

In recent times there has been a significant rise in the number of internship programmes being offered by art galleries and institutions both in Dublin and throughout the country. Aimed at art graduates eager to integrate themselves into the contemporary scene, internships – at their worst - mean cleaning and photocopying, enveloping endless invitations, and invigilating for long hours without pay. But where programmes are carefully scheduled and properly organized, offering even modest remuneration, and when Directors can resist the temptation to exploit free labour under the pretext of providing education, internships have the potential to be valuable and beneficial for both parties.

The gallery transfers practical skills and knowledge to the individual, who, in turn, contributes fresh enthusiasm in assisting with everyday administration, exhibition and installation duties. With so many art graduates and so few job opportunities, internships are becoming increasingly important as stepping-stones between third-level education and the harsh realities of life after college.

I find myself in a unique position to comment on this, having just concluded a nine-month studentship in the Douglas Hyde Gallery. Unlike most, it was full-time and fully funded. The DHG has been a fantastically varied experience: as well as the exhibitions, I have been significantly involved with the bookshop and the music gigs, as well as the coordination of talks and film screenings. All of the logistical mysteries that had previously shrouded the practicalities of running an art gallery have been exposed. On the most basic level I now understand how FedEx and fax machines work; I have developed computer skills and gained confidence in performing mundane office tasks such as making phone calls,

dealing with the public and sending polite emails. I have learned about budgeting, financing and funding, compiling loan forms, managing and organising archives, dealing with the press, board meetings, and so forth.

In relation to the installation of exhibitions, I am now familiar with appropriate packing and handling procedures and how they vary. I have experienced the practicalities and pitfalls that arise from handling less conventional works such as site-specific installations, fragile objects, works on paper, film projections, and pieces that require rotation or ongoing maintenance. On a daily basis, there was nothing that I was not either engaged in or informed about in some form or another, and I was continually surprised by how aware and involved I was allowed to be.

Being based in Dublin's city centre and being engaged with art events of all kinds has hugely broadened my cultural horizons. During the course of my studentship I visited innumerable art exhibitions, as well as attending talks and going to films, gigs and plays. Both inside and outside the DHG I met local and international artists, curators, critics and musicians, and had the opportunity to communicate and work with them. From reading books across a range of subjects and keeping up to speed with a cocktail of art magazines, I have learned about the broad issues that surround how contemporary art is managed, marketed and consumed, and I now consider myself to have a far more comprehensive understanding of the language of the international art world.

My studentship at the DHG covered all aspects of the general administration and behind-the-scenes running of a gallery, with the bonus of an insight into the inner mechanisms of the more global scene. I imagine that this is what

the majority of internships provide. To me, however, far more significant and enduring than any of this was what I would call the ‘unpractical wisdom’ that I could not have gained anywhere else. This covert ‘de-institutionalisation’ is something that has affected me far beyond the passive acquisition of a list of practical skills, and is undoubtedly the aspect that will shape the choices that I make from here onwards.

Although fairly familiar with its programme, what I failed to realise on accepting the studentship is that the DHG is not like other galleries or workplaces. It has a distinctive tone and ethos that are hard to relate to, and reconcile with, the established practices and protocols of other institutions. The Gallery 2 and Gallery 3 programmes, with their relatively unconventional approach, provide a unique platform within Dublin and constitute a large part of what makes the DHG interesting and original. I never knew much about old or tribal things, although I always quite liked them. College instilled a fascination for the flash and dazzle of seemingly ‘innovative’ contemporary practices, skipping over art history in any real detail up until about 1960, as well as ignoring ethnic art practices entirely. The role of Galleries 2 and 3 seems to be about taking things marginalised by popular culture or traditional museums and casting them in a new light (the *Mexican ex-votos and retablos*, *Claude Cahun*, *Jandek*, and the *Japanese tea bowls* are some examples of this.) Scrutinising the Gallery 2/3 programmes, and their juxtaposition with the pioneering contemporary exhibitions in the main space, revealed to me how new art can sometimes be contextualised, and sometimes be upstaged, by things frequently overlooked or unappreciated.

I discovered that the DHG was by far the most *anti-establishment* establishment I have ever encountered. Generally well respected, and with a considerable international profile, the gallery has a small but significant cult following in Dublin. This is made up of people who recognise that the DHG is *cool* due to its point blank refusal to subscribe to, or even to recognise, conventional *coolness*. I find that I have now come to refer to certain things as ‘douglas hyde-y’ when I recognise specific qualities, such is the quirky inimitability of the place – with its rainbow of modest publications, restrained atmosphere, and consistently unusual exhibits.

Almost nine months ago I came to the studentship filled with confidence, enthusiasm, and delusion. As a successful recent graduate, you might say that I was a flawless product of the system. I arrived at the DHG thoroughly conditioned by five years of artistic education, determined that the studentship would represent the first rung on the ladder to becoming a famous artist, my big chance to network with all the right people and to establish my reputation. But the DHG, with its unusual methods and unique tone, were not what the system had led me to expect.

The DHG introduced me to the music of Cat Power and Sufjan Stevens, the novels of Haruki Murakami, the basic principles of Japanese aesthetics, the warmth and beauty of Persian bags and carpets, the sincerity of Sterling R. Smith, the short stories of J.D Salinger and the writings of John Hutchinson. Through these things (and many more unmentioned) I have been opened up to a new way of thinking and perceiving. While I have continued making art and writing alongside my weekday nine-to-five in the gallery, it has been hard to prevent the DHG from influencing and inspiring my parallel lives.

This ‘unpractical wisdom’ has consequently completely reformed my approach to creating art. I have pared back all the crowd-pleasing, literal, and novelty aspects of my work, zoning in on tiny things, on the old-fashioned honesty of textiles, on the scruffy humility of works on paper. More than anything I have found fulfillment in the process and conclusion of the work itself, instead of constantly seeking approval and gratification from tutors, professionals or the viewing public.

In January I would have liked to have spring-boarded from the studentship into greater artistic or administrative prospects. I was determined to pursue a Masters Degree at some point. While I hope that I have proved myself perfectly capable and proficient as a curatorial / administrative intern with the potential to go on up, the unpractical wisdom that I gained from the DHG has persuaded me to follow a different direction. The DHG seems to have removed all of my shallow ambitions and eroded everything I had presumed about the systems and institutions and personalities of the art world. I realise how difficult it would be for me now to start again in some other conventional gallery or cultural institution and to play the games that are expected of me. I feel no more inclined, at this point, to begin a Masters. The DHG has taught me more in nine months than the third level education system did in five years.

I do not want all this to sound as though I think that I now know everything. But the DHG has significantly changed the things that I want from life, and the way in which I approach it. I don’t care about being famous anymore and the whole complex system of ‘networking’ in such a small and incestuous scene fills me with more scepticism than

enthusiasm. I just want to make things, and I want to write, with clarity and sincerity, about stuff that I believe in, that is quietly meaningful. In some strange, almost inexplicable sense, the DHG broke my brain. But I will be eternally grateful.

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