THIN PLACE: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the West of England, Bristol for the degree of PhD

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University of the West of England, Bristol

March 2016

Word Count: 35093 (including quotations excluding appendicies)
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Abstract

The ideas proposed in this thesis emerged out of a practice based interdisciplinary curatorial research project titled *Thin Place*, which was installed at Oriel Myrddin, Carmarthen in early 2015. Fully funded by Arts Council Wales, the exhibition, education programme, publication and symposium aimed to dissolve boundaries that separate fields of knowledge and in so doing, attempted to create a ‘thin place’ within the gallery. In ancient times it was believed that the delineation between worlds was more permeable in certain anomalous areas in a landscape; these areas were known as ‘thin places’ and were sometimes signified by burial mounds or standing stones. The five exhibiting artists and the many other contributors to the project produced work that was concerned with or responded to two particular locations: West Wales and the West of Ireland. These were locations where, it was believed, souls could easily enter Otherworlds. Building upon this notion of a ‘thin place’, this practice based doctoral project addresses the ways in which we value our relationship with Place, particularly in landscapes where animism was once a well established worldview, and where ambiguities in liminal spaces were embraced. By attending to these archaic ideas through contemporary curatorial practice, *Thin Place* questions current socio-political and socio-ecological paradigms and proposes new modes of ecological/environmental knowing through alternative forms of curating.
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Introduction

1.1 ‘Thin Place’: an introduction.

This research combines a number of elements involving different disciplines. It includes:

• an exhibition funded by Arts Council Wales and hosted by Oriel Myrddin Gallery in Carmarthen.

• an exhibition catalogue, which includes written responses by a range of writers to the theme of the exhibition (a scientist, a poet, a therapist, an archaeologist, a priest) and images of artworks produced by the five artists involved in the exhibition.

• a conference which drew together speakers from a range of disciplines such as artistic, academic, scientific, professional and alternative.

• workshops for children from three local schools.

• information gathered from questionnaires issued both to participants in the exhibition and visitors to it.

This body of research began as an exploration into archaic beliefs concerning Otherworlds traditionally located in particular landscapes. The west coast of Wales and the west coast of Ireland were the geographical locations I focused on in this study, as they were known to have many ‘Thin places’.

A Thin place is a term used to describe a marginal, liminal realm, beyond everyday human experience and perception, where mortals could pass into the Otherworld more readily or make contact with those in the Otherworld more willingly. In ancient folklore, Thin places were considered to be physical locations where it is easy to cross between two or more worlds. In the context of this research the term ‘worlds’ is extended beyond a physical place and can also stand for a range of different belief
systems, creative traditions, philosophies, narratives, experiences, scientific world-views, and historical periods.

In this thesis I will show how this expanded sense of place, and its associated stories and myths, continues to have a significant impact on the creative practices of contemporary artists and curators located in west Wales and the west of Ireland. I will also demonstrate that there is a distinct willingness to experience Place as a multiverse in these two geographic locations, especially when this multiverse is presented in the context of contemporary curatorial practice.

Central to this practice-based research method then is the curator – not as an individuated practitioner, but as a facilitator for, and a nurturer of, participation and contribution from those who inhabit many different worlds.

I call this process of engaging a community in place-based interdisciplinary thinking ‘Thin curating’ because it involves interweaving ancient and contemporary world-views. I believe Thin curating constitutes an example of what Kiberd (2004a) calls “the archaic avant-garde.”

Kiberd (2004 a) used the phrase “archaic avant-garde” to describe a way of re-reading visual culture from the past in order to re-write the present. He applied the term initially to artworks and artefacts created in Ireland during the Celtic Revival of the nineteenth century when motifs and symbols from ancient Ireland began to appear in arts and crafts as well as in industrial and architectural design. What began as an interest in ancient native culture by second-generation Anglo-Irish gentry and Victorian anthropologists, later provided the visual tools to support a nationalist uprising. The revival of the archaic, therefore, often comes as a precursor to societal change. In my curatorial practice, I see this revival in contemporary art practice as being indicative of a new form of questioning and challenging the legacy of Enlightenment based paradigms.
Bringing belief systems from archaic historical periods into a gallery context offers communities that have lost sight of the presence of the multi-layered nature of their sacred past, a chance to re-establish a connection with it in a manner that is not restricted to monotheistic modes of thinking.

To return to Kiberd: while the first example of the presence of the archaic avant-garde in Ireland might be seen in the poetry and artwork of the Celtic Revival of the nineteenth century, Kiberd also felt the term could be used in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is because the archaic avant-garde often manifests itself in new forms of creative practice in visual culture during economic, social and environmental crisis.

This project, therefore, is an attempt to re-dress and re-orientate curatorial practice, creating interventions using archaic ideas in order to critically model an alternative approach to curatorial practice. This project calls empirical representations of reality as exclusive representations of truth into question. This is achieved by creating an experience that connects the viewer to place, to animism, to relational thinking and to the numinous within a gallery space.

In this introduction I will outline my research question, the object of my enquiry and I will survey the notion of Thinness in relation to Place. I will also define key terms that have helped develop and inform the concept of Thinness. These definitions will explain why I propose a curatorial approach based on the concept of Thinness.

My own practice – as a writer, curator and book artist – has been informed by Thinness, primarily because in a Thin place one can view multiple perceptions of reality coinherently. This concept is proposed by the scientist and Buddhist philosopher Roger Corless (2002, p. 16), who argues that all realities coinhere in every human, as a result he posits that we are each capable of inhabiting more than one world-view, simultaneously.
This porosity of understanding will be considered in a discussion on how my project came about and how my methodology, epistemology and ontology underpins my approach to curating. Having defined Thinness in relation to place in this introductory chapter. I will then define Thinness in relation to Experience in Chapter 1. To do this I will use a correspondence I developed with artist and academic Mary Modeen. I will attempt to elucidate how Thinness moves from Experience to Art Practice and finally to Curation in Chapter 2. Finally I will examine an engagement with Thinness and Education in Chapter 3. Once I have explored the movement of the concept of Thinness from place, to experience, to curation, to engaging Thinness in education, I will then reflect on how Thin curating and the concept of Thinness might constitute a new contribution to knowledge.

It is important to mention here that the curatorial project I developed for this doctorate was delivered solely in west Wales. However the hope is that my findings might benefit curators working in areas with a similar socio-ecological profile to west Wales (the West of Ireland being one such example).

1.2 ‘Thin Place’ - object of enquiry.

The object of my enquiry is to show, through archaic avant-garde curatorial practice, that moments of spiritual coinherence can be made possible and tangible in the physical world, particularly in a gallery space. I see myself as a ‘Thin curator’ in the practical element of my study. I use Thin curator to describe archaic avant-garde actions that generate deeper engagements between human and ancestral worlds in particular places. I intend to invoke what O’Donohue (2004, p. 226) calls “the primal affection.”

Manifestations of the archaic avant-garde in curatorial practice often acknowledge animistic perceptions of reality. This claim is supported by many of the theorists and curators around which my ideas are framed, and which I will discuss in greater depth
later in this thesis. A particularly relevant citation to offer in support of this claim in the meantime however, comes from the French philosopher Felix Guattari (cited in Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 2012, p. 48) who, like those from animist societies, understood subjectivity as being “the core of the real.” As a result, he argued that “everything breathes, and everything conspires in a global breath” (2012, p. 49).

Ultimately, then, this project is concerned with resisting the impoverishment of subjectivity through creative arts practices.

Through my methodology I hoped to construct and facilitate an exhibition that engendered a state of alertness, an awareness of other possible worlds and realities and of other possible modes of ‘being’. This is what the nineteenth century pragmatist William James (1985, pp. 70–76) called “the unseen order”. James believed that this “unseen order” was “transcendent everywhere” and was capable of inducing a “temporary loss of identity”. In circumstances like these, being is thrust to the forefront of our attention and material distractions are rendered obsolete.

1.3 'Thin Place': research question.

Thin curating is concerned with giving artists a platform to present their work and, in turn, to bring lost or forgotten emotive responses to place back into being. My practice is informed by the impact that archaic sacred and animistic perceptions of the world have on different disciplines. It is also inspired by the ways in which emotional experiences can be triggered by specific places, especially places which were once seen as sacred in the archaeological record.

Although this is a multi-dimensional research project, my key research question asks whether the concept of Thinness could be moved from place, to experience, to curation. I also hope to find out if the concept of Thinness could be engaged in educational practice, particularly within a gallery context. I therefore had to ask:

• What impact does the revival of the archaic avant-garde have on art practice
and, as a consequence curatorial practice?

- In what ways can an exhibition concerned with Thinness engender a greater porosity between disciplines?
- How does this porosity alter perceptions of reality?

In order to answer these questions I needed to:

- Extend current conceptions of animism (Franke, 2012; Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 2012; Wallis, 2005; Warner, 2002).
- Reveal what happens when divisions between fields of knowledge, subject and object dissolve or become more porous (Rose, 2013; James, 1985).

My research question is timely for two core reasons:

- Science is beginning to discover that the dualities of subject/object are not as clearly defined as had previously been considered (Adams and Green, 2014).
- Animist thinking, put into action, can help to temper our perception that all living things are a resource for human consumption. This is a particularly important reason, considering the current ecological issues we face. (Rose 2013; Jones, 2008; James, 1985).

1.4 Methodology.

My methodological approach is multi-dimensional and broadly speaking engages in theoretically informed action research. It has an orientation consistent with established anthropological (Turner, 1986; van Gennep, 1960), archaeological (Mulk and Bayliss-Smith, 2007, pp. 109–115), philosophical (De Botton, 2012; Guattari, 2008; James, 1985), social (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005), educational (Edwards et al., 1998) and curatorial (Obrist, 2004; Serota, 2000; Bennett, 1995; Clifford, 1991) practices.

In order to develop the notion of Thinness in a curatorial context, I had to make it clear to those inclined to believe in the presence and activities of the holistic milieu -
a term I will define in the next paragraph - and those inclined not to, that my research related to issues around animist perceptions and relational modes of being.

Sociologists of religion Heelas and Woodhead, coined the term “holistic milieu” (2005, p.15) during their sociological study of the sacred landscape of the town of Kendal. They suggested that western Europe has been experiencing an ongoing shift away from more or less authoritarian ideologies of faith – what they call the “congregational domain”¹ – towards a more inclusive, subjective and relational experience of spirituality, which they call the “holistic milieu”.² They define this as a “spiritual revolution.” (2005, p. 3) The primary concern of the Kendal study was to examine what Heelas and Woodhead describe as the heartlands of religious and spiritual life.

By investigating the perceptions and activities of the congregational domain and the holistic milieu, they could distinguish between associational forms of the sacred. It is worth noting that their study did not take place in a city with a substantive migrant population. What they did find however was that the congregational domain tended to live what they titled a “life-as” existence, which was generally characterised by duty, roles and moral judgement, where language was dominated by ‘should’ or ‘ought’; where church or chapel offered a sense of order, meaningfulness and security: “Individuals are told what to do by a higher authority, rather than being encouraged to look to their own inner resources to decide for themselves” (2005, p. 16).

“Subjective-life” was generally characterised by the pervasive use of “holistic” language. These included words such as ‘harmony’, ‘balance’, ‘flow’, ‘integration’, ‘interaction’ and ‘connect’. Above all, the holistic milieu is interested in growth, in moving beyond what Heelas and Woodhead (2005, p. 3) describe as “barriers,

¹For example, the public visible activities of church and chapel.
²The ‘invisible’ activities of what is often called alternative or New Age spirituality.
blocks, patterns or habits by making new connections”. Ultimately then, the activities of the holistic milieu, which include all known alternative spiritual practices, are concerned with healing the dynamic of the whole.3

According to the “spiritual revolution” (2005, p. 3) claim, subjective-life spirituality is beginning to eclipse life-as religions. Heelas and Woodhead predict that, overall, the congregational domain will continue to decline for the next twenty-five to thirty years. They attribute the decline of the congregational domain, and subsequent growth of the holistic milieu, to a single process: what Charles Taylor (1991, p. 26 cited in Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 2) calls “the massive subjective turn of modern culture”. This subjective turn presents a challenge to the world-view that truth is arrived at objectively, empirically and methodically.

What I hope to show through my action research is that patterns do exist in and across meanings, and that these would qualify sociologists of religion Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) suggestion that the presence of the holistic milieu is a growing force and therefore cannot be isolated from larger cultural or educational issues.

My hypothesis is that the living world possesses its own agency and sentience, the presence of which can be found everywhere, but is particularly heightened in, thin places, both traditional and constructed (e.g. a gallery.)

To substantiate this hypothesis my methodology draws on William James’ approach because I, like the pragmatists, have developed my concept of Thinness out of what social and cultural theorist Owain Jones (2008, p. 1601) calls a “deep dissatisfaction with the basic assumptions and aspirations that inform thought and knowledge”. In my case these assumptions impact on our relationship to Place. My dissatisfaction is a reaction to the ongoing trajectory of Enlightenment-based conceptions of progress. These notions divide, sort and represent the world in fixed categories and certainties. Challenging these conceptions requires pragmatism because pragmatism makes

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3 These include practices such as meditation, yoga and Reiki.
interventions into the world rather than simply revealing the world. The notion of making an intervention into the world therefore informed my curatorial methodology. Because the Enlightenment project was, as Jones (2008, p. 1601) suggests, “a vast body with great diversity and momentum”, its current destruction involves the “breaking of many things, over large tracts of thought, space and time”. Making interventions into that destruction is one of the ways in which coinherence can be re-constructed from the wreckage. Relying on just simply revealing the destruction, only further perpetuates inertia and a sense of pointlessness and hopelessness at the idea that change might be possible. As Jones (2008, p. 1601) succinctly states:

We need to step from the wreckage – the crude industrialisms, capitalisms, technologies, ideologies, theologies and identities that have crashed so dismally (not least ecologically) rather than remain with them, trying to patch them up, or worse still fight [sic] over the ghostly ruins of it all. We need to salvage what is useful, rebuild, move on.

I also looked at pragmatism as a philosophical discourse, around which I could situate my arguments and frame my methodology. Pragmatism is a relevant theoretical framework for my research because it tries, as Jones (2008, p. 1601) points out, to build alternative ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies, which, he describes as being “multiverse”. Pragmatism is also relevant because at one level it can also be understood as an “attitude towards theory and knowledge” (Jones, 2008, p. 1601).

Pragmatists like James, Peirce and Dewey emphasised the importance of making rather than revealing the world. This approach, which later influenced key philosophical authors, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche and Heidegger, also inspired post-structuralism more generally. The central tenet around which I have framed my curatorial approach is based on James’ interest in turning away from abstract
concepts towards concreteness and action, as seen in his 1907 publication, **Pragmatism:**

A pragmatist ... turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, from closed systems and pretended absolutes, and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and power. (James, 2000 [1907], p. 28)

While this statement might at first appear to resonate with logical positivism, my reading of James' proposal is that it presents a challenge to representational thinking. Pragmatism is therefore relativist, or a form of “qualified relativism” (Thayer-Bacon, 2002 cited in Jones, 2008, p. 1602).

Thinness as a concept acknowledges some indebtedness to pragmatism because it claims that creativity, pluralism and experimentalism are the necessary means by which to understand the unfolding world. As a result, pragmatism tends to offer a more optimistic proposal for a future where creativity is seen as “an ethical act.” (Thrift, 1996 cited in Jones, 2008, p. 1604.)

