less important to local cultural identity, may, to outside parties, appear unremarkable or morally questionable. It is evident that at least for the Irish government, the list serves as a promotional tool for a State-mandated “official” Ireland. When, in 2017, the Irish Minister for Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan welcomed the inscription of Uilleann Piping onto the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, she emphasized the music’s “value” and capacity to transport the listener “back to Ireland, no matter where you are”.³⁴ For States Parties, who as signatories to the convention pay contributions to an ICH fund and share the cost of any safeguarding measures, making and legitimising heritage becomes a finite political and economic good. The best of heritage is conserved and passed on to later generations, while the remainder fades from view. The reification of heritage, at the behest of market forces, disempowers local communities and undercuts the shared values that catalyse cultural

production.³⁵ Official Ireland is remade as a linear sequence of virtuous subjects, to borrow Louis Marin's phrase, a "degenerate utopia", ideology remade as myth. In the words of Kiberd, tradition, powered by nationalist ideology, has:

Lost its future, its power to challenge and disrupt: it exists only as a commodity to be admired, consumed, reducing its adherents to the position of tourists in their own country, whose monuments and heritage centres can be visited or re-entered by an act of will.³⁶

- 10 Walshe's work contests the form of cultural selectivity and exoticization that the heritage marketplace demands. She rejects the utopic, narcissistic, official vision of culture, forcibly arguing that art must acknowledge the social reality that AHD suppresses.

The reality of Ireland back then was huge amounts of repression and violence. Now we're a modern nation with farmers downloading hardcore child pornography, while Americans drive by and take tourist photos saying it's so unchanged and pure and rural.³⁷

- 11 *Aisteach* is an explicit acknowledgement of the morally problematic themes suppressed by economically-driven cultural purification. The art within the fictional archive rewrites history in order to confront *real* issues of repression, sectarianism, gender, and racial and sexual differences.

Inventing Irish Heritage

- 12 The Irish have a rich tradition of using mythology and invented histories to bolster their desire for an independent historical narrative, resulting on occasion in the liberal conflation of fact and fiction. It wasn't until the 17th century that Irish historians attempted to seriously sift fact from fiction and write what they considered to be accurate chronological histories attesting to the antiquity of the Irish.³⁸ However, to justify the case for cultural autonomy, Irish historians were inevitably disposed to taking up the defence of the native myths in the face of British cynics, who for their part were prone to regard Irish history as the product of "lying bards". Reflecting the frustration common in British scholars, Richard Cox wrote of Irish historians that:

The very Truths they write do not oblige our Belief, because they are so intermixt with Impossible Stories and Impertinent Tales, that it is exceeding difficult to distinguish which is the History and which the Fable.³⁹

- 13 Despite criticism from their British counterparts and the efforts of early historians to parse Irish history into verifiable fact and bardic "fabula", the Irish were reluctant to shake mythology from the national psyche. For the historians, the stories were not just parables or diversions, but helped speak to the country's distinctive heritage. When, in the absence of any corroborating evidence, historians dated myths such as the story of Queen Medb to the second century AD, they knowingly lent the native tradition a sheen of historical credence. J.P. Mallory has documented how, up until the mid-19th century, Irish scholars continued to defend the native history against British rationalist incursions, believing the stories to hold truths that were otherwise absent from more evidentiary accounts.⁴⁰ In fact, as Mallory points out, Ireland is still littered with commemorative monuments and plaques that seem to speak to the veracity of the myths that shaped the national self-image. From these memorials to a mythic past, we might infer that the Irish have not yet fully ceded to the historical imperative.

