

# The Politics of the centre



Local-election posters outside the NCAD Gallery, June 2009; photo / courtesy the author

Before the local elections on 5 June 2009, I had the obligatory door-to-door visit from a local politician. I came away from the interaction wondering about the term *local*. For the politician, the word *local* is the keynote of their spin. *Local* means a focus on your concerns within your locality. He/ she is here for you, your perspective, your landscape, and your ideals. If you have something to say, they are your voice. The local politician usually advertises their roots as part of their campaign: "born in the area". This means that they understand the nature of your concerns and troubles. They are just like you. But, are they? Is there such a thing as being local? Has the term *local* lost its way by virtue of our ever-expanding view of the global?

The following text is an exploration of this notion of the local and the human aspiration to get to a centre of influence in order to be the centre of attention. The theoretical backdrop to this discussion is Nicolas Bourriaud's term the *radicant*, the 'vegetable' protagonist of the French curator-critic's new *Altermodern* thesis. The *radicant* is the artist as transient, without roots or the responsibility to adhere to their 'localness' (a case in point is the English artist Liam Gillick, who is representing Germany at this years *Venice Biennale*, and not to forget Bourriaud's 2009 *Tate Triennial*, which for the first time this year had non- British artists included under the criteria 'Passing through').

[1] From the root of Bourriaud's *radicant* the discussion will look at the current political landscape as an example of how, even from the margins, we think we can influence something at the centre (the June 2009 local elections were generally looked at as a potential 'forcing out' of the current government, by way of a Fine Gael majority on a local level, and so a no-confidence vote and a hurried general election).

Another instance, which highlights the importance of being at the centre and the fear of being allocated to the periphery, was in 2006, when NCAD was faced with the prospect of being uprooted from Dublin city centre to Dublin 4. This proposed move to UCD would have changed the politics of the centre in relation to who held the position of attention in visual-arts education in Ireland. Another centre of influence is the art market. For example, the *Frieze art fair* funded a project space - *Frieze projects* - that is part of the fair with aspirations of distancing itself from art-market politics. How does a legitimate art-project space, that is part of and parceled by the art fair itself, distance itself from market politics which are at the centre of the art fair, but also create a significant gap between the market and itself to influence something more sustainable than the fickle forecasts of the fair? And finally, there's this years *Venice Biennale* and the collateral events that aspire to gain attention through theatricality or the 'wow

factor'. What lengths will the artist go to in order to open the doors to success, financial or otherwise?



Kim Coleman and Jenny Hoghart: *Players*, 2009, performance shot, *Frieze projects*; image held [here](#)

At a time of economic and political uncertainty the politician becomes a shapeshifter; they morph. Today, the face of politics shifts to the face of the bank. Depending on the individual's perspective, from either a local or global gaze, the untrustworthy face shifts to either your neighbor, or the face that is current in the media. For example, in our recent past the centre was represented by George W Bush and America. The centre sometimes can be a monstrous place. It is a place where power is given and taken away. The fear of losing power, more often than not, creates a fence for the insecure individual at the centre to perch on. Being caught between is a contemporary concept. Artists are always going on about *in betweenness*; ambiguity is an antidote for the dead-end question. If the fence is a place where politicians and concepts perch, where do we situate ourselves in order to influence and gain power? In the context of this

discussion, where does power reside for the artist? Is location the end-all: the periphery versus the centre, the rural versus the urban, the *culchie* versus the *jackeen*?

"Oh, they are LOCAL" has similar connotations with "Oh it's just ART." Having perspective is a complex thing. Like the shapeshifting politician, it is difficult to pin down 'localness'. Perspective can be defined by your view or position in relation to a given space. I am physically here but I can see over there. Is being local, not being able to see over there, being shortsighted? To be honest, I am defining *local* as the rural inhabitant, the hick cliché. The opposite of *local* is the tourist or what Nicolas Bourriaud has termed 'the radican't':

