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ART IN V̄ TIME OF  
CREATiVITY FEVER

# JOHN KELLY

The Garden Shed (2011)

## THE TIMES, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 1846.

"My Lord Duke,—Without apology or preface, I presume so far to trespass on your Grace as to state to you, and by the use of your illustrious name, to present to the British public the following statement of what I have myself seen within the last three days.

"Having for many years been intimately connected with the western portion of the county of Cork, and possessing some small property there, I thought it right personally to investigate the truth of the several lamentable accounts which had reached me, of the appalling state of misery to which that part of the country was reduced.

"I accordingly went on the 15th inst. to Skibbereen, and to give the instance of one townland which I visited, as an example of the state of the entire coast district, I shall state simply what I there saw. It is situated on the eastern side of Castlehaven harbour, and is named Senth Reen, in the parish of Myross. Being aware that I should have to witness scenes of frightful hunger, I provided myself with as much bread as five men could carry, and on reaching the spot I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes that presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearance dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horsecloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees. I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive—they were in fever, four children, a woman, and what had once been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail. Suffice it to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 of such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe. By far the greater number were delirious, either from famine or from fever. Their demoniac yells are still ringing in my ears, and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain. My heart sickens at the recital, but I must go on.

"In another case, decency would forbid what follows, but it must be told. My clothes were nearly torn off in my endeavour to escape from the throng of pestilence around, when my neckcloth was seized from behind by a gripe which

compelled me to turn. I found myself grasped by a woman with an infant just born in her arms, and the remains of a flimsy sack across her loins—the sole covering of herself and babe. The same morning the police opened a house on the adjoining lands, which was observed shut for many days, and two frozen corpses were found, lying upon the mud floor, half devoured by the rats.

"A mother, herself in a fever, was seen the same day to drag out the corpse of her child, a girl about 12, perfectly naked, and leave it half covered with stones. In another house, within 500 yards of the cavalry station at Skibbereen, the dispensary doctor found seven wretches lying, unable to move, under the same cloak. One had been dead many hours, but the others were unable to move either themselves or the corpse.

"To what purpose should I multiply such cases? If these be not sufficient, neither would they hear who have the power to send relief and do not, even though one came from the dead. Yet, them, however, believe and tremble, that they shall one day hear the Judge of all the earth pronounce their tremendous doom, with the addition, 'I was an hungered and ye gave me no meat, thirsty and ye gave me no drink, naked and ye clothed me not.'

"But I forget to whom this is addressed. My Lord, you are an old and justly honoured man. It is yet in your power to add another honour to your age, to fix another star, and that the brightest in your galaxy of glory. You have access to our young and gracious Queen. Lay these things before her. She is a woman. She will not allow decency to be outraged. She has at her command the means of at least mitigating the sufferings of the wretched survivors in this tragedy. They will soon be few indeed in the district I speak of, if help be longer withheld.

"Once more, my Lord Duke, in the name of starving thousands, I implore you to break the frigid and flimsy chains of official etiquette, and save the land of your birth, the kindred of that gallant Irish blood which you have so often seen lavished to support the honour of the British name, and let there be inscribed upon your tomb 'Servata Hibernia.'

"I have the honour to be, my Lord Duke,  
Your Grace's obedient humble servant,

N. M. CUMMINS,  
"Justice of the Peace."

**BIOGRAFI** Född 1965 i England, bor och verkar på Irland. John Kellys familj immigrerade till Australien samma år som han föddes. 1985 blev han Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts Painting) vid RMIT University, Melbourne där han också genomförde sin Masters of Arts 1995. Som vinnare av Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship 1995, reste han till London för att studera som en Affiliate Student vid Slade School of Art från 1996 till 1997. Verket Garden Shed är producerat med stöd från Culture Ireland.

**BIOGRAPHY** Born 1965 in England, lives and works in Ireland. John Kelly's family immigrated to Australia the same year he was born. In 1985 he obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts Painting) from RMIT University, Melbourne where he also completed his Masters of Arts in 1995. As a winner of the 1995 Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, he travelled to London to study as an Affiliate Student at the Slade School of Art from 1996 to 1997. The work Garden Shed is produced with support from Culture Ireland.

Till berörda parter,

i juli 2007 varnade den irländska ekonomen Morgan Kelly i ett antal artiklar för en irländsk ekonomisk kollaps. Dåvarande premiärministern Bertie Ahern svarade: »Jag förstår inte varför folk som sysslar med sånt där inte tar livet av sig...». 2008 drabbades landet av ekonomiskt kaos.

I december 1846 slog N.M. Cummins larm i ett brev till The Times där han beskrev den tragiska situationen på South Reen Peninsula i västra Cork på Irland. Innan Cummins brev publicerades bodde 340 människor där. 1847 var nästan alla döda. De omkom alla i den stora svälten på Irland, An Gorta Mór.

2009 var jag på en föreläsning av Catherine Marshall. Den hette Att synliggöra det osägbara - ett olöst dilemma för irländska konstnärer. (1) Marshall föreläste om det faktum att mycket lite bildkonst har gjorts på temat An Gorta Mór.

»Irländska konstnärer målade inte sin historia eftersom det fanns en uppfattning (som var så allmänt accepterad att den sällan dokumenterades) att sådana verk aldrig skulle godkännas av etablissemangen.«(2)

I ett märkligt sammanträffande gjorde sig Henry Tate en förmögenhet på grönsakshandel i Liverpool samtidigt som An Gorta Mór. Senare sålde han grönsaksbutikerna och investerade pengarna i sockerbitpatentet, vars framgång gjorde det möjligt för honom att bli den stora samlaren och mecenaten inom brittisk konst. Men det finns inga bilder av An Gorta Mór i hans samling av 1800-talskonst och inte heller på Tate Gallery.

