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Museum Project:
14 Henrietta St. Museum,
Paula Meehan, Dragana Jurišić
and the Irish Housing Crisis

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to compare three (re)creative activities within one interdisciplinary project: a public space (14 Henrietta St. Museum in Dublin), poetry (Paula Meehan's cycle of sonnets in *Museum* of 2019) and photography (Dragana Jurišić's photos in the same book). They are all examined in the light of the current housing crisis in Ireland, which followed the collapse of the Celtic Tiger in 2008. The *Museum* project not only comments on the crisis and the changing social relations in Ireland but also challenges the perception of history and private/public memory. In the article, the components of the project are situated against biographical and historical backgrounds, and within the framework of new museology, memory studies, and the functions of photography and poetry.

Keywords: Paula Meehan, Dragana Jurišić, 14 Henrietta St. Museum, Irish housing crisis, memory, museum.

The 2008 crisis entailed, in the British Isles, a collapse of the spectacular miracle of European economy: the Celtic Tiger. Unlike the rest of the crisis-ridden countries, Ireland tackled the disaster quite efficiently by implementing a governmental adjustment programme, followed by austerity measures, to prevent the country's bankruptcy. Already in 2012 economic growth was noted, achieving, in 2015, a dramatic increase with employment and exports growing, and unemployment and interest rates falling rapidly ("Macroeconomic Imbalances"). On the other hand, poverty, social exclusion, public and private debt, as well as emigration and youth unemployment were challenging "any benign interpretation of how Ireland has succeeded in addressing the consequences of the economic crash" (Healy 255). The backlash of the real estate bubble and the construction market boom which had triggered the recession made a long-term impact: Ireland became immersed in a dire housing crisis. The number of dwellings built shrunk from 100 000 at the height of the boom to less than 10 000 in 2014 (Fitzgerald 8). This particular aspect of the Irish bust was responsible for the emigration of many inhabitants, artists included (Jurišić qtd. in Jurišić and Meehan 61).¹

The Irish housing crisis is by no means an isolated phenomenon. A relatively recent research area of housing studies, still facing theoretical challenges, has been attempting to examine current tendencies in the subject. As David Clapham notes in *The SAGE Handbook of Housing Studies*,

An issue which has come to the fore in recent years [in the context of housing] . . . is the embeddedness of housing in the global and national economies. This has created a situation of volatility in housing markets and a need for households to manage risk. There is an ongoing debate . . . about the cause of the boom and bust cycles in many national housing markets. Some analysts situate their analysis in a neo-liberal assessment of changes in the "fundamentals" of housing demand and supply. Behavioural economists focus on consumer behaviour and "irrational exuberance" in creating booms. Yet others focus on the globalisation of finance markets brought about by their deregulation and internationalisation. The result has been massive flows of capital across space and in some instances risky investment that, when it has gone "bad" . . . , has had deleterious impacts on housing markets and national economies. (486)

If housing studies specialists find it hard to define where the gist of the crisis really lies, pinpointing the Irish housing problem seems even harder.

¹ For the sake of this article, I have attributed page numbers to the unpaginated *Museum* by Jurišić and Meehan.

The Irish population has not increased drastically in the last decade. Yet the combination of the economic recession, artificial market mechanisms (e.g., the above-mentioned real estate bubble) and the lack of public housing system or efficient housing policy (mentioned below, in the course of this article) must have resulted in a housing breakdown.² In my modest opinion as a frequent tourist to Ireland and a non-specialist in housing studies, there is hardly any explanation for Dublin—which cannot rival Paris, Rome, Vienna or many other capitals in terms of interests, multiculturalism, aesthetics, or other appealing factors—to have such expensive accommodation, even taking into account fluctuations in its job market.

Thus, instead of investigating the reasons behind the crisis, the purpose of this article is to approach it as the background for a fruitful collaboration between three forms of cultural and artistic expression which not only reflect on urban development and social change in Ireland, but also, on a deeper level, transform the perception of history, as well as collective and individual memory. The three media mentioned above (a cultural institution, poetry and photography) constitute an interdisciplinary project entitled *Museum*. Its point of departure was 14 Henrietta Street Museum in Dublin.³ Shortly afterwards, Dublin City Council invited two artists to join the project. The first, poet-activist Paula Meehan, composed a cycle of sonnets; the second, photographer Dragana Jurišić, created a series of images inspired by the museum and by Meehan's sonnets.