- 14 AHD performs a similar function to the role mythology played in constructing the Irish narrative, a modern-day version of self-mythologizing. Heritage discourse authenticates a civilization's antiquity that, particularly in the case of post-colonial territories, is used to justify the social, economic and political trauma that habitually accompanies hard won independence. Newly independent countries are faced with a choice between rebuilding society from the heritage that was used to legitimate their struggle for independence, or to break with the past, and, in anticipation of a world they crave, initiate a cultural revolution to mirror the political one that has already taken place.
- 15 Nascent states typically attempt to wrest control over their heritage by adopting a form of cultural protectionism. It becomes socially and politically desirable for an unbroken line to be traced backward from a declaration of independence to a national origin myth. Consequently, pure contiguous tradition is prized over seditious cultural revolution. The valorization of heritage serves the aims of nationalists who fetishize the perceived cultural purity of the past and, in Kiberd's words, fancy themselves "the final point of history, and the past a foil to their narcissism".⁴¹ There is no room for an art movement, such as the avant-garde, that questions orthodoxy, proposing to begin again from first principles. Declan Kiberd has observed that "there was, if anything, less freedom in post-independence Ireland, for the reason that the previous attempt to arraign the enemy without gave way to a new campaign against the heretic within".⁴²
- 16 As in other post-revolutionary societies, the Irish state, in its first flush of independence, and under the influence of the Church, declared cultural self-determination through deleterious censorship of its most inquiring minds. Shorn of its seemingly less palatable aspects, Irish heritage was repackaged for easy international and domestic consumption. It lost its ability to contest the political landscape. No longer functional, tradition is rendered instead as iconic, a cultural image, devoid of the means to make material interventions in the social or political realms. Proclaiming his disappointment, James Joyce remarked to the painter Arthur Power, that there was greater cultural freedom in the Ireland of his youth. English rule, Joyce observed, had liberated the Irish from the social and political responsibilities that would later still their radical urgings.⁴³ Kiberd summarises the situation thus: "A revolution which began by seeing liberation as choice had rapidly become a quest for *liberation from choice*, a quest for a few pious certainties".⁴⁴ Conservative culture pushes out those that feel excluded from the "authentic" heritage discourse. The Censorship of Films Act in 1923, and Censorship of Publications Act in 1929 were emblematic of a reactionary culture that prompted many artists to leave Ireland by the end of that decade.⁴⁵ For Walshe, a heritage of Irish avant-garde art, and the inclusive experimentalism it avows, is a necessary corrective to the monocultural threat of social conservatism.

Because when you're a kid when you're growing up ... you're in this situation where you think, "I can never actually stay at home. I have to leave". And that turns into: "I have to leave because I'm gay", or "I have to leave because I'm trans", or "I have to leave because I'm a girl and girls don't do this", and so I think it's just trying to create that space.⁴⁶

- 17 In many of the accounts in the *Aisteach* archive, the state, operating largely as an avatar of the Catholic Church, repressed all but the most dogged experimental artists. It did so either through censorious expurgation of experimental art works and venues, or by pernicious dereliction of the conditions necessary for free-thinking, subversive artists to thrive. Many of the contributions are advocates of the avant-garde's capacity to

mitigate the exclusionary practices of religious conservatism. In his account of Bartley Dunne's pub, a gay bar and avant-garde sanctum, Stephen Graham laments the opportunity lost for Irish society. Had the radical pluralism that was taking root in the backrooms of venues such as Bartley Dunne's been cultivated rather than suppressed, it may, Graham argues, have helped alleviate the contagion of theocratic nationalism that was effectively calcifying Irish culture. The critique of cultural conservatism is most explicit in the accounts of the avowedly political groups like *The Keening Women's Alliance*, a feminist community co-operative, and the political performance art group, the Kilkenny Engagists. Responding to the Engagist performance piece *Transubstantiate* (1975), in which performers dressed in religious vestments variously performed acts of auto-erotic asphyxiation, masturbation and self-mutilation, the art critic of the *Irish Times* is reported to have said:

As they performed, stripping off the habits and showing us weak, pale Irish skin, something we had all been reared to think of as so shameful, as it went on, with them wreaking havoc on their own bodies with a deep sadness and commitment, I began to feel a huge anger building in me. An anger at the way this country has been warped into violence by religion, at the sectarian violence we pursue on a daily basis with aspects of our own psyches being the frontline victims, at a Church who polices and abuses so many.⁴⁷

