

Institution: Kingston University		
Unit of Assessment: 32 – Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Improving Collection and Curatorial Practices at the National Museum of Ireland and Emphasising Social Value and Creativity in Older Irish Women		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 – 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name:	Role:	Period employed by submitting HEI:
Sorcha O'Brien	Senior Lecturer in Design History & Theory	Sept 2012 – Dec 2019
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

The case study is built on Dr O'Brien's AHRC-funded research on the history of the electrification of rural Irish homes and its effects on women's lives, conducted in partnership with the National Museum of Ireland, and leading to the exhibition Kitchen Power. O'Brien's research and curation has informed changes to National Museum of Ireland communication, curation and collection practices, and improved wider cultural and public understanding of design, domesticity and electrification in Ireland post 1950. Through oral history and work with women's groups on a community-based textile art project based on her research, O'Brien fostered inter-generational understanding and opportunities for creative exchange, with social benefits for the older women involved and National Museum of Ireland audiences.

2. Underpinning research

The research project was led by Dr Sorcha O'Brien, Senior Lecturer in Design History & Theory at Kingston University, from 2014 onwards, with AHRC funding from 2016-19. The Kitchen Power exhibition was curated by O'Brien with Noel Campbell, Senior Curator at the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life. O'Brien is part of the Modern Interiors Research Centre, led by Prof. Penny Sparke, whose publications were influential on the project and who chaired the project advisory board [R1, R2]. The topic was developed out of O'Brien's 2012 PhD on the visual representation of electrical technology in 1920s Ireland, published in 2017. This research explored the ways in which the Irish Free State sought to 'harness electricity to step beyond the political nationalism of its painful revolutionary era and provide for its citizens' [R3].

For her AHRC project and the resultant exhibition, O'Brien extended the research from her PhD to focus on the effects of electricity on rural homes, women's everyday lives and the electrical products that they used and consumed, and to include the voices of these women themselves. Existing research about rural electrification had focused on the construction of the electrical network and the experiences of engineers and technical staff, relying on corporate history and newspaper reportage. O'Brien's work instead focused on the way this technology was used by a generation of women who matured before the arrival of second wave feminism into Ireland in the 1970s: their involvement with traditional gender roles along with their now advanced age has meant that they were rarely considered as 'pioneers'.

O'Brien engaged in extensive archival research and object analysis [R4], developing an innovative oral history project with women who were housewives in the 1950s and 1960s, in order to foreground their voices and make them heard across the generations. Object, archival

Impact case study (REF3)

and oral history methods were used to inform the development of the exhibition, working with the project partner and venue, the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life. Project partners (and advisory board members) also included the Irish Countrywomen's Association, Age & Opportunity, and the ESB (Electricity Supply Board) [R5].

The exhibition focused on the kitchen; O'Brien looked at the physical manifestation of gender roles in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s, and in contrast to the advertising fantasy of the happy housewife, influenced by British and American advertising and advice literature. This comparison brought out the reality of Irish rural women's lived experiences with domestic electrical appliances [R6], both in terms of the actual appliances and changes in kitchen design, as well as the emotional reaction of women to acquiring and using these appliances.

Findings from the research indicated that the modern fitted kitchen was slow to spread across Ireland, with women preferring to install a limited selection of free-standing appliances into existing farm kitchens, mostly due to cost constraints. The Electricity Supply Board (ESB) played an educational role, as well as generating electricity and selling appliances. Two groups of women played important roles - the ESB demonstrators were a source of peer information and confidence, and the Irish Countrywomen's Association coordinated at grassroots level. An unexpected outcome of the research was the discovery of several appliance factories in Ireland, largely staffed by female assembly workers, despite a prevailing climate, both legal and religious, which encouraged women not to work outside the home.

The research findings will also form the basis of a forthcoming monograph by O'Brien.

3. References to the research

The outputs listed below have been subject to rigorous peer review. The exhibition was overseen by a project advisory board comprised of subject specialist academics and project partners.