At first sight, the building at 14 Henrietta St. in Dublin exemplifies a species of anti-museum, with the house commemorating itself, a process which starts with its very name resembling an average address. The dwelling was not inhabited by anyone famous or conventionally worthy of tribute (such as a writer, an artist, or a prominent politician), although the eighteenth-century resident list includes a few names of the city executive. Searching for more interesting historical facts we come across Kevin Barry's involvement in the Henrietta Street fights during the War of Independence ("History of the House").⁴ The tenement at no. 14 would hardly even qualify as a museum of specific interiors: dilapidated outside,

² See e.g., Michelle Norris and Patrick Shiels: "[A] combination of macroeconomic conditions and inflationary fiscal policies is largely to blame for diminishing levels of housing affordability as these fuelled house prices, partly by encouraging growth in second homes" (paraphrased in Clapham 383).

³ In the course of this article, I will refer to it mostly as the "Henrietta Museum" to facilitate the reading process.

⁴ Kevin Barry is now regarded as one of the more important figures, or rather martyrs, of the Republican movement. He was an IRA soldier executed at the age of 18 for a successful ambush on a British army transport. His case received international attention before the execution.

as well as, for the most part, inside, the edifice looks as if it had not been particularly renovated, though its website claims that conservation works lasted ten years and the result was awarded a prize (“14 Henrietta St. Museum”). When I visited it in July 2019 in order to attend the launch of the *Museum* book authored by Meehan and Jurišić, I walked through virtually empty rooms, wondering where the exhibition really began. The difficulty in accepting this sort of public space may stem from the fact that tenement houses—referred to on the museum’s website as a thing of the past—remain vital for many a European urbanite outside Ireland, for instance in France and Italy. My native city of Łódź also abounds in such dwellings. Originally designed, just as their Dublin counterparts were, for wealthier citizens, most of them gradually lost their standing to end up as a shelter for those on the so-called social margins, while some are being renovated and moved upscale again.

Dublin City Council initiated the purchase process in 2000, and having completed the restoration, opened the museum in 2018 (“14 Henrietta St. Museum”). The idea of commemorating a characteristic Dublin domicile was thus developed in the era of economic prosperity but implemented only after Ireland rose from the ashes of the crisis. Carrying out revitalization work in times of acute recession must have been a challenge, and, as such, attests to the determination of the city authorities. The Henrietta House can therefore be regarded as a symbol of endurance within turbulence. It also epitomizes the tendency to archive the unorthodox cultural resources of Ireland (such as the oral tradition⁵) and contributes to a deeper insight into its history.

Dubliners are likely to consider this specific museum both peculiar and relevant, since it addresses a niche in their notion of the past. As Mary Shine Thompson observes in “Paula Meehan’s Dublins: Landscape, Community and Poetic Identity,” the history of lower-class tenants of Georgian housing “did not fit the pastoral, pious template of national identity of the early twentieth century” and in essence “has been elided in much public discourse” (54). Although plebeian Dublin was already immortalized at the formation stage of the Irish state (e.g., in Sean O’Casey’s trilogy), the prevalent political and cultural scene of the independence movement leadership was dominated by the upper middle class and by the aristocracy. Hence, the Henrietta Museum as an act of restitution or rehabilitation, of restoring the hitherto ignored social strata to their proper place as the very actors of events, alters the awareness of Irish history in its entirety.

⁵ The Henrietta Museum also gathers private memories of Dublin tenants. The dúchas.ie project, part of which is devoted to oral tradition, may serve as yet another example of this tendency.