And yet the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer are the dominant figures of contemporary culture. To remain within the vocabulary of the vegetable realm, one might say that the individual of these early years of the twenty-first century resembles those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does. Ivy belongs to the botanical family of the radicans...The radican't develops in accord with its host soil. It conforms to the latter's twists and turns and adapts to its surfaces and geological features. It translates itself into the terms of the space in which it moves. With its at once dynamic and dialogical signification, the adjective 'radican't' captures this contemporary subject, caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other, it defines the subject as an object of negotiation. [2]

Bourriaud asks: "So the global imagination is dominated by flexibility?" Being local, or 'localness' can also be seen as not being flexible, unable to change. This inability to change reminds one of the *Star Trek* character that partly influenced Alan Phelan's *Barbara's boy*. Phelan's portrait of the tragic shape-shifter, Odo, catches the changeling in mid-flux. It is a portrait of the character's inability to perfect his shape-shifting abilities. The back-story to the character reveals that Odo does not know anything about his origins. So the alien coincidentally becomes a space explorer, searching for his home so he can refine his potential ability to change properly. Odo has the flexibility but lacks the knowledge that will allow him to change. Or is it all a case of environment? The shapeshifter has been displaced from his own environment. His 'localness' has been taken from him. He is a tourist. He lacks the knowledge to change, and so lacks power. In the end, he wants to get back his 'localness'.



Alan Phelan: *Barbara's Boy (The Alternate)*, archival paper, EVA glue, plastic blow-up hen party doll, gold paint, 49 x 104 x 32 cm; image held [here](#)

In 2006, NCAD was about to be uprooted from a centre of influence to a periphery of influence. How would that proposed move from Thomas Street, Dublin city, to UCD on

the outskirts of the city have affected NCAD as an institution? With Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology down the road, there would have been an inevitable bumping of heads. NCAD's location is why it stands at the fore of art education in Ireland. Gradcam, a recent initiative that facilitates postgraduate study across several art institutes in Dublin and Belfast, could never have existed anywhere else. NCAD has always received the most attention when it comes to the showcasing of its students' wares at the end-of-year degree shows. The college is blessed with its location from a sociological as well as political standpoint. Curators, art critics and the market are not good travelers. They are not the "urban wanderers" that Bourriaud speaks of. So all in all, NCAD is the jewel in the crown of the art-head.

It is once again in the realm of *Star Trek* to predict the fallout of such an uprooting. However, oblige me to consider a prediction in the vein of Bourriaud. For instance, let us take as a starting point, the public arts centre. Usually located on the periphery, the arts centre is acknowledged as a space that is for the local, just like the aforementioned politician. Funding and support are dealt out with the local card in hand. In the initial stages, the arts centre starts small, having local submissions and education events. However, in time, the arts centre begins to expand outward, inviting curators and artists from outside the local area to exhibit. A more ambitious program pops up every year and the arts centre becomes a desirable site for more established artists to exhibit. Local events still occur, but the real impetus is on showing art from the periphery or centre, depending on where you are standing. Now let us take NCAD Gallery, a hybrid mesh of public arts centre, gallery, and educational space. Generally, the arts centre or gallery have one or two curators, or a board, that pull the strings. However, with NCAD there is the problem of departmental politics. NCAD is still very much a traditional art college. Other institutes have a more dispersed outlook when it

comes to department logistics. NCAD on the other hand has a finite vision on the idea of the department: Painting goes here, Print goes there, Media up here and Sculpture over there, and never the four should meet, or worse still, cross over. When it comes to the gallery and the board that controls the input and output of the space, the decisions must suffer from departmental turf-war.

So the centre of influence in art education in Ireland, which NCAD has, is a layered centre. This is where politics and power struggles reign. It seems that to maintain your place at the centre, the centre has to be divided into stalwart parts, which sit side by side to make a whole. Is it a sacrifice or does it just maintain the status quo? In this setting, departments can focus on their said mediums and allow for students who flee from the flock to try something different. The IADT model for the Fine Art department is a more dispersed arena. As a student of both colleges I found that NCAD was a more politicised site. If NCAD had moved outbound to UCD, that energy that comes with politics would have dissipated. DIT may have become the new centre, with an equivalent 'Gradcam' academy attached, and maybe a new gallery. That said, it would have been interesting to see how starting from fresh soil would have affected the politics of running a college that was at the centre to a college pushed to the curb. NCAD would still have its name, but not the location. Bourriaud describes the positives of such a uprooting in relation to the *radicant* artist when he says:

Their universe contains neither origin nor end, except for those they decide to establish themselves. One can bring along fragments of identity, provided one transplants them to other soils and accepts the fact of their permanent metamorphosis - a sort of voluntary metempsychosis that prefers the play of successive guises and precarious shelters to

incarnations of any kind. Thus, there are fewer points of contact with the soil, for the artists choose these contacts instead of enduring them. They drill down into the ground at a campsite; they stay at the surface of a habitat - it makes little difference... Let's be even more mobile than global capitalism. There can be no question of permitting oneself to be backed into a corner and forced to embrace stagnation as an ideal. [3]

It is a leap to put an uprooting of an institution in the same category as the nomadic *radicant* artist, but let's leap just for the sake of science fiction. "Stagnation as an ideal" is something that establishments perpetually grapple with, due to a juggling of power between the bit-parts that make up an institution. Of course, there is the issue of money. Funding may be more forthcoming when a less finite discipline (such as Fine Art), that needs to create 'New Knowledge', is attached to a bigger multi-disciplinary campus. Significantly, art courses in the American educational system, which are more often than not bit-parts of multidisciplinary institutions, have fared well in this structure. Columbia, Yale and MIT visual-arts programs are examples of art courses existing as part of a bigger institution. 'The sum is greater than its individual parts' is a truism that fits this equation. Gradcam, which is indirectly part of NCAD, reflects this truism in how it merges different disciplines under the broad terms 'Creative Arts & Media'. This maybe an example of a 'bit-part' knocking at the door to the centre of influence, or breaking away from the centre to create a new centre of interest.

Let us go deeper into the centre and look at the quagmire that is the art market and how events such as *Frieze art fair* are trying to do something about the finite nature of such an event. When the curator of *Frieze projects*, Neville Wakefield, was asked what the *Frieze projects* bring to the fair, he replied: "A critical voice, as the fair is a market. The projects bring art that isn't available for sale, and art that is able to engage

critically with the conditions of the fair and the conditions of how art is seen and sold." [4] *Frieze projects*, a project that seems to exist outside of the narrow white corridors of the fair, is commissioned by the fair itself. But let's not look at this as a negative aspect. Of course the art market is bound to fund projects, that over the last few years have been ambitious affairs. Mike Nelson's *Mirror infill* from the 2006 fair, in some ways a fabricated space that reflected the fabricated art market alongside, was the first work to really interrupt the 'Business as Usual' slogan that pervades the art fair. Nelson built a kind of hidden space within the art fair. It was anti-display, in the sense of not showing your wares from their best aspect, and easy to miss. Nelson said in 2006 that:

There is an expectation of criticality built into the invitation to produce a project for an art fair, one that is in itself disempowering. As a phenomenon the art fair is interesting - things are taken from their habitats, displayed and jumbled in a new purpose-built home to be consumed in every sense and elevated to another tier of mythology. It was a long time before I could think of an appropriate work, something which both adored and abhorred in equal parts, to become as a mirror held up and to expand the vacuum beyond. There also seemed to be an urgency to the project, as if there was a limited period in which outdated darkroom technology could speak of memory and reflection without being quaint. Turning to confront the unseen beast that tracks us, we are left to look and decide whether the recognition of this apparition is reassuring or frightening. [5]



Mike Nelson: *Mirror infill*, 2006, installation shot at *Frieze projects*; image held [here](#)

As an art student at the time of experiencing Nelson's Project, I found that, for the briefest of moments, it overshadowed the usual talk of money and trends that follow the art fair. What is key in Nelson's project is the title, *Mirror infill*. I assume that Nelson did not expect his work to exist outside the market through its criticality of the fair's crowded white walls and display lighting. In a way, his work, which existed as a hidden darkroom within and around the fair, put the fair in bigger and brighter lights, and highlighted the position of art in relation to the market - to the point that the fair reflects back with greater force, showing up Nelson's project as a juvenile distraction. So for that moment in time, I experienced an interruption at a centre of influential consumerism. Considering the power that the art market wields, this was a significant achievement. Two years later, the New York-based artist Cory Arcangel did the opposite, but it seems, with the same outcome. If Nelson's project acted as a dark reflection of the fair, a type of doppelgänger, on the margins, striving for the centre of attention but in the end only reflecting a dark twin, Arcangel's project was a one-liner

that, like Nelson, was not a protest or affront to the goings-on at the art fair but an acceptance of the procedure that underlies the market. Arcangel gave an opportunity for one gallery that did not make it through the *Frieze art* selection process, to get the Golden Ticket, literally, and show at the fair.