R1 – Sparke, P. *Electrical Appliances* (London: Bell and Hyman, 1986)

R2 – Sparke, P. *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion 2008)

R3 – **Sorcha O'Brien**, *Powering the nation: images of the Shannon scheme and electricity in Ireland*. Newbridge, Ireland : Irish Academic Press (2017). ISBN 9781911024675 REF2ID: 32-81-1782

R4 – **Sorcha O'Brien**, 2017, "Made in Ireland"? National Narratives and Hybrid Identities in Irish Design History', *Writing Visual Culture*, Available at <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/40342/>

R5 – **Sorcha O'Brien**, Kitchen Power: Women's Experience of Rural Electrification, Exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life, Castlebar, Co. Mayo, Ireland, open July 2019 to July 2020 (extended due to Covid-19 to Jan 2021) REF2ID: 32-79-1781

R6 – **O'Brien, Sorcha**, et al. "Our Own Memories: Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification: Edited Transcript of The Tommy Marren Show, Midwest Radio, 27 May 2019." *RCC Perspectives*, no. 1, 2020, pp. 42–49. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26937552

Grant

Sorcha O'Brien, The Electrification of the Rural Irish Home: Housewives, Electrical Products and Domesticity in the 1950s and 1960s, Arts & Humanities Research Council, July 2016-December 2019, GBP245,195.

4. Details of the impact

The project had impact in two different areas, first through the impact on museum practices in both collection and curation in the National Museum of Ireland, and secondly through enabling social value and creativity amongst the demographic of older Irish women.

Improving collection and curatorial practices at the National Museum of Ireland

The curation of the exhibition spearheaded a number of developments in museological practice, particularly internal museum processes, as well as a shift in emphasis for NMI Country Life from folklife to social history.

The development of the Kitchen Power exhibition from 2015-19 spearheaded the move of the NMI Country Life from its existing emphasis on Irish folk life from roughly 1850s to 1950s, to that of Irish social history including the late 20th century. For the past decade NMI Country Life had been broadening its collecting and exhibition policy to include post-1950 and mass manufactured objects [S1, S2]. This approach was developed further with the inclusion in Kitchen Power of everyday, mass manufactured domestic appliances, and their subsequent addition to the permanent collection. Of the 51 objects in the exhibition, 16 were acquired to add to the 8 already in the collection (1,446 currently on display). The former NMI Country Life Manager/Keeper attests that *'The work with Dr O'Brien and the Kitchen Power exhibition helped bring about the realisation across NMI that approaches to collections needed to change and paved a way for that to begin to happen [...]'* [S3] The and Senior Curator and Assistant Keeper, NMI Country Life, credits the project with prompting a major review of acquisitions policy across NMI: *'As a direct result of our collaboration with Dr O'Brien the National Museum of Ireland is working on an Acquisitions and Collections policy which covers contemporary collecting... The Kitchen Power exhibition has both contributed to and informed that debate. I think it has helped to push a boundary in the National Museum of Ireland's thinking about what the Museum of Country Life should be covering in relation to material culture and social history.'* [S4] One practical example of this new institutional focus on both women's and social history is the Art and Industry Division of NMI's recent interest in buying Magdalene laundries in Dublin.

According to the Head of Collections at NMI and the acting Managing Keeper at NMI Country Life for the past six months, these practical decisions about collections and acquisitions also prompted more strategic and conceptual developments in NMI's curatorial staff: *'The Museum of Country Life has always included oral histories in relation to objects, but a key impact from the Kitchen Power exhibition experience is to bring ethnographic oral history into use in terms of modern times e.g. 1950s. It's fair to say that the Kitchen Power exhibition and Dr O'Brien's research helped to extend this timeframe and also aided thinking and debate that informed our formal Contemporary Collecting Strategy at the National Museum of Ireland.'* [S5] In particular, the use of oral histories as part of new permanent displays at NMI sites in Dublin will be informed by this work and include audio of O'Brien's research interviews.

These shifts in curatorial and acquisition practices meant the NMI as a whole began to address historical issues with communication between departments. The role of O'Brien as the external curator working closely with a project team was instrumental in highlighting issues so they could be resolved at an early stage, including the role of curators in exhibition titling. The Senior Curator and Assistant Keeper, NMI Country Life considers the Kitchen Power project [S6] to have been *'a mould-breaker in terms of curatorial practice'* [S4] The operational demands of working collaboratively with O'Brien prompted him to work *'completely differently'* to his normal practice. This highlighted that a Head of Operations was a significant gap in NMI Country Life's organisation, and that role has now been created and filled. The former Manager/Keeper of NMI Country Life considers that *'by bringing Dr O'Brien's design and research skills, Kingston University and the AHRC into the equation it enabled the Museum to learn that you can collaborate [with partners and external experts] successfully without any loss of standards in the design, production and delivery of an exhibition.'* He wrote that the exhibition *'created conditions for positive changes in mindset and attitudes between staff divisions of the National Museum of*