Another function of this project is to revise the etymology and definition of the term “museum.” The Greek *μουσείο* stands for the “temple of the muses.” At the first glance, neither the Henrietta Museum nor most of Jurišić’s photographs explore those linguistic origins. The etymology conspicuously inspired, however, the form and contents of Meehan’s cycle of sonnets: nine out of eleven have been dedicated to different muses. The choice of such elevated poetic diction may seem contentious when set against the derelict working-class abode. Yet Meehan’s work is renowned for equating the sacred with the profane; and indeed, at the very beginning of the *Museum* cycle the poet warns the reader: “What you find here might not be what you seek” (“Invocation” in Jurišić and Meehan 31). Her sonnets are consistent with two discernible trends in contemporary Irish literature: one of antiquity employed as a metaphor for contemporaneity, and the other of the sonnet form interpreted as dystopian. The sonnet in Ireland can operate, on a conscious or subconscious level, as a postcolonial protest against the Elizabethan masters of the genre, some of whom (Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh) zealously participated in the conquest of Ireland.⁶ Meehan in the *Museum* project seems to opt for this exact genre in the name of historical truth and social justice.

Traditionally, the idea of a museum connotes the protection of a collection of artistic, historical, cultural or scientific value. Yet the term “value” is tainted with subjectivity, and so is the term “history” in the case of the Henrietta house. History as a conventional (and patriarchal) register of wars and large-scale conflicts does not pertain to this particular past. In the English language, inside the word “history” but often at its opposite semantic extreme lies the term “story”⁷: the tale of social life, quotidian and private, hence frequently narrated by women, made responsible for that “ordinary” existence. These aspects are involved in the English-language morphological transformation of the original term into “herstory” advocated for decades since the second wave of feminism. In this context, Dublin City Council’s inviting of two *female* artists to join the project has been a momentous decision, and their incentive potentially reaches beyond political correctness. On the other hand, one can notice a problematic—and probably unwelcome—stereotype at work in the very choice: the Henrietta Museum memorializes home, and home is run by women.

New museology attempts to undermine the timeworn museum concept governed by power relations. Its objective is to forge a bond between the museum and the community, where “the concept of

⁶ For details, see e.g., Oona Frawley’s *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia in Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*.

⁷ No trace of this etymology can be found in the Greek original (*ιστορία*).

community [is associated] with radical democracy and resistance to the dominant culture” (Witcomb 79). Such acts of “giving voice to the powerless,” i.e. the community, should result in “a process of self-discovery and empowerment” (79). The approach has been criticized by, for instance, Tony Bennett, who believed that a museum should “actually produce the very notion of community and culture” (qtd. in Witcomb 80). The Henrietta Museum advances both of these attitudes. By reproducing the recordings of Dublin tenants’ memories it literally “gives voice” to the community who authentically used to live in “resistance to the dominant culture.” On the other hand, the Museum endorses notions of community and culture that visitors can relate to: most of the younger guests discover an unknown facet of the city life which once revolved around tenement houses, while older visitors have a chance to take a fresh look at the world they remember. Given that memory was a decisive factor for Meehan and Jurišić in joining the project, the two artists can also be deemed to have become “emissaries” of new museology.

Paula Meehan, one of the best Irish poets and an activist proud of her working-class origins, was raised in the tenements of underprivileged Dublin districts. As a child she witnessed evictions; in adolescence, she would often move houses and change schools, an experience which she perceives in terms of homelessness.⁸ The poet engages in movements for civil rights, including rights for women and the homeless, as well as the right to education. She visits prisons, takes up issues of ecology and politics, and personally holds leftist or even socialist views. “She has been called a ‘citizen poet’ and a ‘poet of solidarity’” (Hayden) and believes that “[i]n an ironic and strange way . . . the artist can sometimes be more powerful as an activist by following the muse” (Meehan qtd. in Hayden).⁹

Among her reasons for participating in the project, Meehan enumerates the Henrietta tenants’ stories of “survival and courage” which “deserve to be enshrined” (Jurišić and Meehan 61), where the verb “enshrine” dignifies everyday narratives and alludes to antiquity. The poet also postulates that “a museum is a dead space unless it speaks to the now” (61). In an early interview, she expressed a similar opinion in relation to memory: “Remembering for its own sake wouldn’t interest me, but memory as agent for changing the present appeals to me greatly. But you have to go back before you go forward” (O’Halloran and Maloy 13). She deems poetry to be an “archive in itself but also a measuring stick for future change”

⁸ Both evictions and homelessness were also the share of the Henrietta house tenants.