While pragmatism, the concept of the archaic avant-garde, coinherence and the holistic mileu inform my methodology, my approach for Thin Place also developed through my interactions with, and correspondence with, members of staff at Oriel Myrddin, with the artists, writers and speakers I selected to work with, and with the information I gathered from questionnaires issued to visitors to the exhibition and to curators living and working in west Wales and the west of Ireland. It also developed through workshops and through my engagement with children in three schools in Carmarthenshire.

The information I gathered from questionnaires issued to visitors to the exhibition endorsed the key claims of my argument but it did not offer sufficient material for analysis. As a result I have not included an analysis of their responses in my discussion, as they did not provide a robust enough form of evidence to prove that
the aims of my research were met. This was because, on reflection, the questions I asked had a number of limitations: namely, that I did not ask specifically about the presence of animism, the archaic avant-garde, or coinherence in the exhibition. There was however one key testimonial that endorsed the aims of my research and I will reflect on this in Chapter 3.

The information I gathered from questionnaires issued to curators in the west of Ireland and west Wales provided some small elements for analysis. However they were not central to the object of my enquiry and so they have not been included in this discussion. I initially asked curators to choose a selection of adjectives that they might align with their curatorial approach. However my findings and their responses were not as empirically robust as I had hoped, again this was due to the limited way in which I had phrased my questions, a limitation I realized existed after the research was complete. Thus it was difficult to use their responses as a means of identifying what a Thin curatorial approach might constitute. I did, however, ask curators in west Wales and the west of Ireland to identify examples of exhibitions which had initially inspired them to become gallery directors or curators. Their responses provided me with a greater understanding of the aesthetic and philosophical sensibilities they shared. Although I have also not included the responses to these questions in this thesis, as I felt they distracted from the core focus of my argument, I did find that a number of galleries in west Wales and the west of Ireland share commonalities in their understanding of and openness to work concerned with place, animism and the archaic avant-garde. This will prove to be very useful in future should I wish to develop another Thin exhibition in another location in the west of Wales or the west of Ireland.

The findings I have included in this discussion were gathered from interactions with individuals whose opinions and interpretations of animism, the archaic avant-garde, the holistic milieu and coinherence were not necessarily similar to my own. I
recognise that the findings I uncovered are not neutral because my methodology was informed by my own epistemology. It was also informed by my ontology by means of the perspective I was looking to find.

In terms of epistemology, I argue that the secularisation of society has not diminished the longing for spirituality and moral authenticity. I believe that the legacy of Enlightenment-based thinking has overlooked how many aspects of faith remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed. I believe an enriched materialism can be encountered in a gallery space if a multiplicity of world-views are given a platform and represented. I believe it is important to foster an awareness of personhood beyond humans.

I have found that the holistic milieu nurtures this notion through a sacred and animistic world-view of place. When the ideas of the holistic milieu are embedded into curatorial practice, I contend that they express a conceptual imperative that perceives conjecture (based on thousands of years of storytelling and ritual) to be as valid a perception of reality as rationalism.

Through my ontological stance, I question the assumption that there is only one ‘valid’ world-view – in particular, that the logical-positivist world-view, as a scientifically proven ‘truth’, should take precedence over other world-views. My ontology draws inspiration from Virginia Woolf’s (1931, p. 173) assertion that far from being hard and cold to the touch, “the globe of life has walls of thinnest air”. My ontology on being human today acknowledges the fact that while the archaic world-view, as seen for example in the testimony of Isobel Gowdie, (analysed by Emma Wilby, 2010 in her book ‘Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Shamanism and Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Scotland) believed multiple realities could operate in a non-hierarchical, coinherently framework. I contend that this must also be possible in the present.
Accused of witchcraft in Scotland in the 1660s, Isobel Gowdie’s testimony revealed how she, along with her peasant neighbours, inhabited what could be described as a multiverse. These multiple realities were profoundly influenced by the natural rhythms of the land, the natural rhythms of the body, the transition of stars and planets across the sky and their impact on her fate. Her testimony also reveals the magical and mystical powers (seen and unseen), which controlled both her physical and emotional wellbeing. At times, this experience of existence was frightening, complex, overwhelming, violent and uncertain, yet always animate:

Isobel Gowdie was one of the hapless victims of a “Protestantism” that saw witchcraft in harmless signs of piety such as the invocation of saints, and in the traditional gestures of conciliation with the powers of Evil. (van den Hoogen, 1992)

I.4.1 Personal background to the project and its relationship with my methodology.

Since 2002, I have been working as an art practitioner, curator, critical writer, educator and ecological activist. During my undergraduate degree, I developed an interest in activities relating to the holistic milieu. I was interested in these activities as a cultural phenomenon as well as a means of challenging and subverting more orthodox and rational perceptions of reality. This is because I often found that I never could fully assimilate into, or accept, versions of reality that were limited to one meta-narrative.

I explored this epistemology in my visual arts practice through collaborations with institutions outside of the art world (e.g. the Natural History Museum, Dublin in 2002; Ulster Museum, Belfast in 2005; Le Musée de l’hôtel Sandelin, Saint-Omer in 2012). To me, a reality based on a single truth seemed impossibly limiting as an ideology and as a means of nurturing creativity. I found, through my collaborations with individuals from other disciplines, that it was natural to see the world from multiple
perspectives. Many of those with whom I worked enjoyed the process of collaborating with an artist, and our collective world-views were often changed as a result.

My decision to move to West Wales was influenced by a historical (and romantic) attachment to the Welsh coast as a place that shared a similar ancient cultural heritage to the west coast of Ireland, where animistic narratives and more pluralistic modes of being always seemed to be more prevalent, both in folklore and during my childhood. As a daughter of parents who emigrated from Ireland in the late 1980s, the coasts of Wales and Ireland came to embody, in my imagination, sites of disappearance, of metamorphosis, of shape-shifting and of re-emergence.

As the Irish Sea heaved beneath the ferry that brought my family back and forth between Ireland and England, I felt a strange sense of relief when, as the poet Bernard O'Donoghue (2002, p. 320) puts it in ‘Westering Home’, I was “Neither here nor there, and therefore home”.

This is when the concepts of liminality and animism became acutely meaningful to me, terms I will discuss in more depth shortly. It took me a further ten years to be able to articulate why they had such an effect, during which time global movement, particularly to and from Ireland, slowly began to gain momentum. Many artists, curators and theorists at that time were beginning to question in earnest how past concepts and structures of reality could transform perceptions of contemporary identity and ways of being.

When I returned to Ireland as an art student in the late 1990s, I noticed that the experiences of those who had emigrated to, or sought asylum in Ireland at that time, sparked a renewed personal interest to make work that would articulate the experience of belonging, both physically and spiritually, to what Said called "more than one world" (in the film Edward Said: The Last Interview [conversation with Charles Glass], 2002).
During my MPhil research, (2003-2006) I began to investigate theorists, artists and curators who were dealing with this issue. This helped me to establish an understanding of how my practice as an artist and curator could benefit from their attempts to create more nuanced representations of identity in exhibitions of contemporary Irish art, attempts that would address what I called a crisis of representation in the visual arts in Ireland at the time.

I used the term ‘crisis’ to signify a condition of social and cultural change taking place in Ireland in the early 2000s. I looked at established historical and contemporary artworks in museums which identified an ‘Irish’ sense of cultural belonging, and realised that they were no longer relevant – or worse, perpetuated binary or excessively nationalist and exclusivist modes of thinking. This was an important discovery because an increasing number of global, social and environmental changes had taken place both in rural and urban areas of Ireland at that time. These changes included an increased number of people with diverse cultural identities moving to live in Ireland. There was also a significant growth in the numbers of people moving from rural parts of Ireland to the cities. ‘Crisis of representation’ was a term I used to reflect on the ongoing urgent search amongst some creative practitioners and curators to find a visual language or curatorial voice that would embrace both past and present representations of Ireland in order to create a more comprehensive view of contemporary Irish identity in Irish art.

Upon moving to Wales in 2011, I discovered similar issues were also present. Working as a lecturer in critical and contextual studies for over three years, I witnessed in Wales, as in Ireland, the ways in which all that did not belong to Enlightenment-based conceptions of progress was removed from sight. For example I noticed that certain individuals, animals, landscapes and ancient sacred spaces were slowly disappearing from view. What I witnessed in Ireland and Wales does relate to a wider political point. It seems that there is a political necessity to find new
forms for spiritual needs that, otherwise, are all-too-easily co-opted by authoritarian institutions and individuals.4

I speculated that Thin curating might be able to address this paradox, particularly as I began to encounter artists and curators who were developing projects focused on encouraging a sense of belonging to a context larger than a geo-political boundary. The projects developed by these artists and curators, some of which will be discussed later in this thesis, aimed to cultivate a multiplicity of perspectives. They aimed to give place agency and they often found that this had a significantly positive effect on the lives of those with whom they worked.

I believe that the crisis of representation I found in Wales, like the crisis of representation I had witnessed in Ireland during the previous decade, emerged from an inability to find ways of nurturing and maintaining the shared realities that surround us. This is how my interest in developing an alternative place-based curatorial practice began, and why I have developed the concept of Thin curating as a spiritual, creative and politically motivated creative practice.

I.4.2 Method: action research in practice

Not only have I tested my approach to this subject matter through the ‘Thin Place’ curatorial project, I have also introduced the notion of Thinness and Thin curatorial practice in conference papers, journal articles, exhibitions, residencies, gallery talks, collaborations and peer feedback. Some examples have included discussions on Thinness in a peer-reviewed essay for The Blue Notebook: Journal for Artists’ Books (Vol. 8, No. 2, 2014), titled “And the night was kind”; a peer-reviewed essay for Textile Journal published by Berg (2014); a peer-reviewed conference paper in

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4 Putin’s relationship with a reactionary Russian Orthodox Church and the deeply conservative form of Islam supported by Isis being two of many examples. See for example the film Leviathan (2014) Directed by Andrey Petrovich Zvyagintsev and Bitter Lake (2015) Directed by Adam Curtis.
collaboration with my colleague, Elizabeth Palmer, titled “Meta-morphs: being a mediator of the ‘Thin’ place and ‘Thin’ experience in the HE classroom” for the 2014 HEA conference, *Heroes and Monsters: Extra-Ordinary Tales of Learning and Teaching in the Arts and Humanities*; a peer-reviewed paper on Thin curating for Nazarene Theological College, University of Manchester (2013); a peer-reviewed paper for the sixth *International Social Innovation Conference* at the University of Northampton (2014); and finally a peer reviewed paper presented in collaboration with Mary Modeen at the ASLE (*Association for Literature and the Environment*) Conference at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge (2015). Other non-peer-reviewed conferences I attended to test my ideas included post-graduate research talks at the University of Leeds, the University of Dundee, the University of Reading, the National Irish Visual Arts Library and the University of the West of England, Bristol.

I have been testing my approach to this subject matter through critical writing since 2011 when I was made a recipient of the Wales Arts International (WAI) and Axis Critical Writing award. This award had a significant impact on my publication output. Over the course of my doctoral research, I was commissioned to write a number of critical reviews on artists in west Wales, Ireland, London and further afield. The editors I worked for at *Art Review* and *This Is Tomorrow* commissioned me to focus especially on artists or curatorial projects that were relevant to my research. As a result, a number of the contemporary artists I wrote about were selected to be in the ‘Thin Place’ exhibition.

I have also explored Thinness in my book arts practice and during artist residencies. For example, I worked in France with artist Karl Musson in 2012 and in Ireland in 2013. During this period, we produced two publications together and a body of sculptural works titled ‘The Preparations of St Augustine Volume I and II’. These publications allowed me to develop my ideas through dialogue with another artist. In
January 2014, these experiences helped me to attract significant funding from the Arts Council of Wales to deliver the practical element of this project. With this funding, I have been able to integrate my professional curatorial practice into my theoretical groundwork. This allowed for three distinct practice-based elements to emerge, which were as significant to this project as the exhibition. They included:

1. Catalogue production.
2. A one-day symposium involving speakers from many different disciplines.
3. A series of educational activities for children and adults that took place during the course of the exhibition.

I.5 Key terms: Thinness in relation to Place.

Part of what impelled the curation of Thin Place was a wish to re-engage viewers with the place in which they live, in the hope that I might restore in them a deeper emotional attachment, sense of responsibility towards and ownership of; the physical, metaphysical and social geography they inhabit. Carmarthen was an ideal locale for the exhibition in that respect for two reasons:

1. Firstly, it is one of the most economically deprived regions of Wales (and therefore of the UK). Some examples of the extent of the socio-economic difficulties encountered in Wales appear in the 2008 survey compiled by the National Assembly for Wales for the Office of National Statistics. This revealed that 6% of Carmarthenshire falls within 10% of the most deprived areas in Wales, and the majority of its areas are more deprived than the Wales average. Carmarthenshire is a county of very little diversity, with only 0.9% of citizens from a non-white ethnic group, making it predominantly
white and nominally Christian.\textsuperscript{5} It is a place of high unemployment (27.5%), and long-term poor health is higher in Carmarthenshire than the Welsh national average (26.3%). The number of people of working age with no qualifications is 19.4%. This figure is higher than the national averages for all of Wales, England and Scotland. Finally, and most significantly, the emotional well-being of the population in Carmarthenshire was described in the 2012/13 survey by the Office of National Statistics, \textit{Personal Well-Being Across the UK}, Wales as having the highest percentage of low personal well-being in the whole of the UK (11%). A greater proportion of people in Wales in the 2012/13 survey rated their life satisfaction and sense of feeling worthwhile as very low, compared with other countries in the UK and the UK as a whole (Office for National Statistics, 2013; National Assembly for Wales Commission, 2008).

Such levels of economic deprivation inevitably lead to a sense of disenfranchisement and disaffection, with social, cultural, ecological, educational and political structures. The wish that Thin Place would transform how place is perceived and valued therefore drove my research but I did not wish to prove empirically that it had made a difference to the way in which the community felt about their place, as such a claim is hard to substantiate empirically. I did, however hope to facilitate the possibility.

2. The second reason why Carmarthenshire was an ideal area to re-engage viewers with the place they inhabit was its rich history and relationship with the numinous. Although very little is known about Carmarthen prior to the Roman period it is believed to have been established by Irish Milesians. The

\textsuperscript{5} The population of Carmarthenshire is identified statistically as 74.6% Christian, 0.2 Muslim, 0.7% other, 24.6% no religion. Its Welsh-speaking population is 50.1% compared to the national average for Wales of 20.5%
remains of their presence, if they were in fact the founders of the town, were removed when the Romans built a fort in Carmarthen in AD75. The town housed a rich and diverse religious community up until the arrival of the Normans in 1093 – for example, in the twelfth century it was associated with Merlin (Welsh Myrddin) from the Arthurian legends. Merlin’s presence was recorded in the Black Book of Carmarthen, written by a scribe from the Priory of St John the Evangelist and Teulyddog before 1250, along with stories and poems about other legendary Welsh heroes. The book refers to events that had taken place centuries earlier in Wales – events held in local folk memory, transposed and translated into legend through Christian illuminations and publications. While the Black Book of Carmarthen is one example of a symbiotic relationship between an ancient past and an early Christian presence, the historian and psycho-geographer Graham Robb (2013, p. 116) identifies another when he notes that, in pre-Roman times, certain points along the western coasts of Wales and Ireland were believed to be significant entrances into Otherworlds because they were on solstice paths. Summer and winter solstice angles were crucial points of reference for ancient civilisations. According to Robb (2013, pp. 116–120), these paths were carefully measured using Pythagorean mathematics and thus combined what, today, we separate into the categories of ‘science’ and ‘religion’. Because the sun’s light fades in the west, the solstice line system had a certain psycho-geographical logic. It was a physical reminder that the West was where the soul departed this world after death. Many early priests pursued Druidic subjects, such as botany, alchemy, star-gazing and observations of what Robb (2013, p. 134) calls the “inner laws of nature”. In Carmarthen, a significant number of religious orders developed, including an Augustinian priory and a double-cloistered Franciscan friary. These religious orders often
built their churches and sanctuaries on existing pagan sites of worship. Robb (2013, p. 284) suggests that the merging of two forms of worship in one place is common in the British solar network. Both the friary and the priory in Carmarthen therefore played a major role in the cultural life of Wales.

