A Different Republic

2.

In 1996, the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities published its report. *A Strategy for Equality* was a landmark in the development of a culture of rights for people with disabilities in Ireland. The report noted a level of frustration in the responses received from the public. ‘[This] frustration did not centre, as some might expect, on personal experiences of physical pain, discomfort or impaired function. Nor did it centre on the incurable nature of many disabling conditions.’ Instead, respondents expressed anger about the ‘oppressive social barriers’ that exacerbate challenges already faced by those with disabilities in Irish society.

3.

One respondent quoted in the 1996 Report put it particularly bluntly, arguing simply – and starkly – that ‘being disabled means you are no longer part of the public.’

6.

In 1916, before the Rising, Thomas McDonagh published ‘The Yellow Bittern,’ his translation of an eighteenth-century Irish poem. After his death, Francis Ledwidge wrote a tribute, ‘The Lament for Thomas McDonagh,’ that opened with the famous lines:

He shall not hear the bittern cry,

In the wild sky, where he is lain,

Nor voices of the sweeter birds,

Above the wailing of the rain.

In this poem, Ledwidge fuses the lyricism of the Celtic Revival with a new civic spirit. Here we have the familiar elements: the wild bird, the cow in the field, the martyr’s death. But the bittern’s cry undercuts all this. It is guttural, not like a bird’s song at all, more like a slow and regal belch.

For her contribution to this exhibition, Suzanne Walsh has assembled a patchwork of quotations from MacDonagh and Ledwidge’s poetry, spliced with rambling comments from Facebook groups. The result is a new, unexpectedly poetic language, to be projected onto the walls of the LAB Gallery. It reminds me of the language of the great manifestos of the early twentieth century – not the Proclamation so much as the jarring declarations of the avant-garde. Walsh makes common cause with the disenfranchised and the powerless. She talks about the precarious lives of so many in contemporary Ireland, those with disabilities amongst them. She wonders what insights they might have, given their perspectives, into the toxic imperatives of the state.

1.

The 1916 Proclamation spoke of ‘cherishing all the children of the nation equally.’ The writers of this extraordinary manifesto set themselves in opposition to exclusionary British rule. But the Free State, and the Republic, took little time replacing British exclusions with others of their own devising.

7.

In 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her short story, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ a parable about women’s lives in a patriarchal society. In it, a physician diagnoses his wife with a ‘temporary nervous depression.’ He prescribes a rest cure. Denied a life outside the home – outside of the sickroom, even – she becomes fixated with the ‘smouldering unclean yellow’ wallpaper, peeling from the wall. She notices strange patterns, crawling faces; a full-grown woman stoops and lurks behind the paper, trying to escape. Eventually, the patient locks the door and tears the paper away from the wall. She realises the creeping woman is herself, seeking a way out. She has either lost her mind, or escaped her husband’s tyranny, or both. In any case, by the end of the story, she has achieved a kind of freedom.

Aideen Barry’s work is full of domestic anxiety, combining video, stop-motion animation, drawing, and performance. Last year she worked with a group of artists with intellectual disabilities in Ballina to produce a short film about unrequited love, *Silent Moves*, a subtly political response to the disgraceful legal treatment of intimacy between people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. At the LAB Gallery, she takes Gilman’s short story as a point of departure. Pen and ink drawings, arranged frieze-style, on accordion notebooks, illustrate the workings of a feverish imagination. Flock patterns and creeping creatures animate the pages. Displayed in museum cabinets, these works represent an alternative history of the Irish state, one in which women’s bodies have not been regulated and controlled, but have managed instead to escape through the wallpaper.

4.

One of the outcomes of the 1996 Report was the passing of the Disability Act of 2005, a positive step in enabling equal rights for people with disabilities in Ireland. Much remains to be done, however. Arts & Disability Ireland undertake crucial work in this respect. Their long partnership with Fire Station Artists’ Studios is the basis of this exhibition. In the three decades since it was established, ADI has done much to serve artists and audiences with disabilities. They work with practitioners in all art forms, providing access or support or both. Requirements differ from case to case, which is how ADI believe it should be. Experiences of disability are not uniform. Artists with disabilities should not have to speak with a single voice.

8.

Amanda Coogan was brought up in a Deaf household. Her first language is Irish Sign Language (ISL) and she considers herself culturally Deaf. She continues to make use of this embodied language in her work, communicating through movement and gesture. She herself worked as a young interpreter on the 1995 Strategy for Equality, and has misgivings about its effect upon the Deaf community, in particular its effect upon the number of pupils attending Deaf schools, the heartland of the community and the place where ISL is passed down from generation to generation. The previous policy of bringing cohorts of Deaf children together for schooling, while not without complications, had the consequence of solidifying a language, culture and a community.

For Coogan’s contribution to this exhibition, a vast sculptural structure, hung with glistening silver emergency blankets, cuts through the gallery. From the inside the audience sees the construction laid bare. Outside, passers-by see the glimmering façade. Neither side sees the full story. On a screen, mounted on the inside of the structure, a Deaf woman pushes an Irish ‘flag’ – a green pram with white wheels, full of oranges – across a peace line in Belfast. She is caught in an endless loop, continuously entering without ever arriving.

5.

I have thought a lot, in preparing this text, about what different kinds of exclusion might feel like, and how I might convey this through this piece of writing. There are certain kinds of exclusion we can all imagine – a shut door, a closed shop. But there are more indirect exclusions: unnoticed obstacles, unspoken discriminations, simple failures to consider. Such exclusions might feel less like a rupture than a mute uneasiness, a sense of being out of step, of being out of sequence.

I have chosen to present these fragments out of cue. The numbers are off.

The reader is out of place.

9.

Corban Walker’s sculptures, drawings, and installations play with ideas of scale and the nature of the built environment. His remodellings of architectural forms – reduced, distorted, departing from received standards – highlight the extent to which we design our surroundings with particular bodies in mind. Walker, who is 129 cm tall, asks what bodies – what perspectives – are excluded.

3 Mountjoy Square was the birthplace of Walker’s mother, and the home of his grandfather, Walter Cole, at one point a Sinn Fein Alderman. The house was a regular Sinn Fein meeting place at the time of the Rising. Walker’s research into the history of this building has been both personal and political. It has led him to consider more broadly the architectural legacy of the north inner city, and what its neglect might tell us about the changing identity of the Irish Republic. His photographic works for *A Different Republic* map three buildings (No 3 Mountjoy Square, the GPO and the LAB Gallery itself), drawing together disparate sites of commemoration, communication, and memory.

10.

All four contributing artists have been commissioned to produce new work which responds, in whatever way, to the contexts of the two commemorations: the 1916 Rising and the 1996 Report on the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. The result is a quartet of distinct voices: a manifesto (or a set of manifestos, a set of disparate appeals) for difference.