⁹ Part of the biographical information used in this paragraph comes from Hayden’s article.

(Allen Randolph 268), a “tool for excavation” (O’Halloran and Maloy 13) which “by transforming that past / change[s] the future of it” (Meehan, *Dharmakaya* 13). Understood in this way, poetry for Meehan performs a function akin to that of the museum.¹⁰

In the *Museum* book commentary which lists the poet’s incentives, Meehan observes that at present Dublin is undergoing a “crisis of homelessness” while the Henrietta house “is all about making homes” (Jurišić and Meehan 61). During the 2019 book launch, the poet voiced respect for the 1930s housing project discernible from the Henrietta Museum windows (and represented in Jurišić’s photographs, 54–55). This building complex was erected in result of the 1932 housing act, passed with the goal of a tenfold increase in the number of Dublin council flats. More recently, the aggressive times of the Celtic Tiger sent real estate prices and rental costs skyrocketing instead of lowering them, which should have been an expected outcome of the construction boom. In the post-Tiger crisis, the situation has been worsening ever since: the homeless statistics are growing. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the lack of public housing system and efficient housing policy. Many citizens cannot afford private rents, and if they can, there is a shortage of private flats to rent (“About Homelessness”).

Meehan’s own biography converges at some points with that of the Henrietta house. The poet spent her childhood in a tenement adjacent to the street belonging to the landowner Luke Gardiner (1745–98). The Gardiner estate was designed in the Georgian style for the upper middle classes, yet in the nineteenth century the “dwellings became tenements, housing multiple families in poor conditions” (Shine Thompson 53). The Henrietta tenement faced an analogous fate: built in the 1740s in the Georgian style by Gardiner’s ancestor, the even more active Luke Gardiner the elder (1690–1755), it endured comparable pauperization.

Furthermore, both of these Dublin neighbourhoods bore imprints of Republicanism and exploitation. We have already mentioned Kevin Barry in the Henrietta Street context. Meehan’s tenement was located on Seán McDermott Street, named after one of the Easter Rising leaders; close by, another Republican and Labour leader, James Larkin, would deliver his speeches (Shine Thompson 53). The vicinity also accommodated the red-light district Monto and the infamous Magdalene laundries (O’Loughlin). In Meehan’s childhood years it became strictly a working-class area, “a byword for poverty, social dysfunction, crime and lack of opportunity

¹⁰ It must be added, however, that Meehan is also aware of the implications of the technological age, where the poet’s role as “the professional memory of the tribe” has been transferred on machines as instruments of storage (Allen Randolph 268).

for generations,” as well as an epicentre of gang wars (Leahy). Currently, the demolished tenements have been “replaced with public housing or private developments” (O’Loughlin); in December 2020, the Irish Minister for Finance launched a progress report at the new housing project on Seán McDermott Street (Leahy).

Obviously, the new housing projects can be assessed in a positive and a negative light. On the one hand, their developers make fortunes: stories combining rampant capitalism with social, religious and/or environmental exploitation are not exceptional. Dublin offers ample material in this respect, galvanizing Meehan’s work.¹¹ Shameful examples include the High Park laundry purchased by a developer for an astronomical price from a convent: the premises revealed a mass grave of the institution’s female “employees” (Mullaly). On the other hand, newspaper headlines announce that “the state can learn from its failures in tackling social disadvantage and deprivation” by gradually but visibly developing better living conditions (Leahy).

Simultaneously, however, the vibrant, though destitute, world of inner city Dublin, which has also informed Meehan’s work, is being relegated to the past. Identifying with the Henrietta tenants as “us / who gave shelter in broken down Georgian tenements, / . . . to the demented ones, / those who came in rags and miasmas of foul odour, / in delirium tremens, the worn out old spunkers, / . . . the meths drinkers, / the dipsos, the alcos, the put down no hoppers,” Meehan writes from personal experience (“Our Lady of the Apocalypse” in Jurišić and Meehan 39). The tenants’ material indigence, however, coexisted with emotional bounty which the poet celebrates. Families supported one another, shared scarce resources and displayed a wealth of oral traditions:

The tenement houses were porous to a child—you could wander in and out of other peoples’ rooms, sometimes find yourself getting fed at dinnertime in a completely different family. I had a direct plumb line into a very vital and lively oral culture. Story telling, songs, the actual language of the people themselves, the pure Dublin accent. (Meehan qtd. in Allen Randolph 240)

Such stories proliferate in Meehan’s poetry and her *Museum* sonnet cycle. They also constitute a vital element of the Henrietta Museum’s policy of exhibiting traces of everyday existence against the background of the audio recordings documenting Dublin tenants’ memories.