Cory Archangel: *Golden Ticket*, 2008, detail, from *Frieze projects*; image held [here](#)

Our aspiration to find the centre is to find power. We see the centre as the seat of power. From this throne we can generate influence and attention. But does this centre of influence really exist? Can the centre grant further growth? Can the centre expand outward? Is the centre a dead end, where you have to turn back? Is the periphery the real seat of power? Bourriaud's centre and periphery is coming from a global perspective. He is not looking at the 'periphery' from the standpoint of one city or country. He is looking from a planetary scope. From Bourriaud's lens we can only see land masses; the West, the East, the Industrialised and Non-Industrialised. If you are

outside the centre you are an alien, you are Odo. Bourriaud draws a map of this artist exodus from the periphery to the centre when he says:

Rare are the artists from countries of the periphery who have succeeded in penetrating the central system of contemporary art while continuing to reside in their countries of origin: removing themselves from all cultural determinism by successive acts of reenrooting, brilliant individuals like Rikrit Tiravanija, Kim Soo-Ja, and Pascale Marthine Tayou succeed in processing their respective cultures' local signs only from the economic centre. [6]

Bourriaud's map of the art world is made up of cold and hot spots. It is a true reflection of how the artist's 'local signs' are lost in the cold periphery and found at the hot centre. This would-be exodus of the more efficient, globalised artist is an exotic proposal. Also, Bourriaud is very good at convincing the would-be artist practitioner that this is now, that was then, and this is what is going to happen. *Relational aesthetics* hit the art world big, and is still hitting it, even if the inaugural group of artists has broken from Bourriaud's influence. In the art-college libraries it is a must-have, booked out for months. So Bourriaud is good at influencing people, and what he says, artists like to hear. His proposals are always heartfelt, combined with a clarity of vision that is easy to assimilate. And importantly, he does not perch on the fence. How many times have we seen a quote from the book *Relational aesthetics*, or the term itself, become part of the makeup of an artist's statement. It is a bible. J J Charlesworth testifies to Bourriaud's ability to sway the masses:

It's a testament to the nomadic French curator-critic's uncommon talent for fusing a keen attention to emergent trends in art with a freewheeling taste

for grand theoretical speculation, for unlike celebrity philosophers or theory-spouting curator-clones, Bourriaud is a genuine mediator of big ideas and has the temerity to come up with a few of his own, all the time keeping these plausibly close to the prevailing artistic and cultural winds. [7]

If you believe what you read, power and authority seem to revolve around this notion of centrality. The artist and critic Melanie Gilligan describes her own position in the art world as keeping one foot in the art world and "keeping one foot on the ground, in other interests." This other foot that she speaks of is placed firmly in the contemporary financial markets. It is this distance and other interest that gives her criticism an off-the-fence acuity.

If art criticism is facing a diminished centrality within the systems which support art production, one major cause of this shift may be what has been described as a reluctance among art critics to debate contentious issues and make value judgements, a situation often understood to be either a legacy of post-modern theory, a result of a reigning market logic of equivalence in today's art world or both...when art happily operates as frictionless market offerings this in turn invites a climate of critical relativism and promotion. [8]

This "reigning market logic of equivalence" that Gilligan speaks of could be ascribed to the art fair, situated firmly at the centre of the art world. What you could only describe as a collateral event, *Frieze projects*, can only aspire to interrupt the market for the briefest of moments. However, *Frieze projects* can be looked at as a success, not to be

measured in time but by the 'hick-up,' that this interruption causes in what Gilligan describes as a "frictionless market."