The virtual erasure of place-based forms of worship from Carmarthen following the Reformation led the way for many later archaeological and architectural calamities. Today, for example, the ancient Franciscan friary is buried under a Tesco superstore and a car park/shopping mall crudely named ‘Merlin’s Walk’. Many ancient sacred pre-Roman burial places connected to Merlin were poorly excavated prior to redevelopment. There is now very little archaeological or architectural evidence left in the town of its rich, sacred and mythological past.

Similar patterns of ignorance and irreverence towards an ancestral presence can also be found in the west of Ireland, but these instances are more recent and are connected, according to Robb (2013), to gentrification and an increase in road building and peat extraction. The effects of globalisation in the Celtic Tiger era also played a significant part in erasing connections to an animist conception of place.

I.6 Key terms: Thinness in relation to liminality and anomaly.

Place is where my understanding of liminality and anomaly began, particularly looking at features in the Welsh landscape. Cliffs, caves, strikingly shaped hills or unusual valleys prompted me to consider the border between earth and sea as a particularly suitable locale for a Thin Place in Carmarthen.

Tilley (1994), Turner (1986) and van Gennep’s (1960) approaches to ritual, liminality and landscape grounded place into this discussion and guided my own subject-

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6 On the Whitchurch Meridian line, for example, he points out that abbeys and priories were strung along “like beads on a rosary”. Tintern Abbey, Chepstow Priory, the monasteries of Llandogo and Dixon, the church on Glastonbury Tor all constitute significant examples. (Robb, 2013, pp. 284-285)
centred approach. Turner (1986, p. 95) describes liminal entities as being “neither here nor there; betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.”

The space between two worlds is defined by van Gennep (1960, p. 111) as “liminal” after the Latin word *limen*, meaning gateway or threshold. During rites of passage, such as birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death, three steps had to be taken before a person could be regarded as having made a transition from one stage to another. The first was *separation* of the person, second was his or her *transition* and third was his or her *incorporation* into a new state of being.

For Turner, liminality might be associated with places of unique spatial attributes, such as the shore, where the metaphysical and cosmological worlds have a possible counterpart in nature. Places that are physically liminal therefore create ideal conditions for dialogue with those who have gone before.

I have also drawn from Tilley’s (1994) application of Turner’s ideas on liminality. He discovered that images such as boats and animal motifs were produced at places seen to be liminal and where liminal experiences were celebrated on ritual occasions. Curating an exhibition with these ideas in mind, and situating it in a place known to have a history of ancient ritual and liminal landscapes, extended this approach.

My understanding of the terms liminality and anomaly in relation to Thinness also developed out of the arguments put forward by archaeologists Mulk and Bayliss-Smith (2007), following the discovery of ritually deposited evidence at the Badjelánnda rock art site in Laponia, Sweden. Although their discoveries were not situated in Wales, their Swedish findings have wider applications. They proposed the idea that liminal and anomalous places in a landscape actually continue to inform the scared world-view of most indigenous cultures today and, as a consequence, might
have informed the sacred world-view of indigenous cultures in Wales and Ireland in the past.

The carvings, objects and remains Mulk and Bayliss-Smith discovered, deposited by the nomadic Sami communities prior to the advent of the Lutheran church in Sweden, suggest that the Sami believed topographical anomalies were indicative of portals into Otherworlds.

Mulk and Bayliss-Smith learned that what the Sami regarded as anomalous in a landscape was also a liminal link between this world and the Otherworld, and this explained why certain anomalous places needed to be marked by religious ritual and memorialised by images. Furthermore, they discovered that most pre-historic communities in Western Europe chose similarly anomalous places to bury their dead. These sites were seen as thresholds or portals into Otherworlds; places where the veil between this world and the Otherworld was literally Thin.

To substantiate this claim, Mulk and Bayliss-Smith reconstructed the main features of the sacred geography of the Sami using a ‘map’ of Proto-Uralic cosmology. This was originally developed by the Russian scholar Vladimir Napolskikh in 1992 using a wide range of ethnographic and historical sources.

Like the Napolskikh model, the ‘map’ produced by Mulk and Bayliss-Smith represents a generalised and abstract picture of anomalies and entrances into Otherworlds rather than something that existed in concrete form in the minds of every individual.

Human societies contemplating reality, death and the possibility of an afterlife have told various mutations on stories of this kind for thousands of years across many continents. Mulk and Bayliss-Smith (2007, pp. 109–115) argue, using extensive

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7 Proto-Uralic is the term given to the original language and culture of the peoples speaking the Finno-Permian group of languages, which includes Sami, Finnish, Karelian and Estonian, and also the Ugric language group.
ethnographic case studies, that a sacred world-view of a place, as seen in the Sami map, was a valid way of understanding and inhabiting a particular environment in most traditional cultures.

The archaeologist George Nash explains this visually in his map of western Europe which depicts the likely chronological spread of Megalithic art through the Neolithic world. This map aligns the West with the gateway to the Otherworld because it had a preponderance of anomalous sites which acted as signifiers for entrances into Otherworlds.

Many other archaeologists (e.g. Waddell, 2013a) have identified similar examples in pre-historic Ireland and throughout Europe of anomalies in landscapes that contained archaeological evidence of worship. These incongruities also contain evidence of sacred rituals and, as a consequence, could be seen as liminal or Thin places. The Irish archaeologist John Waddell describes Rathcroghan in Co. Roscommon, which was the focus of his research, as unique, because it contained, “an archaeologically-attested entrance to the Otherworld that touches on this [idea of] ‘Thin Place’, where one world and the other did interface in ancient times” (Waddell, 2013a).

The Cave of Cruachan, or Owenagat, was described by Christian monks as being a place populated by monsters and demons. But this site was known to be an entrance into an Otherworld, a portal between two worlds before 400 AD. It was also known as the residence of the Goddess Morrigan, a Goddess of multiple significance, often depicted as a Crow, flying above battles. However in the cave itself she may, according to Waddell (2003a) be functioning in a ‘Sovereignty’ or ‘Fertility’ role.

We may never know what unearthly powers ancient peoples believed the Otherworld of Rathcroghan contained. However, the vast quantity of ritually deposited material found during archaeological excavations in this, and in the Sami site, suggests that this world below, and the portals into it, were a major preoccupation in many pre-historic lives. These belief systems continue to inform the world-views of many non-
Western cultures today (e.g. Turner, 1986; van Gennep, 1960). However, Mulk and Bayliss-Smith (2007, p. 97) make the obvious point that most archaeologists come from western/urban/industrial cultures in which such ideas are foreign, and their religious beliefs, if any, do not match the ‘sacred landscape’ world-view. When wedded to a positivist or evolutionist methodology, such scholars may have difficulty in empathising with the religiosity of the world majority, past and present.

Waddell is one such archaeologist. While he finds the concept of a belief in a Thin place plausible in the ancient past, he is critical of the existence of the religiosity of this archaic world-view in the West in the present:

I am not happy with the term Thin Place and its increasing usage for any site that in a visitor’s subjective experience produces some supposedly mystical effect. I am sure that many tombs (like Newgrange) were liminal places in the past and seen as portals to the Otherworld. It is clear that the secularisation of society has not diminished the wish for spirituality and moral authenticity and a return to such sites like Tara or Newgrange that symbolize an older, enduring spiritual and historical integrity for some is not surprising, even if it mystifies some archaeologists like myself! (Waddell, 2013 b see Appendix D)

Although Waddell has difficulty believing in the empirical possibility that Thin places might have a sacred presence today, he acknowledges that a need for spirituality still exists in Western secular society. De Botton (2012, p. 13) helpfully contextualises Waddell’s position when he argues that the error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of faith “remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed”.

My definition of liminality and anomaly may seem, at first, to be a little conservative in the sense that I have defined liminality around ancient anomalous sites of worship. I am aware that other liminal spaces also exist in current cultural discourses. (See for example Paul Farley’s book ‘Edgelands: Journeys into England’s true Wilderness’.

These spaces are also seen as thresholds between one world and another but they do not carry with them an historical and archaeological attested legacy of archaic sacred worship. I was primarily interested in re-invoking the heritage of archaic and sacred ideas of liminality rooted in locations in west Wales during this research in order to remind the communities living there of their animistic past and of its potential to be valued again in the present.

I.7 Key terms: Animism in relation to Thinness

In researching the interdependencies inherent in Wilby’s (2010) analysis of Isobel Gowdie’s world-view, I could see how animism might be a relevant framework to develop a Thin curatorial practice in Carmarthen. This is because I felt the ghostly traces of an animistic world-view were still in evidence in the region and were made manifest in the work of the creative practices of the archaic avant-garde artists living there.

I also felt that an animistic relationship between the human and ancestral world, as a perception of reality, can create a greater permeability between disciplines.

This belief was informed by what environmentalist Deborah Bird Rose (2013, p. 98) calls “interspecies communication”. In her essay “Val Plumwood’s philosophical animism: attentive inter-actions in the sentient world” (2013), she discussed the world-view and approach of her deceased friend and fellow academic Val Plumwood, making a case for the importance of opening the door to a world in which we can “begin to negotiate life membership of an ecological community of kindred beings”. (2013, p. 98) This statement, in particular the terms ‘inter-actions’ and ‘kindred beings’ constitutes my understanding of animism in the context of Thinness.
While I acknowledge that contemporary world-views can never fully revert to an archaic animistic world-view, I endorse Rose’s argument that animism is still capable of illuminating and transforming our way of being in the present, as long as it is given the opportunity to be valued as a reality. If we were to accept the possibility that the world is sentient, then we would have a greater responsibility towards the more than human world.

Animist thinking today is often referred to as neo-animism. This is because developments in capitalism and science have created what Guattari calls an “animist problematic” (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 2012, p. 55). As the “certitude of knowing what is living and what is not continues to shift” an androcentric world-view, based on Enlightenment conceptions of progress and hierarchy comes under increasing scrutiny as science uncovers that sentience exists beyond the human mind. In Gowdie’s world-view the movement of the planets and stars, the folk stories of the ‘little people’ the shape shifters and animals that inhabited her world were all animate, all sentient. Today, however, this sentience has also been extended, according to Guattari, to include entities such as agri-business. As a result, we enter into what he calls an “animist thinking and politic” where current ecological, technological and bio-political developments find new ways of rethinking dualisms, creating, as a result, an urgent political challenge. How we negotiate our relationship with and our responsibility towards this increasingly ensiled world will require a greater permeability between disciplines and a greater sense of coinherence in our thinking.

Anselm Franke, curator of the exhibition ‘Animism: Modernity Through the Looking Glass’ supports this notion when he claims that: “the arrow of time has changed directions” (Franke, 2008, p. 1). As a result, I suggest that the future and the present have moved from a linear narrative of progress, to an alchemy of encounter, where
nothing of our past is dead stone, instead it insists, as the poet Cherry Smyth (Healy, 2015, p. 25) states, “like a film [we] can’t walk out of”.

Neo-animist theory can be problematic because it tends to position itself in a dichotomy, making those who are not neo-animists ‘others’. I acknowledged this issue by including voices in my curatorial project from both mono-ideational and poly-ideational positions. In practice, this meant I avoided working with participants who were all of the same mind-set. Instead I worked with and mediated between those who had a myriad of different world-views. I advocated the union of their singular positions as a collective ‘being for’ rather than ‘being against’ because, as Guattari (2008, p. 86) points out “being against only relies on impotent catchphrases of resentment”.

My curatorial model was therefore not characterised by putting itself up against a reductive world-view, but rather bringing many, and often opposing or marginalised world-views into dialogue, using an archaic avant-garde art exhibition as an opportunity to begin that conversation.

An animistic world-view once shaped and transformed the way certain landscapes were perceived and inhabited, and neo-animism still has the potential to challenge the way in which the world today is organised and experienced. In this sense, a Thin exhibition can become a portal into remembering these archaic world-views, reclaiming them into the present and conjuring new communities into being as they do so.

My approach acknowledges Finn’s (1992, p. 120) assertion that “business is currently booming in the departments of the ‘psyche’ amongst the doctors of the ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’”. Business will continue to boom, she argues, while we “continue to confuse ourselves and our world with our categories”. In other words, there will

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8 Finn defines doctors of the ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ to include anyone working in alternative medicine or healing therapies, such as homeopaths, herbalists, hypnotherapists, astrologers, etc.
always be scope for a Thin curatorial approach when a place and its inhabitants suffer the effects of living in a reductive world, particularly when the sacred world-view of place does not have a voice. I propose that embedding animist and neo-animist thinking into Thin curating might be an effective means of re-establishing and re-awakening an interest in the contemporary possibilities inherent in archaic and sacred methods of relating to a place. This multi-sited approach however also owes its development to ecosophy as much as it does animism.

I.8 Key terms: Ecosophy and Tri-ecological thinking in relation to Thinness.

Ecosophy comes from the Greek words for household and wisdom. It is therefore concerned with living in harmony with what is in one’s household in the broadest sense; that is, nature. In this way, the boundary between a person and everything else is of no ultimate significance – all is a seamless whole. This position is particularly important to my curatorial practice and supports my attempts to navigate perceived boundaries in order to show how Thin they are. Ecosophy is a term coined by Guattari and it is a paradoxical concept in as much as it values the multifaceted nature of subjectivity, yet simultaneously stresses the importance of collectivity. The constant emphasis in Guattari’s (2008) work is that life is polymorphous and multidimensional. He argues that our current conflicts are taking place under what he calls a “multipolar system” (2008, p. 22), and yet they are still addressed through the lens of the traditional dualist oppositions that have guided social thought and geopolitical cartographies since the Enlightenment. He proposes the notion of tri-ecology as an alternative way of looking at discreet, separate categories and benchmarks, mediated to us as reality. He believes this structure of reality is longer effective for the times in which we now live. Tri-ecology brings into being what he calls “otherworlds beyond those of purely abstract information.” These otherworlds
engender the notion of the self-in-relation, where the subjectivities of every sentient entity are taken into consideration by what he describes as “the group Eros principle of social ecology.” Collectively, these inter-relationships “dare to confront the vertiginous cosmos so as to make it inhabitable.” (Guattari, 2008, p. 67)

Guattari’s (2008) tri-ecological vision is an elemental characteristic of Thinness in the sense that it navigates many subjective world-views, drawing and creating links between them. This on-going negotiating becomes a catalyst for a gradual reforming and renewal of humanity’s confidence and compassion for a social ecology. As an aspect of curatorial place-based practice, this creates the opportunity for creative autonomy and agency in a particular community, and, as Guattari argues, when this is achieved in one domain it encourages change in other domains.

1.9 Key terms: Relational in relation to Thinness.

The reason why Guattari’s ecosophical model is helpful to Thin curatorial practice is because it is relational. Inviting participants to engage with archaic avant-garde art practices and speakers and writers from many different disciplines offers the opportunity to go beyond life-as-roles and conventions. It allows one to develop an understanding of themself “in relation with the whole” (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 99).