Ireland (the NMI), between the Museum of Country Life and the wider NMI and between the NMI and others... This was a significant change.' [S3]

NMI visitor numbers increased significantly from the opening of the exhibition in July 2019 to March 2020 (when a national Covid-19 lockdown began in Ireland) – they rose from a previous July 5-year average of 13,532 visitors to 15,060, and a previous August 5-year average of 15,560 to 18,002; a rise of 11% and 16% respectively. As of February 2020 (the last full month for which complete visitor figures are available before lockdown) 73,426 people had attended the exhibition [S7]. There were 22,748 visitors to the galleries from the end of lockdown in June 2020 to October 2020, when the galleries closed again due to Level 3 restrictions. While this is around half the usual attendees for these months, compared to previous years, it still represents a strong level of attendance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the absence of overseas visitors and the social distancing restrictions that limit the number of people in the galleries to 50.

While the outbreak of Covid-19 shut the NMI Country Life galleries housing Kitchen Power completely from March 2020 and much of the remainder of that year, this has prompted new online curatorial activities in the museum [S8]. NMI have decided to extend the exhibition's run to January 2021, and Audrey Whitty, the current Acting Keeper, said that elements of the exhibition will become part of the permanent online and real-life displays: *'In the future, the Kitchen Power exhibition will have more presence on the newly launched National Museum of Ireland website [...]. The National Museum of Ireland is also planning a major renovation on our Collins Barracks site with a permanent exhibition in one whole wing on the theme of the 20th century history of Ireland. It will open in 2023. The story of rural electrification will be an important part of this story and so will be present as part of the permanent exhibition. The social history interviews conducted by Dr O'Brien that were an integral part of the Kitchen Power exhibition may be represented through audio visual display.'* [S5]

Enabling Social Value and Creativity in Older Irish Women

The project enabled interventions with older women in Irish society in two different ways, through the oral history interviews and the textile art project.

The intergenerational oral history interviews involved 60 participants in total, most of whom were older Irish women who remembered rural electrification. Clips from the oral histories are included in the exhibition [S8] and quoted in publications [R4]. Several of these participants attended the exhibition opening and were interviewed on national television news, national and regional newspapers and radio [S9].

The project also catalysed a creative intervention by a group of older women in Irish society, highlighting their lived experience and craft skills through the textile art project. 15 older Mayo women worked with artist Anna Spearman (commissioned through Age & Opportunity) over 11 months to develop a process-led project to create individual and group textile artworks [S10]. The artworks produced were based on the participants' life experiences and memories of life before and after rural electrification, which emerged as a definite generational watershed. The textile art showcase held in May 2019 as part of the Bealtaine festival had an audience of approximately 150 people, and a 20 minute radio interview by O'Brien and a project participant in May 2019 was broadcast on regional station Midwest Radio [R6].

A survey answered by 28 of the overlapping group of oral history and textile art project participants recorded a very positive response to their involvement. All of these responses were positive about their sense of being part of social change in Ireland, 26 responded that the experience had improved their self-confidence and sense of self, 23 that it had improved their general sense of wellbeing and 27 found that it had renewed their interest in creative activities. The words most associated with the projects were 'engaging', 'reflective' and 'fulfilling' [S11].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1** – Anthony Candon, '[Breaking into the Present: Addressing boundaries at the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life](#)' in Dissolving Boundaries: Museological Approaches to National, Social and Cultural Issues, ed. Annette B. Fromm & Bärbel Kerkhoff-Hader, 2014.
- S2** – National Museum of Ireland [Master Vision Statement 2018-2032](#)
- S3** – Testimonial from Former Manager/Keeper of NMI Country Life
- S4** – Testimonial from Assistant Keeper and Senior Curator, NMI Country Life
- S5** – Testimonial from Head of Collections NMI and Acting Keeper, NMI Country Life
- S6** – [Kitchen Power](#) [exhibition webpage](#), National Museum of Ireland
- S7** – NMI Country Life Footfall Figures
- S8** – Electric Irish Homes [project website](#)
- S9** – [Kitchen Power](#) exhibition launch media coverage cuttings compilation
- S10** – Our Irish Heritage Electric Irish Homes Textile Art [project webpage](#)
- S11** – Survey Responses