- 18 Even, in cases where the artists are less explicitly political, the pall of social conservatism checks the enlightened momentum of the avant-garde. Graham, who authored the essay on Bartley Dunne's pub, writes of how educator and pianist Theresa Flynn's efforts to adopt an inclusive musical pedagogy and socially responsible recruitment of students were stifled by a "craven musical and political establishment".⁴⁸ The music of composer, poet and field-recordist Zaftig Giolla was lost, the reader is informed, to the "fug of 1950s cultural indigence". The artists celebrated in the archive are ad hoc groups and individuals whose spirit of free-thinking invention persisted in the face of systemic puritanical headwinds. It suggests that ordinary people do extraordinary things, even in the most unfavourable circumstances. Amongst the wide breadth of activities, the archive documents the practice of surrealist musician and dramaturgist Sean Cullinane, radio-artist and sound poet Roisin Madigan-O'Reilly, outsider artists Alexander Black and Caoimhin Breathnach, beekeeper-organist-composer Joseph Garvan Digges, and Sr Anselme O'Ceallaigh, a Carmelite Nun and hitherto unknown progenitor of drone music.⁴⁹ Such are the ecumenical tastes of Walshe's archive that all of the principal movements of the international avant-garde are mirrored, or in some cases prefigured, by these artists. Listed as cultural iconoclasts are schoolteachers, folklorists, pipers and fiddle players, artists with disabilities, brewery workers, amateur astronomers, reclusive eccentrics, community activists, and gay and transvestite performance artists. *Aisteach* recalls Nietzsche's proclamation that in the absence of a good father, a better one must be invented. Threaded throughout is a hyperrealist desire to marry believable fiction with culture's most fantastical corners. As Walshe recounts, the goal was to "find pieces of reality that smack of surreality... And then trying to make pieces of fiction that we buff enough so that they feel like they could be real".⁵⁰

When Fiction Becomes Reality

- 19 If we adopt the fictional archive as a rhetorical tool for moderating, or at least questioning, the appropriative excesses of heritagisation and its apparent utopic vision of national cultures, we quickly run up against some small but important questions of logic that it is useful to address. Firstly, when a fictional archive is brought into being, is it not the case that it becomes de-facto real, taking its place alongside and becoming subsumed by the mandated heritage it questions? And, following from that point, and perhaps more troubling, is the charge that, in creating a utopic counter-narrative, does the author of the fictional archive not commit the same original sin of selective cultural reification and enclosure that exercised her ire in the first place? The cynic might protest that, as a comment on the archival process, it is hardly a satisfactory rhetorical move to merely repeat the misstep of AHD. Despite its subversive impetus, the fictional archive seems to quickly become entangled in a strange loop, moving through levels of rhetorical abstraction but failing to emerge from the web of paradoxical self-reflection it has created for itself. What it seems to be tending toward is an iteration of the Epimenides paradox.⁵¹
- 20 The fictional archives of Walshe, Raad, Dunye and Leonard are, depending on your point of view, either tautological or paradoxical collective statement that archives are fictional: *This archive, which is a fiction, states that all archives are a fiction*. However, to dismiss their work in this fashion is facile. Walshe's work requires a more nuanced reading (and listening) than that which gives rise to the self-reflection objection. Suggesting that *Aisteach* is merely constructing heritage anew is to diminish both its cultural ambition and artistic significance. Where AHD values and privileges inclusion, Walshe's *Aisteach* advances its necessary complement: exclusion. A deconstructionist reading of Walshe's work would suggest, as with Leonard and Dunye before her, that she is advocating a revision of heritage discourse by rooting her project in the binary complement of heritagisation. In so doing, Walshe draws attention to the "violent hierarchy" at the heart of binary heritage discourse.⁵² She suggests with *Aisteach* that "official" heritage dominates and eventually extinguishes other cultural practices. While this deconstructionist characterisation may be closer to the spirit of both *Aisteach* and the *Fae Richards Archive* it omits a significant, perhaps key distinguishing feature of Walshe's project: its continued, open-ended evolution.
- 21 As mentioned above, Zapperi has described the work of Leonard and Dunye as impelled by desire. The inducement to act is rooted in absence, in a lack, without which Leonard, Dunye and Walshe would not be in want. Zapperi contends that desire "mediates" between past and present. The in-between state of desire that Zapperi identifies is the subject of an essay by the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray who characterises desire as a perpetual process of becoming.⁵³ Walshe's archive is neither inclusive nor exclusive. Her desire to identify with Ireland's official musical heritage contests the fundamental binary opposition underpinning AHD, occupying instead the between state that Irigaray describes.
- 22 Walshe was insistent that *Aisteach* would be an open platform, a communal space that is receptive to the desires of its contributors to redress issues in Irish heritage that condition contemporary experiences of identity and belonging. She found that "people wanted female characters, they wanted queer characters ... there was no brief regarding that, it was just what people wanted. People tended to pursue things they