This return to developing a relationship with the whole through archaic and sacred world-views in secular societies also invites the re-emergence of finding meaning in the words ‘Soul’, ‘God’ and ‘Immortality’. Since the Enlightenment, these terms have not been seen to possess a sense-content. As a result, they have been regarded by rational and empirical thinking as being devoid of significance. However, James (1985, p. 53) maintained that they have “a definite meaning for our practice”.
I have embedded this argument into the concept of Thin curating because these evasive, “featureless and footless” (James, 1985, p. 56) abstractions provide the binding essence that can make coinherence tangible for visitors in a gallery space. Most would agree that the relational coexistence of multiple world-views is possible, but rationalism often makes it seem implausible or, at the very least, unlikely. In considering this proposition, I follow Guattari’s (2008) ecosophical argument that we should interrogate our existence using more than one register, and recognise realities in relation to each other. My research is impelled by the idea that a Thin approach to curating can help participants move beyond their immediate concerns and see the self-in-relation, to inhabit what Guattari calls the “incorporeal universe” (1989, p. 85), where the boundaries that define all frames of reference, from geopolitical borders to disciplinary fields of study, become porous, seeping into one another. As a result anthropocentric Enlightenment-based preoccupations with hierarchy and boundaries disappear. This porosity endorses the poet, storyteller and activist Stephen Jenkinson’s (2014) proposal that humanness and humanity come from a Place:

Human life does not derive from human life. There is no beginning for humanity that is human. The first ancestor that gave your ancestor life is an animal. Their first ancestor is a plant. Their first ancestor is place. Place is the ancestor of all. That place that has kept you alive for so long is waiting for you. That place is your home, that place is your death. (Jenkinson, 2014).

Thin curating puts this proposal into action by invoking the many ancestors of place into the gallery space through dialogue, essays, artworks and education events.
Chapter 1: Thinness and Experience

1.1 Introduction.
This chapter will outline how I extended the notion of liminality from Place towards Experience. This extension will clarify how Thinness relates to art practice and curation in Chapter 3. My understanding of the term Wonder will also be discussed in this chapter. This will help define how certain Experiences can be described as Thin. The arguments put forward in this chapter will be supported by a correspondence I developed with the artist and academic Mary Modeen over the duration of my Doctorate study.

1.2 Thin Places, Thick Places and Experience: A Correspondence.
The experience of Thinness is quite evasive, so in this section I will attempt to clarify its core meaning in order to show how the notion of liminality can be an experience as much as it can be a physical place. To do this, I will discuss the notion of Thick description, as this is a useful way of identifying how one might experience liminality as Thin.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz coined the phrase ‘Thick description’ in his book, The Interpretation of Cultures (1973), where he used it to describe a method of capturing layers of meaning when discussing a person or a community. For Geertz, a Thick description was an attempt to capture the accumulation of structures that the anthropologist encounters in the field. These encounters are almost always rooted in complex conceptual structures, which are grounded in stories and ideas superimposed on deeper structures. He believed that neutral observation did not sufficiently describe or capture these anthropological complexities. In a similar way, a Thin place can be experienced through an accumulation of Thick descriptions. This is because a place can appear more vivid and more meaningful through each layer of
Thickening description. In a conversation with artist and academic Mary Modeen, her Thick description captures many layers of awareness:

First, of course, the viewer (as body; as cogito) is aware of occupying a place, taking up bodily occupation of space with feet on the ground. Next, is the picture plane, the surface of glass that is the window. We see fingerprints and dust on this side of the glass, we see raindrops on the other side of the glass, all at the same time as looking through the window, to the spaces beyond. (Modeen, 2014 – see Appendix B)

In her description of her home, Modeen weaves words through twisted willows, out to the edge of her garden, beyond to the river, to the fish at the mouth of the ocean. Her Thick descriptions convey the experience of seeing the world coinherently, or 'Thinly.' Thinness as a concept might be usefully linked to 'porosity' here, in the sense that Thinness is analogous to the semi-permeable walls of membranes that divide one reality from another – a perspective Woolf (1931, p. 163) has called “the sudden transparency through which we see everything”.

However the concept of Thinness was initially troubling for Modeen, suggesting to her the point of intersection between the instances of the world as it is, and the world as we intuit it might be:

Thinness of layers of the ordinary, scraped to thin substance, with just enough poking through to hint at the substructure of the uncanny, the Other. It is the birdcall that seems to vacillate from chirping and cawing to modulate into an unseen child’s cry. It is the cave that beckons as ivy covered limestone but seems to transform somehow into a threatening terrestrial maw, holding, offering something Other. When the ancient seer disappears into the hole in the earth that opens at his feet, is he falling into another zone, or being pulled by the Other into his proper realm?

To me, this perception of Thinness implies removal and reduction, and the creation of a polarity. In response to Modeen’s proposal that Thinness offers something Other, I argue that in Thin Places there is no Other. There is inversion, and the inverted creatures found in folktales of Otherworlds could be seen as ‘Other’ through
a particular Enlightenment-based lens, but those of the inverted Otherworld can
never really be Other, because it would imply that they are binary opposites of those
in this world. The inversions of the Ancients were never really true binary opposites
because they could be both benign and terrifying simultaneously. Queen Morrigan for
example, who inhabited the Owenygat cave discussed in the introduction to this
thesis was both the Goddess of birth and death. She was an inversion of Queen
Maedhbh, a legendary Irish folkloric Queen, but both Maedhbh and Morrigan were
equally capable of compassion as much as cruelty in their respective worlds. It was
the Christian monks who fixed their mutating identities in a written format, who
sealed their mutual site of worship with a boulder, declaring it the gateway to hell. In
so doing, they relegated Morrigan to a binary Otherness for hundreds of years.
It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the notion of an Other emerged with the
spread of monotheism, which, as the literary theorist Marina Warner (2002) points
out, carved the way for the dualistic world-view of the Enlightenment. Before that,
Morrigan’s cave might have been a site for fertility rites as much as it might have
been a place to train young Druids for Shamanic or physical battle. (The
archaeologists Owens and Hayden (1997), for example, describe how caves like the
cave in Rathcroghan might have been initiation sites for young men and women
undergoing significant rites of passage. Separated from their family or tribe, they
often spent time alone in order to do battle with the internal daemons of their psyche
following days of starvation and sensory deprivation.)

When Otherworlds became ‘Other’ through monotheism, an intrinsically
interconnected perception of the world was severed. The porosity, transparency and
permeability of the “globe of life” (Woolf, 1931, p. 173) became opaque. But it
persists – and its persistence has been revived through the archaic avant-garde in
contemporary art practice, and through the holistic milieu identified by sociology.

Rather than ‘poking,’ I argue that Thin Places seep, like light shimmering through
bullrushes. Nothing is reduced, but every layer is present, transparent and permeable.

This notion of seeping allows us to look at individual elements of existence without ever losing sight of their relationship to other elements. It is a kind of attentiveness that allows one to see one thing in another, and all things connected. The Greek philosopher Paracelsus sums this notion up when he says:

> Just as the sun shines through a glass, so the stars penetrate one another in the body. For the sun and the moon and all planets, as well as all the stars and the whole chaos, are in man. (cited in Bennett, 2001, p. 60)

So although Thinness is a point of intersection, it is not one singular point of intersection between one world and another, between here and there. Thinness is made up of multiple intersections between many, many worlds. Worlds inhabited, worlds intuited and worlds, as yet, unknown to us, but which do exist. These unseen orders around us are only perceptible to those of us who engage in the possibility of seeing with a Thin Perception. I do not intend to sound like an exclusivist when I suggest this. I believe everyone is capable of perceiving with a Thin Perception, but many choose not to, or are frightened to, or are educated out of seeing reality in a relational way.

So how is Thickness different from Thinness? In response to Modeen’s concern, I propose that there is very little difference between experiencing the coinherence of the world through Thick description and being in a Thin place. However, problems arise when the layers described through Thick description become categorised in and of themselves, sealed off and presented as existing only in separation or isolation. When this happens, one is more likely to perceive (often unintentionally) each of these seeping layers as belonging to reductive, dualistic or hierarchical structures. This makes their coexistence and our ability to engage with them coinherently appear almost impossible.
A Thin description presents only what is observable externally. A Thin description of a work of art, for example, may give merely an external record of what is happening in the image. It may offer a few details or many, but what it omits is the meaning and the intentions that could be expressed in the gestures and objects within that image. A Thin description therefore is not to be confused with the concept of Thinness, thin places or seeing with a Thin perception.

In light of these arguments, I posit that a thin place is thick in terms of the multiplicity of its layers. These layers are rich with myriad complexities and it is difficult, but not impossible, to see and understand these layers in isolation. However, for a place and an experience to remain Thin, these layers need to be equally present, each containing the other, seeping and indivisible. Corless (2002, p. 4) describes this concept spiritually as being a bit like Jesus in the Johannine tradition: He is in the Father, the Father in him; He is in his disciples, and his disciples in him. Corless suggests that such a concept, albeit normal in theological accounts of the spiritual world, is often perceived as impossible in the physical world.

1.3 Thin Places and Wonder.
Yet, the spiritual concept of coinherence, existing in the physical world, is not so impossible a concept to children. I would argue that most children are born with an innate animistic sensibility, which allows them to see the many layers of a Thick Place, Thinly. This notion has been argued in a plethora of novels, polemics, poems and artworks, particularly in Britain since the advent of industrialisation. Many have contributed to the development of this idea from poet John Clare in the 1800s to the environmental writer Jay Griffiths in her recent publication ‘Kith: The Riddle of the Childscape’ (2013). Jane Bennett can be included in this contribution too. She observes that: children have a sense of themselves as emerging out of an over-rich field of protean forces and materials, only some of which are tapped by their current,
a relevant example of how wonder allows children to see this emerging reality as something animate and relational. In the introductory chapter of her book, Lively created a vivid image of her childhood through Thick Description. She describes sitting in animistic communion with a eucalyptus tree in her back garden in Egypt. The Thickly layered constellation of her presence, the plants, birds, the little eucalyptus tree, the bright cloudless sky and the call to prayer in the distance all constitute a Thick place, in the way Modeen uses the term. However it is Lively’s awareness of their connectivity, their relation to each other, their coinherence and communion in her and with her, that makes her experience one of Thinness, and it is this experience that constitutes wonder in the context of my thesis.

For Modeen, her first recollection of wonder took place when she was five years old, looking at an apple tree in full blossom:

I am small, looking up from underneath as the white petals fall down on me, the most gentle snow of silken white petals against an impossibly blue sky as it brushes against my cheeks.

She describes wonder as an entity on a rope that we both hold between us in our quest to understand Thick and Thin Places.

We hold her taut between us. When we pull hardest, she cannot move. When we relax she bounds about, lurching ahead, taking us both for an impetuous walk, as an eager puppy on a lead. So here we are, side by side, led by wonder. You look about, and feel the seepage between worlds. I look about, and feel the simultaneity of all the worlds. Not so very far apart.

In being led by wonder, both Modeen and I align our perception with the philosopher Max Weber (1904-05) who argued that rationalisation, in its broadest sense, had, in his view, induced a sense of ‘dis-enchantment’ with the world. This dis-enchantment had facilitated a rejection of traditional customs - and the kinds of animistic perceptions they can induce - in favour of scientific thought. This led, he felt, to a
world that valued rationality as an end in itself, above any other claim to reality. But poetry, literature and the arts is where the realities marginalised by rationalism continue to flourish. To define her concept of Thick Places further, Modeen aligns her perception with:

the deepest affinity with the Deep Image poets. I came of age attuning my inner ear to the possibilities of the numinous, the intuited something, residing in certain places. This "intuited something" is also described in Phillip Pullman’s trilogy, ‘His Dark Materials’. Marina Warner, in her book ‘Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds’ (2001) points out that the increasing popularity of this book amongst both children and adults is testimony to the understanding that we always need to engage with texts and images that are concerned with shape shifting, with Otherworlds and with the transmigration of souls, especially during moments of crisis.

In her analysis of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Warner suggested that fairy tales, myths and legends were first transcribed around the edge of the Mediterranean. They travelled from Egypt to the bustling ports of Venice and Naples, following trade routes far and wide and as they spread. Their popularity, she argues, stems from the fact that they are a means of supporting us over liminal thresholds in life. They help us to imagine, to experience a greater permeability between worlds and, as a result, to re-think the nature of reality.

While Thin Places in pre-history were specific sites\(^9\), where the dead were buried, I argue that Thin Places today can be experienced in any place where, through wonder, connection and communion with other forms of sentience occurs. A Thin Place then could be experienced on a May Day Parade in Cornwall, in a forest at dusk, at a gallery talk, in a classroom, on horseback, in the company of friends and

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\(^9\) This is according to an empirical mindset. We do not know if Thin Places had the potential to be as ubiquitous as they do today, because they are defined in the archeological record through material evidence, rather than through something less tangible such as energy.
family. Thin Places appear when layers seep into one another, making the realities of worlds we co-inhabit simultaneously present to our minds eye.

I posit that love motivates our search for Thinness. For the experience of Thinness penetrates the heart deeply, evoking a sense akin to what the artist and cultural theorist John Berger describes as ‘the gasp of Home.’ (2012, p.68) Love leads us to wonder, when we wonder we are given the space to imagine, and, when imagine we fall in love.

The poet May Sarton proposed that Love opens the doors to everything, including “the doors into one’s own secret, and often terrible and frightening, real self.” This real self, which the Sufis call the Perfection of the Absolute comes from the very ancient mystical need to experience existence within one dynamic whole; that of a collective consciousness. I believe Thinness makes the sorrow for that lost real self visible and tangible. It asks us to be accountable for its demise. Yet it is also an invitation for re-discovery, to create a consequence that could be otherwise. It was our need to continue loving that once pulled us to Thin Places, where we could convene with our dead ancestors. I suspect they are still in need of our memory today, perhaps now more than ever - for it is our memory of their wisdom, that will keep them, and us, alive.

Consciousness, then, is the key to the wholeness of the experience and awareness of Thinness. The holistic quality is attributable to the integration of the experience as intrinsically sited—that is, in a Place. Our environment both physical and metaphysical is wherein the wholeness of awareness, ‘takes place’. Modeen acknowledges that it is our desire -and our love- that pulls us to the longing for a (re)-united marriage of self with Place. She describes it as a happy reconciliation with the vibrant interactions and barrier-less interrelationships between the anomalous places on Earth and ourselves.

The desire of artists and poets to represent this sited knowledge arises in the same
way that storytellers tell a well-known story over and over again, new with each
telling. The storytellers, the artists, the people who reconnect with Thin Places—each
find a way to connect the wonder of the experience with the timeless repetition of
living on the Earth. It is this sense of wonder, this reconnection with the archaic,
manifested through material, that will be the focus of the next Chapter.
Chapter 2. Thinness in relation to Art and Curating

2.1 Introduction.

In this Chapter I will cite examples and make a case for the notion of a Thin art practice and will include a discussion on the practices of the artists I selected to work with for the Thin Place exhibition; the practices of curators who identify with a Thin sensibility; and finally I will explain how and why the exhibition I developed might be considered Thin.

2.2 Thinness in relation to Art practice.

Thin art practice forms a relationship between place, experience, animism spirituality and material. These relationships were explicitly and implicitly present in the work I selected for the Thin Place exhibition. My encounters with Thin artists and the Thin works I selected evolved and grew through correspondence over a long period of time (approx. 3 years).

Adam Buick and Jonathan Anderson were the two artists I selected from Wales. From Ireland I selected Christine Mackey and Ailbhe Ní Bhriain. I decided to select one other artist from outside of these two geographical locations, yet at the same time I sought to find someone whose practice could be described as Thin. This was in order to make the boundaries between the geographical locations I situated the exhibition in more porous.