Another 'hick-up', by way of a collateral event, is currently occurring at this year's *Venice Biennale*. In recent times in the context of war, the word *collateral* was paired with *damage*. However, in the case of war, *collateral* was not subordinate to a centre of attention. In reality the term *collateral* became synonymous with the caption that scrolled across the bottom of television screens on all of the news channels, BREAKING NEWS. If the term *collateral* can gain ground as the centre of attention in times of war, how about in the context of John Gerrard's 'splash' in Venice. In a conversation between Linda Norden and Jasper Sharp, Norden describes how, when she first met John Gerrard, he "made me think that he wanted to be rescued from an audience that was responding to the 'wow factor'." [9] Maybe not being 'rescued' from the 'wow-factor' in the context of the initial rumors, build-up and current reception of Gerrard's work on the periphery, is why he finds himself placed at the centre of attention. Blake Gopnik from the *Washington Post* forecasts a significant amount of future attention for the artist:

Irish artist John Gerrard is off in a far part of Venice that few people ever get to. And he's only on the periphery of the official *Venice Biennale* events. But Gerrard seems to have made a splash despite those handicaps. The projected landscapes that he's showing are more compellingly real than any art you're likely to have seen, but also more complex in their view of our realities. The artist announced last week that most of his Venice exhibition will be coming to the Hirshhorn in the fall. [10]



John Gerrard: *Dust Storm (Dalhart, Texas)*, 2007, installation shot from *Animated Scene*, Venice Biennale collateral event; image held [here](#)

It is not surprising that Gopnik says, "And he is only on the periphery." Gaining attention from the periphery is an anomaly. But when anomalies occur, they do not go unnoticed. Gerrard's future show at the Hirshhorn, Washington DC, at the end of the year is a testament to location not being the end-all.

There is a fraction of a moment that separates rising and sinking. Some people call it luck, others hubris. One of Jean-Michel Basquiat's memorable quips on a canvas from the mid-1980s was, "most of the bums in the Bowery were bankers." The Bowery in New York was an area that was defined by homelessness, especially in the 1970s and '80s. Ironically, Basquiat would later see himself displaced in a similar way, but from the streets to the upper echelons of society. Positions in society are not static, they grow or recede. In 2006, NCAD's stable position at the fore of art education in Ireland was compromised. Such an uprooting would have caused a rupture in how things had worked up to 2006 in the Irish art world. NCAD would have been pushing up daisies

out at Dublin 4. I say this based on the conclusion that there has to be something to lose for politics to exist in such a unstable form at the centre. And without the politics and power games that occur at the centre of influence, 'stagnation as an ideal' would inevitably win over. Maybe it is not a jump to put an uprooting of an institution in the same category as Bourriaud's nomadic *radicant*. Why not look at the shapeshifting politics at the centre of influence as a constant reshuffling of positions in order to avoid 'stagnation as an ideal'.

**James Merrigan** is an artist.

[1] 'Tom Morton interviews Nicolas Bourriaud', Frieze magazine, Issue 120, Jan-Feb 2009

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud, 2009. The Radicant. New York and Berlin: Sternberg. 'Radicals and radicants', pp 44-60.

[3] Ibid

[4] Neville Wakefield interview: <http://www.howdowegettohereblog.com/interviews.html>

[5] Mike Nelson, 'Statement for Frieze Projects Commission,' July 2006,

[http://www.friezefoundation.org/commissions/detail/mike\\_nelson/](http://www.friezefoundation.org/commissions/detail/mike_nelson/)

[6] Nicolas Bourriaud, op cit, pp. 161 - 171

[7] J J Charlesworth, Art review, Issue 33, Summer 2009, p 152

[8] Melanie Gilligan, 'The contemporary social market', Daniel Birnbaum, Isabelle Graw (eds), Canvases and careers today, criticism and its markets, Sternberg Press, August 2008, first presented at a conference organised by the Institut für Kunstkritik in Frankfurt am Main in 2007

[9] John Gerrard, Animated scene, accompanying catalogue for 53rd Venice Biennale, Schlegel, Editor, 2009

[10] Blake Gopnik, 'A most 'animated' eco-critique: Irish artist's high-tech videos roil with critical power,' The Washington Post, 9 June 2009