were passionate about”.⁵⁴ She recruited writers and musicians from disparate cultural and national backgrounds to better contest “authentic Ireland”, encouraging them to use the “idea of Irishness” as a medium in which to play, not just for the purposes of inventing a past but bringing a desired present into being.⁵⁵ *Aisteach* is impelled forward by the evident desire of the musicologists and musicians that contribute to the website, by those that commission new works from the fictional composers that populate the archive, and by Walshe herself who continues to deliver performances and lectures of and about the work. Her archive is interrogative rather than corrective. The cynical reading suggests that adopting the supposed repressive lingua franca of archival practice is to be complicit in the implied censorship and repression it means to subvert. A more sympathetic reading would argue that *Aisteach* echoes Irigaray’s call for “jamming the theoretical machinery itself”.⁵⁶ Walshe is siding with the excluded other of heritage production, those artists and musicians who are relegated to a position outside of official cultural discourse. Though it is important to recognise the importance of the objection that *Aisteach* does not abandon the archival process, nor ex officio cultural heritage, it is not Walshe’s intention to offer a utopic alternative to the official cultural narrative. With strong parallels of Irigaray’s reclamation of women in European philosophy, her project seeks to reclaim those that have been lost to the Irish cultural narrative, not by rejecting heritage discourse. In fact, Walshe talks enthusiastically of the fascination that archives of the Contemporary Music Centre hold for her as a practicing composer and enthusiast of music history and identity. She does not identify with, nor undertake her creative work in response to the apparatus that defines ICH, and despite an apposite reference to *Aisteach* as “fictional heritage made tangible”, her project tackles the term “heritage” in its vernacular sense.⁵⁷ Walshe’s work offers an alternative vision of Irish heritage construction, urging us to engage in cultural heritage discourse, but to engage differently.

- 23 *Aisteach* is a radical, sometimes provocative turn, rooted in desire, flowering into a state of perpetual becoming. Desire is both the base condition of the work and the catalytic impulse that propels it forward. Irigaray’s treatment of the historicity of the ancient Greek female philosopher Diotima has many resonances with Walshe’s *Aisteach*. Diotima’s place within the Western philosophical tradition is habitually delegitimized by the common acceptance of her as a fictional creation of Socrates. For Irigaray, Diotima’s absence from Plato’s Symposium is evidence of what she describes as “sexual indifference” in European philosophy. However, the key point is that the purpose of Irigaray’s essay is to do more than decry the patriarchy of philosophy. Echoing Zapperi’s contention that the archive’s role in knowledge construction is contingent upon the subjective voice, Sarah Tyson describes Irigaray’s reading of Diotima as an attempt to:

[U]se Diotima’s absence as an invitation to authorship, moving the site of philosophical authority from texts to our practices of engaging (reading, but also reading out loud and writing in response to) texts.⁵⁸