I was introduced to the artist Flora Parrott in London in 2011. I felt her work could be regarded as Thin both in terms of the materials she used and the concepts she addressed. This was because the sculptural objects she developed for the Thin Place exhibition were particularly representative of a practice engaged in the archaic avant-garde. ‘Horn Circle’ (2014) and ‘Stalagmite Sculpture’ (2014) alluded to ancient, shamanic-like practices, or looked like archaic archaeological material.
'Bone Circle,' (2014) for example, was a bleach white strung circle of cow bones, hanging over a circular arrangement of digital images of bones. Parrott's work was criss-crossed with motion; a spruce black ladder lead up and down, plaited black rope wove back and across, precarious, sagging, tense. The core notion of co-existence and multiple realities were explored repeatedly in each constellation of works she produced using archaic and contemporary materials such as bones and digital prints. This approach seemed particularly fitting for the ‘Thin Place’ exhibition. However, my decision to include Parrott’s work was also influenced by the curatorial policies of Irish artist Mainie Jellett, (1940) whom I will discuss in more detail later in this thesis. Jellett saw it as necessary to include perspectives from outside of a particular cultural centre in order to create a more relational curatorial experience. Although Parrott’s practice is located in central London, her aesthetic and concerns do not correspond to the styles and approaches to making taking place around her. Her subject position is also paradoxical because her practice is frequently inspired by rural or isolated places, although her responses to those places are always developed in an urban environment. Her indirect response to the urban environment drives her need to create experiential projects in rural or isolated environments. These kinds of anomalies also seemed very appropriate for the ‘Thin Place’ show. I met Flora Parrott in 2011 in London and over a period of 3 years we corresponded with each other about the commonalities in our practices. We shared journal articles, books and artworks. This was something I did with all the artists. I also set up a number of group meetings in both Wales, Ireland, London and online. It was through this correspondence that the artists developed their work. But it is important to point out that an interest in the archaic, in the numinous and in place was already present in their practice. It was our collective correspondence that consolidated and brought Thinness into being through materials in the form of a group exhibition. But Thinness as a concept already existed in their work.
I came across Adam Buick’s work at the Ruthin Craft Centre in North Wales in 2011. His film work, *Earth to Earth*, was funded by the Arts Council of Wales and documented the weathering of an unfired Korean moon jar, made from a blend of local clays, using time-lapse photography. The jar was photographed day and night, every thirty-three seconds, on Carn Treliwyd on the Pembrokeshire coast, until it had completely weathered away. The resulting film captured the relationship between the moon jar, the earth it was made of and the changing weather on the coast, the stars at night, moonlight, sunrise, the movement of animals across fields, rain showers and ships on the Irish Sea. Natural cycles and the transience of human endeavour were reflected not only in the jar but also in the activities taking place around it in the liminal, shifting coastal landscape. The concepts expressed in this piece and the relational way in which the moon jar inhabited and disappeared back into the earth resonated with the concept of Thinness.

This led to a number of studio visits and conversations, out of which Buick developed a new body of work using votive moon jars and ritualised walks along the Pembrokeshire coast. Over a period of 2 years these works formed an animist dialogue and exchange with the landscape, sharing the development of his work with the other artists included in the exhibition. He created hundreds of tiny votive jars from unfired porcelain and placed them in particular locations that corresponded to the idea of a Thin Place. The documentation of this work was then installed in the gallery. Only one of the small jars was placed on the threshold of the gallery entrance. This documentation of an animist dialogue combined with a single and elusive small sculptural object was a fitting response to the ‘Thin Place’ concept.

Like Buick, Jonathan Anderson’s work was also Thin because it demonstrated an interest in archaic and avant-garde forms and with animism. In 2011, I was commissioned by the critical art journal *This Is Tomorrow* to review Anderson’s solo exhibition at Oriel Myrddin, Carmarthen. The show was made up of multiple mandala
compositions, which were constructed from scraps of wood and cardboard, most of which were created as part of his daily meditative ritual. It was inevitable that using coal dust as a material to make artworks in Wales might be seen as a political statement, but Anderson’s concerns were more open.

The works contemplated the liminal space between destruction and repair, ultimately reminding us of what time brings: transformation, inevitability, loss, hope. Writing about this exhibition led to conversations and multiple studio visits to Anderson’s space in Swansea. Out of these meetings he began to develop a collection of sculptures using bitumen and rags. These sculptural objects ranged in shape and height from 5 cm to approximately 5 foot, and also had a votive element. They made pan-cultural references that alluded to Crucifixes, Asian Buddhist statues, South American and African voodoo dolls. Yet their inspiration also came from the many hundreds of electricity pylons that criss-cross the Welsh Landscape. Assembled on a tiered platform, Anderson’s intention was to subvert the language of votive statues of worship, which are often collected together. His sticky, black-coated oil and tar effigies raised questions about the direction of Western worship but also invoked ideas of political and ancient uses of the material.

Selecting the Irish artists to be involved in the ‘Thin Place’ exhibition followed a similar trajectory. In 2012, I was commissioned by This Is Tomorrow to review a group exhibition titled ‘Motion Capture’ at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, curated by Ed Krčma and Matt Packer. The exhibition aimed to interrogate the specific qualities of surfaces that capture the moving and still image, the markings of space and time, and their ability to carry, convey and make permanent the temporality of the imagination. Installed over two brightly lit floors, the exhibition focused on a selection of artists who explored drawing and the moving image in a manner that challenged the ways in which traditional narratives of beginnings and endings are seen and understood. Because drawing in art history has often been
relegated to the provisional status of preparation rather than completion, Krčma and Packer selected artists who rejected the notion that history operates as a linear narrative. One of the artists they selected was Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, whose film work, *Immergence* (2004), oscillates between representation and abstraction. *Immergence* records the disappearance of strangely familiar rural Irish landscapes by slowly dissolving multi-layered photographic images of forests and fields in a bleach solution until they become a blur of horizontal streaks. The slow rise of pigment from the surface of the print is edited in reverse and looped so that the image disappears and re-emerges seamlessly, thus disrupting the fixed nature of the print and creating a visceral representation of our futile attempts to grasp the remembered images of a lost homeland from our mind’s eye. For Ní Bhriain, these points of erasure became inherent parts of the work’s final form; like the materiality of Buick’s moon jar and the landscape they sit within, they are the unfinished parts of a whole in transition to another manifestation.

Ní Bhriain presented an interpretive talk and tour of her work during the exhibition. Following the publication of my review, we began to write to each other regularly, I made several visits to her studio in Cork. For Thin Place she developed a body of film works titled ‘Great Good Places’ (2012–13). Images from the coast of her native Co. Clare seeped into images of tax offices, abandoned airports and famine villages. The coinherence and confluence of these places, all presented simultaneously as permeable and dissolving layers on a screen resonated deeply with the concept of Thinness. Each multi-layered scene possessed an acknowledgement of brokenness – of the cracks in the realities we have constructed and hidden behind. This echoed issues affecting post-Celtic Tiger Irish landscapes, and questioned what remains possible in the aftermath and in the afterlife of both an image and a place.

As I encountered each of these artists, it became apparent that they each expressed a need to trace elements of the numinous in their practice and in their relationship to
place. Christine Mackey’s drawings and sculptural objects also resonated with this idea. I first encountered her work in 2007 when I was invited to contribute an essay to her publication, *RIVERwork(s)*, which was developed as a series of historical and topographical studies of Doorly Park, the Garavogue River and its surrounding environs in Sligo, Ireland. This was an area designated for ‘re-development’ just before the financial collapse of 2007.

Working for a year as an artist-in-residence in the abandoned gate lodge of the old manor house in Doorly Park, Mackey explored the interactive potential of art to facilitate social and environmental change. She collaborated with local community groups, environmental activists, town councillors and planners, and invited them to contribute towards making a portrait of a place before it was turned into what would later become yet another ghost estate.

Since 2007, Mackey and I have communicated regularly and I made a visit to her studio in Leitrim in 2013 where she presented examples of her explorations of hidden histories, real and imagined, as well as ecological formations using diverse graphic sources – from town planning literature to ancient topographical drawings. It was out of these conversations that Mackey produced a body of work, which involved walking, mapping, mandala-making and collecting. Between 2013 and 2014, Mackey enacted repeated walks in certain parts of Ireland collecting seasonal wildflowers as she went. Each flower was labelled and recorded in a log book before its dye was extracted using a scientific process. The dyes were stored in vials. Each walk was painted as a pseudo ‘pie chart’ or mandala, documenting the flowers found on a particular day and in a particular place.

### 2.2.1 Thinness and Thin Place Catalogue.

The ‘Thin Place’ catalogue, which was one of the major components of this project, extended the Thinness of the artworks. It included specially commissioned texts from
professionals who work in different disciplines outside of the art world. I wrote an introductory essay and Meg Anthony, the gallery manager at Oriel Myrddin, wrote a short foreword. The commissioned texts in the catalogue comprised:

- A poem by Irish writer Cherry Smyth.
- An essay by Dr Haley Gomez, professor of physics at Cardiff University,
- An essay by Mark Jones, an astrologer and psychosynthesis therapist who runs an organisation called Pluto School.
- An essay by Brother Joseph McMahon, a Franciscan friar based at the Order of Friars Minor (OFM), Ireland.

These texts were presented in both Welsh and English and were a critically important part of the project because they offered different lenses through which to read and engage with the artworks in the exhibition. They also provided a platform for the contributing writers to engage with new audiences. This was, in part, the point of the project, because these broader contextual interpretations offered multiple insights into how the artwork could be understood. My intention was to create a physical manifestation of the notion of Thinness, where multiple intersections could take place between many, many worlds. The catalogue also acted as a physical record and legacy, extending the ‘duration’ of the show.

One of the first people I spoke with was Cherry Smyth, an Irish writer and Royal Literary Fellow based in London. She kindly gave me permission to publish one of her poems from her collection *Test, Orange*, published by Pindrop Press in 2012. I selected it because I felt it conveyed Thinness very clearly, particularly the coinherence of multiple times, past and present. The poem described how the physical experience of being in a particular place can invoke a memory of inhabiting that place in the past. The poet is shocked that this past continues to dazzle her with its “insouciant beauty” (2012, p. 32). The confluence of both past and present experienced coinherently constituted, for me, a form of Thinness.
The second essay in the catalogue was by Dr Haley Gomez, a senior lecturer in astrophysics at the School of Physics and Astronomy at Cardiff University. Gomez wrote about the formation and evolution of cosmic dust, which blocks out optical light and affects our view of the universe. She is particularly interested in where cosmic dust is formed and her latest work suggests that the titanic explosions of massive stars are responsible for polluting galaxies. The inclusion of her fascinating perspective of the world was not only personally revelatory, it was another important example of Thinness. This was because her research and discoveries, in the fields of astronomy and quantum physics, are currently destabilising and disrupting reductive scientism from within the field of science itself by positing that matter is participatory.

The third text was by Mark Jones, a psychotherapist, hypnotherapist and soul-centred astrologer working in private practice in Bristol and with clients and students all over the world. His essay describes his understanding of time and memory and in particular the journey of the soul through different lives. He focuses on the direction of the soul in this life into the next. Again, his thinking is quite Thin when he says that nothing from our childhood, our love lives or our dreams is merely dead stone. This resonates with the idea of Thinness and seepage, as outlined in my correspondence with Modeen in Chapter 2.

Joseph MacMahon wrote the final essay in the catalogue. He is a member of the Franciscan Order in Ireland. I invited Brother Joseph to contribute to this catalogue for two reasons. Firstly, I felt it would be important and relevant to include a voice from the Christian Church and secondly, and more importantly, because his essay reflected on the Franciscan way of life, the legacy of which is still present in Carmarthen today – even if it is buried under a Tesco superstore. Brother Joseph’s essay made visible a way of life that one could argue is still present but no longer perceptible in Carmarthen.
2.3 Thinness in relation to curating.

As well as corresponding with the artists and contributors to the Thin Place catalogue over a long period of time while developing my Thin curatorial model, I also researched curatorial practices and approaches taken by internationally recognised curators to discover if there was a model of practice or particular set of methodologies I could incorporate into my own Thin curatorial approach.

I looked in particular at the curatorial approach of Hans Ulrich Obrist, director of the Serpentine Gallery in London. I was interested in the way in which he presents celebrated international artworks in a local context. Obrist’s rationale for relating the locale to the international works he exhibits, emerged out of a concern that there was a pervading sameness, in terms of appearance and content, in many large-scale contemporary art exhibition programmes in museums throughout the world. He felt this prevents audiences from identifying with the places they are visiting. Consequently it becomes difficult to find any distinguishing features in an international exhibition, taking place in any major city in the world. In order to overcome this problem, Obrist feels that it is important to challenge the viewer by creating a space of “interlocking zones.” (Obrist, 2004). As a curator he feels that the exhibition, and museum space, need to be transformed into an “archipelago”, (ibid) where different time zones can be represented together, and where, an idea is produced through the act of curating rather than simply being illustrated.

For example, in an interview in The Guardian in 2014, Obrist described a curatorial project he developed in collaboration with Daniel Birnbaum. The project arose from an interest in the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard’s exhibition, ‘Les Immatériaux’, which took place at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1985. It was concerned with an early postmodern interest in digital futures, in particular how new information technologies shape the human condition. What interested Obrist was the way in which Lyotard used the exhibition as a platform to manifest his
philosophical ideas, situating them in a particular place, rather than, for example, writing a book. I found this approach very useful to my practice-based research.

Obrist’s curatorial policies are not dissimilar to Nicholas Serota’s “zones of influence” (2000, p. 48) method. In *Experience or Interpretation*, Serota puts forward his curatorial proposal stating the “zones of influence” method must involve an open-plan exhibition space divided only by corners and half-length walls. This type of space means it is always possible to view an artwork in relation to other works in the exhibition. Serota argues that this approach is particularly useful when curating an exhibition of historical and contemporary references because it enables audiences to experience how the exhibition works as a whole.

Serota’s rejection of exhibiting artworks in chronological order emerged from his disillusionment with “the conveyor belt of history” (2000, p. 62) curatorial approach. This is a system of representation most commonly used in the majority museums criticised by the cultural theorist James Clifford (1991) in his research into the representation of Native American artworks in museums in the early 1990s.

Clifford’s collection of essays (1991, pp. 212–254) on exhibiting cultures reveals a history of repression; in particular, the repression of cultures that hold an animistic perception of the world. This repression, he argued, was conducted through specific curatorial strategies, such as the forced sale of Native artworks or, as happened more frequently, the omission of Native artworks from contextual displays in museums – if they were displayed at all. Clifford found that a significant number of Native artworks had been kept in storage from the time when they were first included in the museums’ collections. All of these events facilitated a decline in the presence and understanding of Native American culture in the North American psyche.

The University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum were described by Clifford (1991) as “majority museums.” While “majority museums” attempted to acknowledge or include a Native American
perspective in their displays, Clifford felt that they did not accurately reflect the culture from which the work came. The most significant differences between majority museums and what Clifford referred to as "tribal museums" was to be found in the ways in which power and ownership were mediated. "Majority museums" sought to own a collection of objects, and when presenting these objects they sought to separate fine art from ethnographic culture. The structure, layout and curatorial policies of the “majority museum” therefore articulated the ideals of the Enlightenment. “Tribal museums”, on the other hand, such as the U’mista Cultural Centre and the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Center, were perceived by Clifford to have a more cooperative agenda because they challenged the notion that history can only be represented in a museum as a meta-narrative. Local and oral testimonies, subjective memories and personal experiences were presented alongside existing national and ‘objective’ histories, making a relationship between place, narrative experience, spirituality and material.