Marshall förklarar detta genom att berätta historien om R.G. Kelly:

»...en irländsk konstnär som ställde ut en målning av en vräkning på British Institution 1853... Strickland skriver i sin förteckning över irländska konstnärer (Dictionary of Irish Artists) att målningen *An Ejectment in Ireland* eller *A Tear And a Prayer for Erin* fick »skarp kritik för att den var en politisk bild, vilket konstnären aldrig avsett, och debatterades i brittiska underhuset.« Kelly tog åt sig av kritiken och verkar ha undvikit den sortens motiv resten av sitt konstnärskap.«

»Problemet var inte skildringen av fattigdom... utan snarare politiseringen av fattigdomen i ett koloniserat land.«(3)

N.M. Cummins dog utfattig. Sir Henry Tates motto var »Think and Thank« (Tänk och tacka). Eftersom jag är en konstnär som idag bor på pittoreska och bördiga South Reen Peninsula önskar jag att Cummins brev ska hängas på Tate Modern som ett tack för att han lyckades »måla den tavla« som konstnärerna missade. Tack N.M. Cummins.

Med vänliga hälsningar  
John Kelly

1. Catherine Marshall är konsthistoriker och föreläsningen gavs i Skibbereen i West Cork.
2. Marshall, Catherine, [www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/irish-famine](http://www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/irish-famine)
3. ibid.

To whom it may concern,

In July 2007, the Irish economist Morgan Kelly wrote articles warning of an Irish economic collapse. The then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, responded: »I don't know how people who engage in that don't commit suicide.«  
In 2008, economic pandemonium struck.

In December 1846, N.M. Cummins wrote a warning letter to The Times describing harrowing scenes on South Reen peninsula in west Cork, Ireland. Shortly before Cummins's letter was published, 340 people lived there. By 1847, nearly all were dead. An Gorta Mór (The Great Hunger) killed them.

In 2009, I attended a lecture by Catherine Marshall entitled Visualising the Unspeakable; An Unresolved Dilemma for Irish Artists (1). Marshall addressed the fact that there was a scarcity of visual art relating to An Gorta Mór.

»Irish artists did not paint their history because of a perception (so widely held that it was not always documented) that such work would not be acceptable to the establishment.«(2)

In a strange coincidence, as An Gorta Mór was decimating the population of Ireland, Henry Tate accumulated wealth from his string of greengrocer's shops in Liverpool, later selling those shops to invest in the sugar-cube patent, the success of which allowed him to become the great collector and benefactor of British art. But there were no images of An Gorta Mór in his collection of 19th century art or later in the Tate Gallery.

To explain why, Marshall recounts the story of R.G. Kelly:

»...an Irish artist who exhibited a painting of an eviction scene at the British Institution in 1853...Strickland, in his Dictionary of Irish Artists, records that the painting, *An Ejectment in Ireland* or *A Tear And a Prayer for Erin* was »much criticised as a political picture, which the artist never intended, and was actually discussed in the House of Commons.« Kelly got the message and appears to have avoided such subjects for the remainder of his career.«

»The problem was not the depiction of poverty... but rather the politicisation of that poverty in a colonised country.«(3)

N.M. Cummins died in poverty. Sir Henry Tate's motto was »Think and Thank«. As an artist who now lives on the picturesque and fertile peninsula of South Reen, I think Cummins's letter should hang in the Tate Modern as a thank you for being able to »paint the picture« the artists could not. Thank you N.M. Cummins.

Yours faithfully  
John Kelly

1. Catherine Marshall is an art historian and the lecture was delivered in Skibbereen, West Cork.
2. Marshall, Catherine, [www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/irish-famine](http://www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/irish-famine)
3. IBID

## Thematic

### Pandemonium: Art in a Time of Creativity Fever

10 september–13 november 2011

The theme of this year's biennial is *Pandemonium – Art in a Time of Creativity Fever*. In John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1671), Pandemonium is the castle built by Lucifer and his band after they had been booted out of heaven. It is the base camp from which they plot against the »old order«. But it is also a platform from which they seek to launch the project of another creation, a new kind of world albeit a »devilish« one. Wary of »paradises lost«, of utopias that have turned sour or gone of the rails, the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art sounds today's turbulent world for new possibilities and perspectives, alternative forms of life and living that are brewing up. What form of creativity, art and thoughts are emerging in the aftermath of the radical social changes taking place today?

For the biennial, *Pandemonium* is a Lab, an experiment zone, bubbling with ideas. The curator for the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Professor Sarat Maharaj, is working together with a team of co-curators: artist Dorothee Albrecht, curator Stina Edblom and Professor Gertrud Sandqvist. Together, they have turned this year's biennial into a process, with space for in-depth reflection and knowledge production.

The performance program *City Excavations* initiated the biennial process in June and served as a platform for artistic explorations of the city of Göteborg and its history. A number of Summer Academies on the Biennial theme have been established in collaboration with the School of Photography and the School of Design and Crafts, to further engage in the ideas and research connected to the biennial theme.

This is the sixth biennial since the start in 2001, and it will be held between 10 September and 13 November, 2011. Around 40 artists from all over the world are participating. To experience the art, the tours and the events, we welcome you to the biennial venues: Röda Sten Art Center, Göteborgs Konsthall, The Gothenburg Museum of Art and Konsthallen – Bohusläns museum.