The other artist collaborating on the *Museum* project, photographer Dragana Jurišić, emigrated from the former Yugoslavia to Dublin over

¹¹ See e.g., one of her most famous poems analyzed by ecocritics, “Death of a Field” in *Painting Rain* (2009).

twenty years ago. She recalls the fire which consumed the lifetime's work of her photographer father in their Yugoslavian flat: "On that day I became one of those 'refugees' with no photographs, with no past" (Jurišić's website). That moment marked the beginning of her own passion for photography, a medium which "helped provide a semblance of control over an otherwise unpredictable world" (ibid.). As Susan Sontag observed in her classic study on photography, "[p]eople robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers . . . [especially when] the break with the past has been particularly traumatic" (7). In one of Jurišić's projects, *YU: The Lost Country (2011–2013)*, the author admits that "Yugoslavs vanished, like the citizens of Atlantis, into the realm of imaginary places and people" (Jurišić's website). All that loss—of home, country, identity—prepared the artist to question and negotiate the meaning of "home" under the pressure of constant insecurity. Instead of geography, the notion is correlated with inner feeling; asked about Ireland, the artist replies: "If a permanent exile has a home, so yes, this is home" (Interview).¹²

Like Meehan, Jurišić was attracted to the *Museum* project by her own working-class origins and her belief in the power of the medium (photography, in this case) over memory. Her preceding projects hinged on kindred themes. In 2015, the artist carried out the *Mnemosyne's Daughters* project composed of a hundred female nudes, with the intention of subverting the objectifying male gaze on the female body. Instead of traditional muse sittings, the project participants performed actively as protagonists of the work of art: they were able to decide which of the nine muses they were going to represent, and assumed poses of their own choice. Jurišić's current project, *Something from There*,¹³ engages asylum seekers caught in the open prison system of the Irish Direct Provision.¹⁴ Invited to the Henrietta Museum to join a poetry workshop with Paula Meehan and to watch an early twentieth-century documentary, the refugees were deeply moved by both, as Jurišić stated in interview (Interview). Following *YU* and *Museum*, *Something from There* is yet another of her projects which responds to housing precarity, as well as to national and psychological instability in the face of the crisis.

What image of home is thus generated by Jurišić's partly blurred photographs in the *Museum* book? At first sight, they react to the

¹² The information in the next paragraph comes from the same conversation with Jurišić which I conducted on 5 March 2021.

¹³ *Something from There*, National Gallery Ireland, until April 2021. The catalogue of the exhibition contains the asylum seekers' stories about objects they brought from home.

¹⁴ The system providing asylum seekers in Ireland with accommodation but not with work permits. The conditions of life in these centres have been criticized by human rights organizations.

sentimental memory of a lost childhood (for instance, the photograph of a rocking horse, Jurišić and Meehan 9) and register the absence of the inhabitants (the photos of half-open doors and the view from behind curtains, 1, 4–5, 60). On the other hand, they invoke the tenants' spirits by representing the authors' silhouettes and hands. It is not only "old houses" and "words" that "harbour ghosts" ("Invocation" in Jurišić and Meehan); the ectoplasmic multiplied images produced by Jurišić serve a similar purpose. The artist claims that she believes in the magic of photography, especially analogue photography "created out of nothing" (Interview), and follows Roland Barthes in his definition: instead of being "a 'copy' of reality" photography is "an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art" (Barthes 88).