Much of what Thin curating attempts to do is to question the established systems of display, which present the values of the Enlightenment as norms. These norms have persisted into the twenty-first century, and in subtle ways, they have continued to assert a reductive or limited representation of existence in curatorial practice. Two relevant examples which substantiate this point are the ‘British Folk Art’ exhibition at Tate Britain in 2014 and ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989. Both exhibitions attempted to try to understand the art of cultures that sit outside the capitalist art market, yet both proved controversial in their consideration and representation of those cultures. ‘Magiciens de la Terre’, organised by the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris sought to treat all the exhibiting artists equally. However, critics felt that displays went too far in equating disparate pieces. The earth work of Richard Long, for example, displayed in conjunction with an earth painting by a collective of Yuendumu Aborigine artists was insufficiently contextualised for
Western viewers. The term ‘Magicien’ in the title also hinted at a New Age desire for ‘authentic’ spirituality, possibly as a means of glossing over or avoiding the fact that many of the Western artists included in the exhibition were also participants in the global art market.

Identity politics became an increasingly important issue for many artists in the 1980s, especially those who saw themselves as having hybrid identities. Art became a medium through which they could explore issues of racism and cultural assimilation. ‘British Folk Art’ at Tate Britain in 2014 was an attempt to articulate the evolution of that idea at a time when artists and curators from within a nation were facing increasing difficulties in assessing meaning and value in art.

‘British Folk Art’ attempted to draw attention to and celebrate the cultural artefacts associated with Britain’s traditional folk culture. This was the first time many of the objects selected had ever been displayed in what Clifford (1991) describes as a “majority museum”. The notion of presenting these artworks in such a space challenged what critical theorist Greenberg (1992) might once have considered appropriate for a museum of art. While this is to be applauded, the exhibition itself did very little to express what the artworks meant to many people in Britain today. For example, many of the displays were housed behind glass in static arrangements which seemed to suggest that the objects had no practical relevance to contemporary communities. An emphasis was put on their primitive nature and the cosmopolitan viewer was made to feel superior (often invited to chuckle) when viewing the ephemera of these ‘strange’ folk rituals. At no point in the exhibition was the viewer made aware of the significance of these objects or their continued active use in many communities. For example, objects connected to May Day festivities in Cornwall were presented as if this ritual and its associated objects were now defunct. If, as the pragmatist John Dewey (1934, pp. 334) suggests, art “expresses the life of a community” then ‘British Folk Art’ continued to employ an Enlightenment-based
notion of what folk art might be. Rather than considering the notion that the objects on show were culturally significant because they were encoded in an affecting medium and capable of complex strands of interaction with other cultures, times and values, both ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ and ‘British Folk Art’ seemed to express the notion that indigenous art is in some way ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’, belonging firmly in the past, and it can, in the context of ‘British Folk Art’ be the subject of ridicule as well.

My Thin curatorial model therefore drew on Obrist’s concept of the exhibition as archipelago, where different time zones co-exist and where the works themselves produce an idea, rather than illustrating an existing one. I also drew on Serota’s method of displaying artworks so that they can be seen in relation to each other, thus disrupting any form of linear meta-narrative. Finally I drew on the method of inclusion of local and oral testimonies, subjective memories and personal experiences alongside more mainstream narratives as seen in approach taken by the “tribal museums” identified by Clifford.

2.3.1 Curating the Thin Place exhibition.

When the time came to install ‘Thin Place’ at Oriel Myrddin, the physical presentation of the exhibition formed a distinct relationship with place, experience, animism, spirituality and material.

The relationship with place was referenced in relation to the locale as a whole as well as in the areas directly outside the gallery. One significant example was St Peter’s Church tower, which could be viewed through one of the gallery windows and whose tolling bell often could be heard in the gallery space, occasionally playing in harmony with the sound work on Ailbhe Ní Bhriain’s film pieces.

The relationship between Thinness and experience could be found in the works themselves, as their very material structures and their physical presence in the space
and in relation to each other seemed to produce an idea of the archaic and the spiritual, rather than illustrating it. This was further amplified by my use of Serota’s notion of “zones of influence.” (2000, p. 48) Without any barriers or walls in the space, each of the individual works themselves had the potential to create harmonious or dissonant dialogues with the space, the viewer and with each other. Other ways in which Thinness was cultivated as an experience in the gallery could be found in the inclusion of oral testimonies, narratives and theoretical and philosophical books displayed in a specially made quiet reading area in the main foyer of the gallery building. This area was designed to offer visitors a chance to read some of the material that had informed the exhibition. The space included a beanbag, lamp, rug and a shelf with several books. These books all referred to the issues central to the show. In the second month of the exhibition, the reading area also included a printed booklet of images and texts from the children’s writing competition.

The final consideration I made to produce a Thin experience involved the removal of labels and names of works on the walls. My intention was that the absence of labels would make the artworks appear more cohesive and might also facilitate more direct and experiential engagement. There was a discretely presented map in the main foyer of the gallery which identified the artist responsible for each work but it was not possible to see who had made each work when in the gallery space itself.

The relationship with animism and with the spiritual was facilitated by the use of deliberately low spot-lighting. This was effective because the exhibition took place at Oriel Myrddin in January and February, when evenings were longer and darker. My intention was that the low lighting in the darkness might allude to a cave dwelling, a crypt or other hushed and sacred space, and that this in turn might amplify the otherworldliness of the works in the gallery.
Negotiating where the works might be hung or installed in the gallery was a very simple process in practice because it had developed over many online and face-to-face conversations with the artists – in particular with Jonathan Anderson, who needed a specific plinth to be built to accommodate his *Pylon Totems*. Over a period of six months, while the artists were making their work for the show, I adjusted where particular works might be accommodated in the space. I drew provisional plans during studio visits and online conversations. However, I was aware, and made the artists aware, that these plans might be subject to change once the work arrived in the gallery space.

Anderson originally wanted the plinth he had designed to support his *Pylon Totems* to take up the whole length of the back wall of the gallery. However, I was concerned that this might compromise the other works and look very dominant in the space. After some negotiation Anderson agreed to a plinth design that took up three-quarters of the back wall of the space. This meant that the other works could develop a dialogue with his work, rather than be dominated by it.

During the installation I worked with two technicians to install the work. In the first two days of installation I was worried that Anderson’s and Buick’s work might overshadow the other artworks because both artists were eager to create very large installations. In Buick’s case, the three photographic prints he produced were originally each going to be a metre in width. He also wanted to install a large three-metre shelf, which would be covered in found objects. I expressed my concern that the integrity of the photographic work might be lost if the shelf were to be included, primarily because the shelf looked quite domestic and detracted from the sophisticated confidence seen in the photographic work.
What I did notice both during and before the installation of the exhibition was the way in which gender impacted on the level of control artists placed on their work. From the outset, the female artists were all much more open to negotiation than the male artists. The male artists regularly needed clarification of my intentions and my motivations before they agreed to any presentation suggestions. When I collected their work from their studios, all the female artists said they trusted me to make final editing and curatorial decisions with their work because they understood the central premise of my curatorial agenda. They all knew, through several years of discussions, that their work would look different to the imagined ideal once it was unpacked in the space. None of the female artists were able to be present during installation.10

I was reminded of the discoveries made by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) in relation to gender and the holistic milieu. They defined the subjective turn as a turn towards the autonomous self and away from being told what to be or how to live. But, ironically, this 'autonomous' self is actually predicated on the fore-grounding of a constellation of persona that are deeply interwoven into an intra-personal sense of identity. The direction our subjective-life takes towards autonomy varies, as Heelas and Woodhead discovered, according to gender. In their research they found two extreme differences of direction, with many intermediate positions in-between. They described these extremes as individuated subjectivism and relational subjectivism (2005, p. 96). They proposed, using Geertz (1983) and Bellah et al. (1985) to support their argument, that individuated subjectivism is typified by going outside of the self to find external solutions, rather than by going deeper into our inner life. As a consequence, our subjectivities are catered for through procurement, which serves desire, happiness and a sense of success or contentment. So the subjective life develops through self-reliance, self-sufficiency and a certain level of atomisation from

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10 This was due to budget restrictions and commitments with their young children.
society. Competition is likely to be more important than the connections of personal relationships, and as a consequence there are obvious links to be made between this mode of selfhood and entrepreneurial capitalism.

Relational subjectivism is similar to individuated subjectivism in so far as the commitment to becoming autonomous remains, along with the cultivation of the unique. However, relational subjectivism places much more emphasis on the relational and on the need to reflect more deeply on our inner life. These reflections are substantially assisted when they take place in a relational context. Heelas and Woodhead (2005, p. 98) observe that:

more women than men tend to emphasise the relational subjective-life, and
conversely that more men than women tend to emphasise the individuated or distinct variant.

This observation can be applied to the gendered experiences I encountered during the installation of the exhibition and could offer a potential further area for research for the future, particularly for those interested in the legacy of Luce Irigaray’s (1930) repositioning of women in creative contexts.

Although the male artists had more fixed ideas than the female artists on how their work should be presented, negotiating the final outcome with them was still straightforward. I believe this was because I had involved all of the artists in this project from its inception and I had communicated and discussed all decisions with them throughout its development.

2.3.2 Drawing on historical examples of Thinness in relation to curating.

The dialogues and negotiations I had with the artists I worked with to produce the concept of Thinness also drew on a particular Irish historical curatorial case study.

For example, by reflecting on our relationships (such as talking things through with a friend, visiting a counsellor, reading biographies) or, in the case of our practice, by organising a critique of our work during which we find out more about ourselves.
This case study expanded the approaches taken by Obrist, Serota and Clifford because it formed a relationship between place, experience, animism, spirituality and material. Yet, equally importantly, it also included education in that discussion, which is a discipline I will discuss in relation to Thinness in the next chapter. The 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art’ (1943) made deliberate attempts to bring animistic ways of thinking back into the centre of culture. It was initiated by Mainie Jellett in the late 1930s and adopted a radically different approach to the dominant curatorial practices in operation during her lifetime - practices which had a tendency to adhere to, or emphasise, a monolithic form of reductivism. This can often leave us with what De Botton (2012, p. 211) calls "discreet doubts" about what we are meant to do and experience in exhibitions, especially those that explore and attempt to represent aspects of liminality and spirituality. He adds, with irony, "What we must of course never do is treat works of art religiously, especially if (as is often the case) they happen to be religious in origin" (2012, p. 212).

It is important, however, to remember that curatorial practice is not solely responsible for limiting our engagement with the sacred, as Robert Hughes (2004) points out: "Culture is often seen as a ketchup that gets squirted onto the meat and veg of politics and economics." Hughes directs his criticism at institutions that allow the agendas of governments to dictate how exhibitions should be presented. He argues that curators need to distance themselves from the interference of such political agendas within funding bodies.

This was certainly the case with the 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art’ (1943). In 1943, the Irish Times journalist Myles na gCopaleen criticised the absence of authenticity in the growing number of exhibitions in Ireland that mimicked international trends without understanding their source. His primary concern was with modernist artworks shaped by the Second World War. He argued that Irish curators should avoid exhibiting work by Irish artists who did not have first-hand knowledge of the conflict, as he believed
that those who did not directly experience suffering had no right to make work about
the pain endured by others. He criticised the “nourished and well-clad Irish” artists
who “visit the continent, creating artworks that draw inspiration from an occult
premonition of agony” and argued that those “who had not the fare” to travel abroad
diligently copy these new techniques and styles until “soon they are modern also”.
Because these artists were primarily concerned with being recognised as modern
artists working in an international arena, they were, according to Na gCopaleen
(1944): “pretending to be troubled … They say it is easy to sleep on another man’s
wound. It’s even easier to squeal when you’re not hurt at all.”
For Na gCopaleen, the Irish artists who copied the artistic styles of those who had
had direct experience of war, made a spectacle of their loss and thereby rendered
their own work inauthentic. However, there were some Irish artists who travelled to
the Continent with the intention of reconciling international modernism with an
indigenous cultural identity. One of these artists was Mainie Jellett, who, along with
fellow painter Evie Hone, travelled to Paris during the late 1920s and worked in the
studio of André Lhote and Albert Gleizes. They established the Irish Exhibition of
Living Art Committee (IELA) when they returned. The organisation responded to the
growing demand for public exhibitions by making available “a comprehensive survey
of significant work, irrespective of School or manner, by living Irish artists”.¹²
Before discussing Jellett’s involvement with the IELA, it is worth acknowledging the
extent to which her painting practice informed her curatorial approach.
Jellett’s experience of Cubism in Paris had had a profound impact on her painting.
She had always been preoccupied with Catholic iconography, particularly depictions
of the Madonna. Modernist interpretations of the archaic formed the basis of Jellett’s

¹² Minutes from inaugural meeting of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art Committee, Dublin, 12 May 1943,
Minute Book 1943–51, ‘Irish Exhibition of Living Art’ National Irish Visual Arts Library, Irish Exhibition of
Living Art (IE/NIVAL, IELA).
ethos: to create work, to curate exhibitions and to write critical texts that expressed her wish to re-dress the representation of Irish identity in art. This wish became more urgent when she returned from Paris in 1923, equipped with her newly discovered knowledge of modernist techniques.

Her early paintings of Catholic icons depicted in a Cubist style were greeted with total incomprehension. Neither the press nor the public had the required level of interest or cultural literacy to understand her progressive approach, and she was banned from exhibiting at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) – the only major exhibition venue in Ireland at that time. Despite all this rejection, Jellett persevered, travelling between France and Ireland, formulating, refining and developing her own indigenous approach to modernist painting.

Jellett’s interest in reforming the Irish arts made her one of the main voices calling for change in the 1930s when she urged the RHA, through a series of public letters printed in both the newspapers and as petitions, to adopt a more sympathetic attitude towards modernism.

Many modern artists working in the early 1940s in Ireland found it difficult to exhibit their work at the RHA. The Academy’s continued bias against those who used modernist techniques led Jellett (May 1943, p. 57) to accuse the RHA of being “a miasma of vulgarity and self-satisfaction”, and requesting that it at least “give us good academic work”.

In spite of her frustration with the conservative attitudes of the RHA, she decided to embrace both the avant-garde and more academic styles to curate what I argue was a Thin exhibition. She called it the ‘Irish Exhibition of Living Art’. This is not something the RHA would ever have considered, and it shows Jellett’s pluralistic willingness to embrace the outspoken opponents of modernism by presenting academic paintings alongside avant-garde works.
To return to Na gCopaleen: his criticism of Irish modern artists was aimed at those whose approach and context appeared inauthentic. In his 1944 review of the first IELA exhibition, he jovially declared: “There is absolutely nothing Irish about this exhibition, not a sign of a cudgel or whiskey-bottle anywhere in the place.” In other words, Na gCopaleen was celebrating the diversity of the show, which he felt to be more representative of an Irish creative community than any of the stifled, sentimental or excessively nationalist and limited perspectives offered by the RHA in the past.