- 24 As in Irigaray’s essay on Diotima, Walshe’s project exploits absence as an invitation to authorship. For Walshe, authority is not found within the archive, but is formed in our practice of engagement and response to its authority. *Aisteach* represents what Irigaray would term an “intermediate state”. The site, its content, and related activities are continually growing, a platform for the desire of musicologists and composers, and as such is neither a fictional nor real archive. Following Irigaray, it manages to slip the binds of the dialectic imperative, rejecting a need to confirm, refute or synthesise

competing discourse, but instead advances the existence and importance of, in Irigaray's words, "what is held *between*, what permits the passage between ignorance and knowledge".⁵⁹ Love, which Irigaray equates with desire, is intermediary between opposites, i.e. in the case of *Aisteach*, between inclusion and exclusion. It disrupts the archive's pretension at truth, highlighting instead its desirous state. *Aisteach* is neither a facile nor cynical examination of the heritage process. *Aisteach* is an act of love.

- 25 The affective quality of the archive, and its merits as a work of art, depends on the liminal space between construction and re-construction. This between-space affords an audience the opportunity to countenance the haunting presence of the ghosts of cultural actors lost to heritage discourse. Walshe tends toward realist terms when discussing the archive. It is a way to arrest the romanticisation of Irish heritage and reclaim the strange in Irish culture. She says, "Well let's engage, because there's probably some locals who are into all sorts of mad stuff".⁶⁰ The affecting imbrication of fact and fiction in *Aisteach* situates the audience in a desiring present, moved both to unveil secrets of the past and anticipate a craved future. When asked about the need for a distinctive Irish avant-garde, Walshe comments that "I've lived in New York and Berlin and all that, but it's also important for my niece and nephew to know that there's a whole avenue of weirdness available to them". The contributions to *Aisteach* aim to reclaim the energy of a hidden past, repurposing it as fuel for a re-birth, a process of becoming, rather than a revival of Irish culture. *Aisteach* recognises that heritage, as Walshe contests, is a necessarily political act. Foucault wrote that the archive is "the first law of what can be said".⁶¹ It may be effectively appropriated not only by state actors but by individuals, like Walshe, who wish to redeem the failings of the past in service of a desired future. To that end, Walshe sounds the clarion for reimagining our heritage through the archive: "If we are going to exoticise, let's exoticise ourselves for our own ends".⁶²

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ABSTRACTS

Recent debates in heritage and archive studies have centred around the question of intangibility and how best to faithfully conserve and document dynamic cultural practices. This article

explores the way in which composer Jennifer Walshe's project *Aisteach*, a fictional archive of the Irish avant-garde, interrogates questions of authenticity, exoticisation, commodification, misrepresentation and marginalisation in heritage discourse, both tangible and intangible. Drawing upon art theory, philosophy, heritage and archive studies, it is argued that by contesting the binary underpinning of evaluative cultural heritage discourse, *Aisteach* instead advances a form of cultural production occupying a liminal space between inclusion and exclusion, past and present, fact and fiction.

Les débats récents au sein des études sur le patrimoine et les archives ont principalement porté sur la question de l'immatérialité et la manière de conserver et de documenter fidèlement des pratiques culturelles dynamiques. Cet article explore la façon dont le projet *Aisteach*, une archive fictionnelle de l'avant-garde irlandaise imaginée par la compositrice Jennifer Walshe, pose le problème de l'authenticité, de l'exotisation, de la marchandisation, de la mauvaise représentation ou de la marginalisation dans le discours patrimonial, matériel comme immatériel. En puisant dans la théorie de l'art, la philosophie et les études sur le patrimoine et les archives, on défend l'idée qu'en contestant les fondements binaires des discours d'évaluation du patrimoine culturel, *Aisteach* propose au contraire une forme de production culturelle qui occupe un espace intermédiaire entre inclusion et exclusion, passé et présent, fait et fiction.

INDEX

Mots-clés: musique, avant-garde, Walshe (Jennifer), *Aisteach*, patrimoine culturel immatériel, archive fictionnelle, Irlande

Keywords: music, avant-garde, Walshe (Jennifer), *Aisteach*, intangible cultural heritage, fictional archive, Ireland

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