Among Jurišić's object photography, the *Museum* publication depicts unretouched images of its two authors. Dressed in casual clothing, Jurišić and Meehan appear in the desolate interiors of the Henrietta tenement as if they were recounting or explaining something (Jurišić and Meehan 43, 2–3). At times they touch the walls (18–19) trying out the tangibility of the past, or listening in. Touching memory, the contact with "the energy of the people imbued in the walls" (Jurišić, Interview), may trigger dramatic results, as suggested by multiplied images of the artist who started by palpating the walls and ended up lying on the floor (Jurišić and Meehan 58–59).

One of the characteristic features of these phantom portraits is motion. They contrast with the double "interior portraits" devised for promotional purposes (O'Sullivan, "Standing Portrait"), where the formally dressed authors, their hair styled and wearing full makeup, pose *motionless* in the museum. The conservative style of the surroundings also appears in another photo in the series (O'Sullivan, "Seated Portrait"), faintly alluding to the golden age of Flemish painting. The protagonists assume poses reminiscent of the Old Masters, with the interior details echoing either the symbolic painting code (the piano) or the stale museum atmosphere which fetters the heroines' convictions (anticlerical Meehan is sitting right under the picture of the Pope). The immobility, abundance of details and artificiality of these portraits may imply that the artists endorse the "animated" world of the lower-class tenants rather than the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie manufactured for the sake of mass media.

Another connotation evident in the photographs of the artists' hands is Meehan's concept of art as craft (in the sense of "making" and of "vehicle"), both in ancient and modern contexts.¹⁵ The poet admires the Georgian craft of the Henrietta Museum just as she used to admire

¹⁵ Applied for instance in relation to Icarus' flight (e.g., in *Painting Rain* 73).

Minoan frescoes in Crete. The Dublin sample of Georgian style modelled on antiquity¹⁶ provided her with yet another stimulus to join the project (Jurišić and Meehan 61). Generally in Meehan's work, "the restrained formal virtuosity of the Georgian architecture" can be noticed in the art of the sonnet, as Shine Thompson remarks (59) in reference to another sonnet cycle by Meehan. In *Museum*, the sonnets are additionally set against Jurišić's photographs of the walls, and on a closer inspection, one can notice that coincidental patterns on the decrepit walls recall archaeological findings. The background of the "Invocation," for instance, could feign one of Knossos unrestored frescoes. For both artists then, the Henrietta tenement bears traces of "ancient cartographies / still scribed in the walls" (Jurišić and Meehan 37).

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Habitually, one of the tasks of poetry and photography has been to encapsulate the moment. Even Sontag, who otherwise denied photography's power to emulate reality, conceded that "[t]he force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces" (87). In a similar context, Jurišić points to the kinship of photography and poetry: they both fill a "field of paper" and "frame the moment of time in a limited space" (Interview). In the absence of the original dwellers of the Henrietta tenement, the photographs of the artists and their hands in motion make them almost "inhabit" the space, and thus "materialize" Barthesian magic. The *Museum* project also seizes the moment by projecting agency onto another person and into a different time period. Among Meehan's protagonists one can find, for instance, a victim of domestic violence, who requests: "You, who write the histories, / write her in, write her up, write her down, before she blurs" (Jurišić and Meehan 35). Poetry delivers testimony of an urgent social problem, where the poet takes over the voice of a former inhabitant. In this particular sonnet, the victim's memory is literally facing extinction, and the State is deemed responsible for this vanishing act, as if Meehan wanted us to realize that, in fact, the legal systems of numerous countries fail to address the scope and gravity of domestic violence in an effective way. The process of the victim's "blurring" in the *Museum* progresses in a threefold way: it is (1) referred to in the poem, (2) conveyed through the sonnet's background photograph by Jurišić, and (3) takes place in the very museum, where the victim's original writing on the wall keeps perishing. This intensified process brings up the plight of all unprotected victims who dare report acts of violence to the police, and often afterwards go "missing," falling prey to revenge and secret killings. Writing in the name

¹⁶ Although, in my opinion, the Anglo-Irish tenement version of the Georgian style, with unrefined brick façades, imitates antiquity really remotely.

of the victim, Meehan dedicates her poem to Clio, the muse of history, and entitles it “Her Dignity: A Restoration.” The text becomes a revision of the neglected, female version of history: herstory. It also represents the redress of poetry, to use Seamus Heaney’s phrase, and sides with the defeated. This tendency can be detected in the whole cycle; another sonnet, “The Acoustic,” highlights those who “were much like us: they lived, they died on the margin” (29). Meehan’s stance coincides, therefore, with the Henrietta Museum’s mission: it propounds equality beyond social and political division.