As the first elected chairperson to the Irish Exhibition of Living Art Committee, Jellett invited members of the RHA as well as many new modernist artists to join her. As well as facilitating a more inclusive dialogue it was also a strategic political move on Jellett’s part, because the Irish Exhibition of Living Art Committee required a suitable venue to exhibit their works. The National College of Art was one of the more significant exhibition spaces at the time; however, it also acted as the venue for RHA exhibitions. In order to manifest a comprehensive survey of ‘significant’ art (which I argue had a Thin approach), the committee needed artists who were both modernists and academicians to exhibit. The installation of the exhibition took place under the supervision of the “whole committee”, and so the “attribution of significance” became “a collective decision involving both Modernists and Academicians”.¹³ For Jellett, this approach ensured that examples of “previous badly hung exhibitions in this same building” would not be repeated.¹⁴

The first ‘Irish Exhibition of Living Art’, in 1943, was contentious for many critics, academic artists and members of the public. It was described as “a rebel exhibition; created by rebellion that was bound to come”,¹⁵ involving “persons who claim the title

¹³ Minutes of committee meeting, 15 July 1943, Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IE/NIVAL, IELA).
¹⁵ Editor, ‘Irish Exhibition of Living Art’, Sunday Independent, 19 September 1943 (IE/NIVAL, IELA).
artist without the ideas or capacity." Yet it was recognised that this departure from academicism meant that the 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art' was, according to the editor of the *Sunday Independent* "striking a new note in Irish art". Jellett's curatorial approach was also interested in improving the quality of experience for the visitor. During the first 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art', she and her colleagues organised a programme of events that included a series of lectures and tours for many different groups, both local and national. This was an unusual and ambitious undertaking for the time. It involved working in conjunction with the Department of Education, offering children the chance to visit the exhibition. For many children in Ireland it was the first time they had ever engaged with an art exhibition, not to mention an exhibition of avant-garde artworks. A prize of one guinea for the best-written criticism of the show by a child from a primary school in Ireland was offered on the opening night of the exhibition. Members of the public were very supportive of this event and the many other initiatives developed by the Irish Exhibition of Living Art Committee to encourage audience participation.

While the RHA strove to represent a romanticised portrayal of communities in Ireland (particularly the West of Ireland), Jellett struggled for several years to reconcile her interest in international modernism with her own indigenous voice. Before the establishment of the IELA, she feared that such achievements were being threatened by the Academy's aesthetic conservatism and narrow definition of heritage. In opening the RHA space to the general public and providing educational tours and talks, she gave the audience the ability to see themselves in a new relational light, without the limiting props that other academic artists might have used.

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16 Editor, 'Striking a new note in Irish art', *Sunday Independent*, May 1943 (IE/NIVAL, IELA).
17 Editor, 'Guinea for a child critic', *Irish Press*, 2 October 1943 (IE/NIVAL, IELA).
However there were a number of critics who challenged Jellett’s position and actions primarily because they felt alienated from the Irish Exhibition of Living Art Committee’s attempts to represent Irish art in this new ‘international’ way. Mairin Allen for example stated that:

if any exile visited the Irish Exhibition of Living Art he must have emerged bewildered by the utter foreign-ness of so much presented to him as Irish art. One gets the notion that the strange foreign-ness is the result of an absence of contact between these artists and their ‘normal’, native cultural background. (Allan, 1943, p. 10)

Allan’s criticism of the IELA exposed her desire to see the development of a “native” art, which would, she believed, distinguish the newly independent Irish people from the religious and political domination of the British. The prevalence of Renaissance-based Greco-Roman culture on the architecture of Ireland by British colonisation was of particular concern to her because she felt it contributed to the loss of native Irish art. In post-independent Ireland she argued that this was made manifest in the artworks admired and promoted by an emergent Catholic middle class, that lacked, she felt, any native artistic taste. Rather than become patrons that supported artists to create native Irish work, this aspirational and affluent group “turned to England and the Continent for craftsmen, artists and architects” (Allan, 1943, p.12). However, Allan’s lament for an ‘original’ native Irish art is undermined by the simple fact that many Irish artists and artisans learned their skills abroad and wanted to return to Ireland to make them their own. This was certainly the case with Jellett and the way in which she contextualised her interest in Catholic iconography through the language of international modernism.

The first ‘Irish Exhibition of Living Art’ is regarded as being one of the most significant cultural turning points in the early years of Ireland’s independence. The visual arts changed from having what Kennedy (1984) described as an “introverted, self-
sufficient attitude” to becoming more accepting of the fact that outside influences are just as likely to penetrate Irish art practice, as they do everywhere else.

Jellett’s attempts to create a holistic representation of reality is an approach to art analogous to that De Botton (2012, p. 217) describes as the “sensuous presentation of those ideas which matter most to the proper functioning of our souls – and yet which we are most inclined to forget, even though they are the basis for our capacity for contentment and virtue”.

In that sense what Jellett did, and what a Thin curatorial approach attempts to do, is remind us of what De Botton (2012, p. 237) calls “familiar yet critical ideas”.

### 2.3.4 Endorsing Thinness in curation.

These “familiar yet critical ideas” proved very popular in Carmarthen. The private view of the exhibition was one of Oriel Myrddin’s most successful. Total visitor figures to the exhibition were 3,106 over forty-two days. This was a significantly (approx. 30%) higher number than usual for the gallery in January and February.

Immediate verbal responses to the context and content of the work were extremely positive and the atmosphere in the gallery was ebullient. Although I feel it is not necessary to use these positive visitor responses as endorsements to explain the success of the research, how the exhibition was received critically in art reviews offers a more rigorous insight into its success in creating a relationship between place, experience, animism spirituality and material. In a review published in This Is Tomorrow, for example, critic Rowan Lear (2015) immediately identified a relationship between the location of the exhibition, its history, spirituality and its curatorial premise when she wrote:

> Carmarthen is one of Wales’ oldest towns, and myth names it the birthplace of Merlin, wizard of Arthurian legend. Oriel Myrddin itself is sited on Church Lane, a breath away from St Peter’s Parish Church opposite. Presenting artists with Welsh, Irish and
Scottish heritage and thus Celtic cultural memory, in a place already imbued with mystery and prehistory, Healy draws us a map of thin places and thin practices, suggesting connections between the two.

In considering how the concept of Thin Place is experienced, Lear posits that:

Thin Place is not intended as a clarification on boundaries, but a dissolving of distinctions, a way marker that complicates the route.

Finally, her review indicates that the materials encouraged an animate experience:

On encountering a thin place, rarely does a visual sign alert its presence. Instead there’s a peculiar, instinctual, bodily sense: a prickling awareness that cannot be described but is there nonetheless … The most powerful artworks … incite a ‘gut’ reaction … Leaving the exhibition, and on the journey home, that odd feeling stayed with me, long after I left. (Lear, 2015)

Rowan’s review indicated that Thinness, for her, was something experienced, something she understood in relation to Place, and something that was made apparent in the way in which the art practices were curated.

However, Lear did not attend the education programme I devised, which was equally important to the project as a whole and therefore her response to the idea of Thinness is limited to the exhibition only. How Thinness is experienced through educational practice will be discussed in the next Chapter.
Chapter 3: Thinness in relation to educational practice

3.1 Introduction.
In this penultimate chapter I will cite models of what I consider to be examples of Thin educational practice to explain how my Thin educational approach developed. I will discuss how I engaged these models of Thin experiences in the education programme I devised for Thin Place. I will argue that the educational events I devised were as significant to the Thin Place project as the exhibition. Finally I will explain how and why the educational aspect of this research project might be considered Thin.

3.2 Thin education approaches.
My Thin educational approach was pedagogically underpinned by educational theorists Freire (1993, 1973), Edwards et al, (1998) and Robinson (2006), as well as a number of others who have extended their pedagogical philosophies. My rationale for engaging Thin experiences in education was based on my desire to interrogate pedagogical practices for their possibilities as well as for their limitations, or, as Freire suggests, “challenge possibilities of determinism and liberty; of negation and affirmation of humanity’ (1993, p. 155). Friere’s (1993, p. 67) creative student–teacher relationship was something I particularly valued because of its co-participatory nature where those educating and being educated “are simultaneously teachers and students”.

Ultimately, I was interested in developing a “dynamic ethos” in the gallery space through the use of enquiry, discovery, experimentation, problem-solving and expression (Jeffrey and Craft 2004, p. 80). Jeffrey and Craft (2004) argue that the prerequisite of teaching for creativity is to be learner inclusive. This idea is based on the Reggio Emilia co-participative approach
(see Edwards et al., 1998), which promotes holistic thinking and creativity and is usually aimed at statutory education, particularly primary level. However, authors such as Gale (2001) are now endeavouring to apply these ideas to other contexts. The Italian primary schools of Reggio Emilia incorporate into their practice strands of European and American progressive education, Piagetian constructivism and Vygotskian socio-historical psychologies, as well as participatory and democratic European postmodern philosophy. In other words, storytelling, drawing, critical thinking and animistic thought experiments are blended together and become the primary means by which children in these schools integrate a conscious and unconscious relationship to place. Edwards et al. (1998) argue that children who are educated in this way are much more likely to grow up to become people who will care for the future of a place. This alone seemed a significant reason to employ their methodologies into my educational practice.

Another significant reason why I felt the Reggio Emilia model might help inform my Thin curatorial practice was inspired by the role these schools give the artist, which they call the ‘Atelierista’. In Reggio Emilia schools the ‘Atelierista’ is given a particular position, not of power, but of honour. This means they have a responsibility to foster a multiplicity of views and to engage with different forms of perception and expression, particularly through materials. This is seen to be an enormous benefit both to the teachers in the schools, the children, their learning environment and the creative practices of the artists themselves. In many ways the Atelierista is a mediator of worlds when working in the Reggio Emilia classroom.

According to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, the purpose of education is to provide an environment that fosters meaningful interpretative experiences that allow students to make their own meanings through material investigation and to understand how meanings and interpretations of reality are made. As such, responses to a place and its inhabitants, both human and ancestral, are led by wonder. This gives everyone
involved in the Reggio Emilia schools the space and the potential to see the world in a relational, spiritual, animistic light.

The learning activities I developed for the Thin Place exhibition were, therefore, like the Reggio Emilia approach, concerned with helping those involved in the education programme I devised, to move beyond individuated concerns and to see conceptual structures relationally. In Reggio Emilia education, as in Thin art-practice and curation, this thought–action–assessment axis endorses experimentation, failure, error and uncertainty as an inevitable part of unfolding growth.

The most compelling aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach, which motivated me above anything else to include it in my Thin educational programme is the poem/manifesto produced by the Reggio Emilia founder and philosopher Loris Malaguzzi in collaboration with Reggio Emilia children titled: No Way. The Hundred is There.

What this poem revealed to me was the way in which the layers that make up the Thick Places Modeen described in Chapter 1 solidify and become impermeable through conventional education, a perception - as the last line of the poem explains - that no child desires. The Reggio Emilia approach is Thin, therefore, in the sense that it aims to keep these layers of experience permeable, relational and ecosophysical. In that sense it is also possible to suggest that the Reggio Emilia approach is pragmatic, in that it develops these ideas and makes them manifest through practice.

3.3 Thin Place Children's workshops.

As part of the education programme, I worked with Oriel Myrddin education officer, and fluent Welsh speaker, Seren Stacey. We invited students from three local schools to visit the exhibition and attend workshops: one of the targeted schools was in an Objective 1 area, the Canolfan Y Gors pupil referral unit and the other two were
bilingual primary schools. The educational activity objectives were concerned with developing and deepening a relationship to place, through animistic, spiritual and material experiences, with cultivating the opportunities to speak the hundred languages of the Reggio Emilia model.

This was achieved by developing two workshops. The first workshop involved a series of storytelling events which took place in three local schools. Stories from Welsh, Irish and English language books were used. Children were encouraged to interpret these narratives through guided meditations and creative activities. The stories focused predominantly on ideas of Otherworlds, the afterlife and overlaps between worlds. Contemporary and historical children’s books that deal with these issues were used to support the development of cultural literacy and critical thinking.\(^\text{18}\)

The children were given time to reflect on the stories in their classrooms and to learn any new terminology or vocabulary. They were then invited to establish links between the stories they had been told and the artworks they saw in the exhibition. The catalogue was given to primary schools in the local area and they were encouraged during the workshops to use the images and essays as a resource. From this, a richer vocabulary of place, animism and spirituality was developed through play before they finally applied their newly developed creative and critical thinking skills into writing practice. The final element of the education programme involved inviting children to write a critical review of the show and enter it into a critical writing competition. This part of the project was inspired by curator Mainie Jellett’s own gentle and inclusive curatorial practice. The winning critical review of the exhibition (selected by a panel) was published in a local newspaper, the *Carmarthen Journal*.

\(^{18}\) The two core texts I used to do this were *Tales from Old Ireland* by Malachy Doyle (London: Barefoot Books, 2000) and *Tales of Wisdom and Wonder* by Hugh Lupton (London: Barefoot Books, 1998).
A total of 264 participants were involved in the children’s education programme. The gallery covered all ethical considerations for this and I undertook the role as an employee. This gave me an opportunity to reflect independently on the experience. The schools were selected for two reasons: firstly, because they were situated in areas most affected by the socio-economic and socio-ecological issues outlined earlier in this thesis, and, secondly, because the teachers in the schools were eager to engage with the experiential nature of the gallery programme.

The ‘Thin Place’ educational programme was particularly relevant to local teachers because, as Seren Stacey, education officer at Oriel Myrddin, pointed out, it could be:

- explored as part Cwricwlwm Cymreig (Welsh curriculum), which promotes Welsh culture and heritage. The exhibition provided an opportunity to look at the work of contemporary Welsh artists working locally whose work relates to the landscape (place) … The use of magical imagery in children’s literature, and storytelling in the workshops as well as the critical writing competition, was ideal for engaging schools who are currently focused on improving literacy. Further to this, what I saw was an inspiring use of writing which may have sparked the children’s imagination and made critical writing a more engaging activity. (Appendix D)

I also prepared a teacher’s interpretive pack of the exhibition for other local schools who visited the gallery throughout the show. Seren Stacey used the pack regularly throughout the exhibition period. The interpretive pack described the content and context of the exhibition and provided specific interpretive exercises and potentially new areas for discussion using each individual artwork in the show as a starting point.

The ‘Thin Place’ exhibition became a perfect starting point for teachers looking to launch new projects or introduce new ideas to their learners. The schools engaged to take part in the ‘Thin Place’ education project were especially interested because of
the emphasis on creative and critical writing. For example, the primary teacher responsible for the cohort I worked with at School A mentioned that while writing skills are firmly embedded in the curriculum, the opportunity or freedom to write creatively and imaginatively at school was lacking:

While the groups have loved the sessions on their previous visits, Thin Place has inspired the children’s imaginations and kept their interest more deeply.

They got more ‘into’ it. (See Appendix D)

He believed this was due to the ways in which creative writing was fostered.

The workshops I developed for the targeted schools were documented as critical reviews written by the children, submitted to the gallery as part of the critical writing competition. The children’s level of analysis, depth of understanding and ability to articulate imaginative experiences was measured by myself, Seren Stacey and Alicia Miller, an independent writer on the contemporary visual arts based in west Wales and a representative for Axisweb, an online arts hub. Although it might seem contentious, and not in keeping with the ethos of Thinness, I decided to develop a competition component to the project for two reasons. Firstly, the competition opened up the opportunity for a wider audience to engage with the exhibition because the competition was advertised in the national newspapers. This approach was influenced by Jellett. Secondly, I was interested in using a competition as a metaphor for a kind of archaic rite of passage, in entering into something that was difficult, and competitive, the children motivated others to join them as they had to cross a threshold and only some of them would succeed to win the prize. The prizes themselves were purchased with this in mind – hence they ‘looked’ archaic.
3.4 Responses to the workshops.