In the *Museum* cycle, Meehan traces this egalitarian view back to the Middle Ages with its *danse macabre*, especially in the sonnet dedicated to the muse of dance (“Step We Gaily, On We Go” 31). The same poem comments on the remembrance culture in Ireland. Three years before, the author published a poem on a similar subject, under the telling title “The Commemorations Take Our Minds Off the Now,” where she wrote: “I commemorate / the poor going round and round the bend” (*Geomantic* 58). Such an attitude, characteristic for her whole *oeuvre*, truly matches the new museology idea of “giving voice to the powerless” in “resistance to the dominant culture” (Witcomb 79). Together with *Geomantic*, the *Museum* sonnet cycle assumes a vantage point which enables this sort of democratic vista: a cosmic perspective. It levels the sacred with the profane, as in the prayer “Our Lady of the Apocalypse” which rescues those on society’s margins from oblivion by honouring them in the sublime art of religious poetry and of the sonnet.

Presiding over Meehan’s contribution to *Museum* is Mnemosyne, mother of the muses, and the whole project can be contemplated in connection with memory studies. Discussing the commemorations of the Great Hunger, Mary Daly indicates that in the urban society of contemporary Ireland the memory of this event “is no longer part of a long-standing tradition; rather it now has to be made intelligible to people who find it distant to their everyday lives” (qtd. in Pine 9). The same could be said of the memory of Dublin tenements and the consequent role of the *Museum* project. Applying the once-fashionable distinction between dead history and live memory, advocated by Maurice Halbwachs (Erl 6), one can also argue that the Henrietta Museum performs the function of the latter, for instance by reproducing audio recordings of its former tenants. Simultaneously, remembrance culture, as Emilie Pine suggests in *The Politics of Irish Memory*, policies a boundary between the present and the traumas of the past: “[I]n order to observe past sufferings, audiences must do so from a position of relative security in the present” (11). This secure position can reveal either nostalgia, where the past becomes “a sepia-toned lost era,” or anti-nostalgia, focused on the future as the

antithesis of the painful past (11). There seems to be, however, a slight gap in Pine's theoretical framework: a little earlier in the book, the author defines nostalgia as "feed[ing] a yearning for the stability which is absent from a present that is perceived to be fast-paced and hence unstable" (8). The "relative security in the present" is thus *relative* indeed. Meehan emphasizes the current lack of stability in Ireland (the housing crisis) yet her sonnet cycle has a clearly anti-nostalgic character in the traditional meaning of the word: it is not sentimental. Photography, in turn, "actively promote[s]" nostalgia as the "elegiac art," in Sontag's opinion (20), and some of Jurišić's photographs can be classified as nostalgic (e.g., those of the Henrietta children's toys, or of the 1930s housing complex); but the rest is, again, anti-nostalgic (e.g., hazy photos of the artists in motion). At the same time, in their remembrance pattern, Meehan and Jurišić would fit Pine's categories to an extent: they opt in and out of nostalgia (yearning for the past because it was rich in personal experience, and not yearning for it because it was insecure).

All three elements of the *Museum* project complement one another as diverse media which facilitate, channel or (re-)create the past. According to Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, one of the functions of media is to provide frameworks of remembering "through which memories come into the public arena and *become* collective" (2, emphasis in the original). The ensuing cultural memory is thus an *active* process of "remembrance and forgetting" with various perspectives on the past, where "'remembering' is better seen as . . . performative rather than as reproductive" (2). One can detect such a process of cultural memory formation in the *Museum* project, where each medium confronts the past differently, even if their historical point of reference appears to be the same. The project's chronology of creative activities (1. museum, 2. poetry, 3. photography) furthermore communicates the mechanism of remediation (Bolter and Grusin), where each respective medium not only performs as "transparent" of its contents, but also reveals its operative procedures:

On the one hand, the recycling of existent media is a way of strengthening the new medium's claim to immediacy, of offering an "experience of the real." On the other hand, remediation is an act of hypermediacy that, by multiplying media, potentially reminds the viewer of the presence of a medium and thus generates an "experience of the medium." (Bolter and Grusin 70f. qtd. in Erll and Rigney 3–4)

The first part of this assertion, however, does not seem to fully apply to our context, unless we understand the adjective "new" as "new to the *Museum* project." Chronologically speaking, poetry is the oldest of the three

media involved in the project. That it also aspires to offer an “experience of the real” (Erll and Rigney 4) is doubtful: on the contrary, its reader remains constantly aware of its imaginary and linguistic superstructures. Visual and auditory arts (and the Henrietta Museum combines the two) have always claimed a more immediate reaction from their audience than literature, whose arbitrary medium of language may act as a decelerating or even obfuscating intermediary between the instrument and the effect, despite poetry’s origins in oral and music traditions.

The *Museum* project can also be read as a palimpsest. The Henrietta Museum itself can be interpreted as such, with its conservation process aiming, on the one hand, to remove “the accumulation of layers of paint obscuring the detail over the centuries” (Charles Duggan in “14 Henrietta Street—Making a Museum” 3:15) and, on the other, to demonstrate and juxtapose these several layers of human existence by, for instance, leaving “the original wallpaper in its very worn condition” next to the new “recreated wallpaper,” as in Mrs. Dowling’s flat (Grainne Shaffrey in “14 Henrietta Street—Making a Museum” 9:40). The museum website also functions as another palimpsestic layer to the networked project, allowing the Henrietta house to be visited from viewers’ homes. With regard to the *Museum* publication, on some of its pages one can find photographs of museum walls serving as the background for the poems. Ultimately, the project, or its parts, has become available in book form. As Katarzyna Bazarnik has commented, the book in such a case becomes an exhibition place; this conspicuous trend in contemporary art book publication may result from an easy access to the medium.¹⁷ Initially, however, the purchase of the *Museum* book was limited to the Henrietta Museum premises. While the museum has been operating remarkably well on the informative and leisure levels,¹⁸ its two subsequent “media partners”—poetry and photography—found themselves beyond mainstream market circulation, which for a certain time span created a situation of inequity.

Last but not least, one might wonder whether the *Museum* project can work as an act of intervention in the present-day life of the Irish capital, or perhaps, as an act of restorative memory understood as “a compromise between truth recovery and creation of the past for the sake of the present and the future” (Drong 246), memory which “envisages either individual or communal redemption or restitution if those may lead to reconciliation” (284). By “reintegrating” the depreciated groups into the fabric of society, it also touches upon the

¹⁷ My conversation with Prof. Katarzyna Bazarnik, 27 Nov 2019.

¹⁸ See the number of nominations to Irish and European awards in tourism and museology (in the Museum website).

ethics of new museology and revisionist history. Ultimately, the project may accomplish the objective Paula Meehan formulated for “memory as agent for changing the present” (qtd. in O’Halloran and Maloy 13). According to Yuri Lotman, memory generates “a conceptualized reality which the mind transfers into the past,” and similarly, culture reads past “texts” that “interact with contemporary mechanisms” to generate an image of the past “which, like an equal partner in a dialogue, affects the present” (272). If memory and culture are forms of dialogue, then the *Museum* project represents a comparably active approach, inviting Dublin inhabitants and authorities, Irish citizens and foreign tourists to engage with the present through the past.

Essentially, such activities must transform individual and communal awareness in order to be effective. One can only hope that this process will not be disrupted by another crisis. As Seán Ó Riain observed in 2015, “the only feature of Ireland’s economic history more striking than its ability to recover from a series of crises is to just as quickly move from each recovery into a new form of crisis. Can Ireland break out of this cycle of boom and bust for the first time in its history?” (219). Now that more powerful crises (the pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine) have swept across the world, activities related to culture and memory seem to find themselves again on the social margins and they will, possibly, have to be reiterated at the beginning of each new crisis. Nevertheless, the process of memory negotiations in Ireland may be gradually but steadily penetrating the mentality of post-Celtic Tiger society.

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