3.4.1 Responses to classroom workshops.

The children’s education programme was aimed at children aged between 7 and 10. School A was the first school I worked with. To enable the reader to understand what follows fully I will put this and the other schools in their social context. School A is situated in Llanelli, within the 10% most deprived LSOA (lower layer super output area) in Wales. In 2007, an estimated 21% of working age adults in Llanelli had no qualifications; this compares with a 15% average in Wales. Pupils entitled to free school meals in Llanelli were 20.1% compared with a 17.8% Wales average. Poor long-term health was 36% compared with a 27% Wales average. It is worth highlighting that these statistics are measured using a Wales average, which, as mentioned earlier, has one of the lowest levels of well-being in the UK as a whole. In the 2008 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation child index, 10% of LSOAs in Llanelli fell within the 10% most deprived LSOAs in Wales and 59% fell within the more deprived half of Wales.¹⁹ Carmarthen Town, where School B is situated, ranks 7 in Carmarthenshire and 276 in Wales for LSOAs.²⁰ Bearing in mind these statistics, School A has an incredibly progressive, child-centred approach to teaching and learning. Following a recent government grant, the school was housed in a new building designed to be a labyrinth of light-filled corridors looking out on to courtyards where vegetables and plants are grown. Every classroom evidenced thriving creative environments and a real interest in using creativity to engage students in learning. The classroom where I was working was full

of sculptures, paintings, prints, collages, and outside the room a Picasso-inspired portrait made from toast!

School B is housed in an older building with darker classrooms and has a larger cohort of children with a much more visible variety of learning needs. (For example, one child in the cohort was deaf and had severe learning difficulties, many children spoke English as a second language and much of the teaching was delivered in Welsh.) The teachers were enthusiastic and very supportive of the project, but the classrooms in which they worked and the resources available to them were limited. One classroom had two doorways on either side, and I found that the flow of people moving in and out of these two side-rooms was a constant distraction when working with the children. The School B building and its classrooms were significantly more worn and tired learning environments than School A, and as a result they were more of a challenge to work in. I reassured children in both schools when I met them for the first time at the beginning of the sessions that their subjective experiences, their conjectures and their imaginative responses to place were all valid in the workshops I had organised. Despite the different learning environments, the children in both schools responded very well to the story read to them and many felt comfortable sharing their experiences of, and encounters with, the "elemental kingdom";²¹ both with myself and with their peers. When the more confident children's experiences were met with positive responses, other children began to feel more comfortable sharing their own subjective experiences of nature spirits in their daily lives. Many of the children in both schools were familiar with the words chosen from the 'magical hat'; however, the context in which they knew these words often came from the virtual world of online gaming.²² It was interesting to note

²¹ This is a term used by R. Ogilvie Crombie to describe nature spirits.
²² Many of the children in both groups were familiar with words such as ‘portal’ and ‘universe’; however, they were not familiar with ‘threshold’, ‘shoreline’ and ‘druid’.
that Thinness is also now located in gaming culture; as an emerging universe, this could be a potentially fruitful area of research for the future.

When discussing what the words in the ‘magical hat’ meant, I alerted the children to the possibility that these words also have a relevance to, and resonate with, physical places as much as virtual places. Their reaction to the possibility that a portal might exist in a physical realm, as well as in a virtual realm, was met with a mixture of surprise and excitement. Many children said they were familiar with where a portal might be found in a physical space. They cited examples such as “the bottom of my garden” or “near the sea” and, inspired by C. S. Lewis, “inside a wardrobe”.

All children in both schools were very comfortable and happy to engage in the shamanic journeying experience (which we described as an ‘imagination journey’). The ritual of lying down in a circle was very exciting for them, possibly because it was so different to normative classroom behaviour. While journeying, only a very small number of children struggled to engage (two or three children spent some of the time giggling). My justification for using a Shamanic drum and inviting the children to go on a Shamanic journey is discussed later in this chapter in relation to enchantment.

There was always a maximum of two children in each group who said they couldn’t imagine anything. All remaining children (usually ten out of fifteen) participated in the journeying experience in a fully absorbed, immersive and occasionally quite reverent way.

In both schools I found that there was always at least one boy in each of the small groups I worked with who found the experience intensely moving. At the end of the journey, these boys were often in a deep state of relaxation and it was obvious from their movements that they had been on a very vivid imaginative adventure. It was a challenge to encourage these boys to talk about their experiences as they often became aware that their feelings had been more intense than the rest of the cohort when speaking to the group. As a result, they became nervous, shy or sought to
conform to the behaviour of the more dominant males in the class. In praising them for engaging so meaningfully in the experience, I occasionally inadvertently amplified their differences to the whole group of boys and as a result they became too self-conscious to share the story of their journey. This happened twice at School A and once with the group at School B. However, these boys were eager to share their stories with me in confidence at the end of the session. Girls, in general, were much more confident than the boys in sharing their stories.

At School A, the group as a whole was very shy and much less boisterous following the journeying experience. Many said they had seen things but that what they had seen was ‘secret’. They were much more inclined to conform and copy each other and were anxious that their stories or conjectures wouldn’t be ‘right’. At School B, the groups were much more confident and excited to share their stories, and these were much more diverse and subjective in nature.

Nonetheless, all the children in both schools had some form of imaginative story to tell, and in that sense the outcome I had hoped for had been achieved. For example, I asked if anyone had seen a bear, just to see if I could provoke a response. A shy child put his hand up. He said quietly that he has seen a green bear and it had said to him that he must help him stop all the trees from being chopped down. I felt that this child had had a sincere journeying experience. After he spoke other children shared their experiences more confidently and soon their stories became more and more imaginative, more relational to place and more animistic.

The children in both schools all attempted to use the terminology learned from the ‘magical hat’ when describing their journeys. The shamanic experience had initiated and cultivated an imaginative and poetic view of place for them – admittedly with varying degrees of understanding. Nonetheless, this ‘opening up’ to the imaginal realm equipped the children with a new, intuitive and immersive approach to
engaging with the artworks in the gallery. This was substantiated in the books and essays they produced for the critical writing competition.

3.4.2 Responses to the gallery workshops.

Children from both schools were very enthusiastic and confident about sharing their experiences of what they saw in the gallery. Anderson’s work was described by many as being “like a graveyard” or “a city in another world” and often “like something from the olden days”. Mackey’s work was “like a potion”. Parrott’s work was “like a ladder to a cloud castle”. Buick’s work was “like a pot for fairy dust”.

Both school groups made great attempts to recall and apply the words they had learned the previous week from the ‘magical hat’ to the exhibition. However, the School B children evidenced a greater verbal agility for applying the new words they had learned in creative ways.

A noticeable difference between both school groups when in the gallery was their capacity to concentrate and be autonomous. In the second hour of the workshop, when the children were given the opportunity to draw and write about the artworks, the group of children from School A gradually but noticeably grew more subdued. Many children began to ask repeatedly when they might get their lunch. Oriel Myrddin’s policy, agreed with the teachers, is that children on gallery visits do a workshop for two hours without a break because the activities often involve absorbing play and creative activities which children find novel and engaging. As such, they only get a break at 12 p.m. for lunch.

Because the gallery visit was a school trip, the children were required to bring a packed lunch. In school, as outlined in the statistics above, many of the children in the Llanelli area are eligible for free school meals and receive a hot meal at lunchtime and are members of a breakfast club. At the end of the School A school gallery session, I went to visit the group in the education room where they were
eating their lunch. It was only then that I understood why energy levels had seemed lower with them in the gallery than when I saw them in their school. The majority of the lunches the children were eating consisted of crisps and bars of chocolate. Only one child out of the whole group of thirty had a lunchbox with a noticeably healthy meal (pasta, carrots and fruit juice). I noticed that one child (the child who, it turned out, won the first prize for the critical writing competition) was eating a lunch which consisted only of a packet of crisps and a bag of chewy sweets. While this encounter is anecdotal, and I do not intend to discuss the broader socio-political issues of eating habits in LSOAs in Wales in great detail in this thesis, what I witnessed provided me with a greater understanding as to why the children in School A were representative of the statistics mentioned earlier in this chapter, and why malnourishment had significantly hindered their ability to engage with the exhibition for long periods of time. Prior to this encounter I had not fully considered the extent to which Maslow’s (1943) basic hierarchy of needs would impact on the outcomes of my research and the children’s learning experiences.

The children from School B were able to concentrate and participate in the workshop for its full duration. This is most likely because their school is within walking distance of the gallery and, as a result, those children receiving free school meals and breakfasts would have had their nutritional needs catered for before arriving. I noticed how levels of engagement were still very strong in the second half of the workshop, with many of the children wanting to write and draw before we had introduced the writing workshop to them. Often they wanted to show us their work in progress, not for reassurance but out of pride and excitement. The children from School A were much more nervous as a group about being autonomous. Many of them wanted to be reassured that they were “doing the right thing” when illustrating their books, and a small but significant number of girls in particular wanted to be told what to do as they “didn’t have any good ideas and would just get it wrong”.

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However, with a little bit of encouragement, and by reminding them of the stories they had created on their shamanic journeys, the majority of children managed to create wonderful reflections on the show. There was a pace to the language in many of the entries that was engaging and dynamic: “the floor is fire” and “makes me feel scared and dream about a tower” being two examples. The first prize in the writing competition went to a child who had created a very detailed account of the show. All judges felt her essay articulated her embodied experience of the artworks with great confidence:

I was inspired by all the colours and everything else. The black totem poles made me feel like they were enchanted fairy house. The test tubes looked like they were potions. The ladder made me feel like I wanted to climb up and go to different dimension. The pot reminded me of my fairy pot. The colours in the test tubes reminded me of a garden. The painting of a pot it felt like I was there. I could feel the breeze. The totems made me feel like I was in a graveyard. (A child from School A)

Even though many of the other essays were less detailed, they often included poetic and original imagery:

It made me think of the funny weird things I see. Bones and stones and pots and thoughts. Isn’t that what is meant to be. (Child A, age 7)

Objects make you think! The gallery makes you dream and live. (Child B, age 7)

One of the favourite lines for all the judges was by Child C (age 8) who wrote: “The gallery is a story.”

Although the gender of the prize-winners is not particularly significant to the arguments put forward in this thesis, it was interesting to note that four of the five prize-winners were female, and also that the girls, more than the boys, found it much easier to have an embodied experience of the exhibition. They were also much more confident and capable of articulating that engagement in both verbal and written form.
For education officer Seren Stacey, ‘Thin Place’ emphasised the interdisciplinary nature of artistic practice. Because it had many different entry points or themes through which to view the work, it made her more aware that “everything is an artist’s business” (see Appendix D). While the element of competition is not something the gallery often gets involved with, she noted that it was a very motivating factor for the children. This was evidenced by the enthusiastic way in which they wrote their competition entries:

What was touching was the visible sense of pride from the three winners and two runners-up whom I feel will have been inspired to persevere with their writing. The fact that someone can ‘win’ through writing may also be a motivating factor for all the group, recognising the value of these skills. I also felt that there was something courageous and ‘about time’, in all of the artists’ work in broaching and exposing subjects of personal spirituality and relationship to place.

Seren’s final reflections on the education programme were particularly useful to substantiating the claims made for this project:

I found Ciara inspiring to work with, finding a good pitch to work with children, introducing the complex themes of the exhibition from a perspective a child could find accessible. It also is rare to be given such a thorough guide to the educational hooks for each artist and piece in the exhibition. And the talks, essays and additional reading provided many entry points for the exhibition. It felt like a collaboration when we were working together in the gallery. The way Ciara brought storytelling into the classroom was great. It is rare to have the opportunity for quietly listening to a story and I observed the children becoming relaxed and focused and engaged in the stories. I think they themselves were surprised to be talking about magical things. The introduction of competition was effective and created a sense of excitement and even magic when they got their special prizes. (See Appendix D)

The education programme for ‘Thin Place’ has continued to inspire the gallery education programme, primarily because of the diverse ways in which it embedded
critical and creative writing meaningfully into school gallery visits. Since ‘Thin Place’, Seren has been using creative writing exercises as an integral part of the exhibition programme. She said:

during a recent Year 5 and 6 school visit we came up with sentences in response to the latest exhibition then wrote down our sentences with a view to encouraging someone to come and see the exhibition. I did not previously bring this kind of creative writing into school visits.

3.5 Adult education events: book club and film club.

The education programme I developed for adults consisted of:

1. A film screening
2. A book club
3. A symposium

Details of the education programme were printed as a poster.

3.5.1 Book club.

The book club grew out of a conversation with Meg Anthony in the spring of 2014. During that time I was invited to lead discussions on books that were specially selected to complement Oriel Myrddin’s existing curatorial programme. The book I selected to discuss in conjunction with ‘Thin Place’ was *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. I selected it for two reasons.

Firstly, it was recommended to me during email conversations with Dr Robert Hensey and Dr Carleton Jones, two academics and archaeologists at the National University of Ireland, Galway. They both informed me that the use of the term ‘thin places’ is more commonly found in American pop culture, graphic novels and New Age literature than in archaeological or academic discourse. However, they both acknowledged that the term ‘liminal’ is probably the closest equivalent. Dr Hensey
pointed out that the Thinness concept may be derived from Irish folk tradition around non-Christian seasonal festivals such as Samhain\(^{23}\) and similar turning points in the year would be traditionally considered times when the veil between the worlds was ‘Thin’:

For instance, in Irish myth someone might go into a cave or passage tomb at one of these times and unintentionally find themselves in the spirit world. Deceased relatives would be considered more present at these times, candles placed in windows to guide them home, places set for them at the table etc. The Irish word sidhe is perhaps the most connected Irish term/concept, and can be applied to places, monuments, spirits etc. Neil Gaiman is fond of it and uses it in his Sandman series and in his novel ‘American Gods’. (Email conversation with Dr Henesey, 11 June 2013 – see Appendix D)

Secondly, these ideas are particularly present in American Gods, which is a dark, unsettling and humorous story of ancient and modern mythology. It tells the tale of Shadow, a recently released prisoner, who travels across America and learns of the ancient gods carried in the minds and hearts of thousands of emigrants. He encounters the Native Gods of Place and becomes implicated in the needs of these gods to exist in a new terrain. He sees their dwindling power to change our view of the world as the new gods of modernity slowly replace them.

This event was reasonably well attended. Average book club events usually involve up to seven visitors and the ‘Thin Place’ book club event hosted eight participants, all of whom were eager to engage in dialogue on the book and its relationship to the exhibition. Many critiqued the literary style of the book and the majority admitted that

\(^{23}\) Samhain or Lá Samhna is an Irish term used to describe 1 November, which marks the end of the harvest time and welcomes in the darker half of the year through ancient ritual and festival. Lá Samhna takes place halfway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice. It, like other pre-Christian festivals in Ireland, was a ritualised event in which homage was paid to nature gods and spirits. It was also a festival where the veil between this world and the Otherworld was believed to be Thin, allowing the souls of the dead to revisit their homes.
it was not a literary genre they had read before. Some of the women in the group found the representation of women in the book to be reductive. Nevertheless, all participants found that the book made relevant connections to the exhibition and it initiated much discussion on issues relating to the local community and its relationship with place, which is ultimately why I felt it would cultivate a relational dialogue and resonate with the concept of Thinness.

Topics covered during the book club conversation included issues relating to corrupt town planning and finding funding for the local museum, which is currently facing closure. Many of those attending shared stories of the rich heritage of Carmarthen. Participants ruminated on why this heritage is not fully visible in the town and discussed the consequences of making history a commodity. Participants also shared many local oral testimonies, folk tales and subjective experiences of death rites in Wales. Many had uncovered bones buried in and around the area, in their back gardens and in local fields when new housing developments were being built, especially near where the priory and friary were once situated.

### 3.5.2 Film club.

The film club screening for the exhibition was *Afterlife* (1998) directed by Hirokazu Kore-Eda. This Japanese film follows the story of a group of recently deceased people as they are greeted at a way-station style institution before entering the afterlife. The afterlife in which they will shortly enter (after three days) is described as being one single happy memory from the deceased person’s life, re-experienced for eternity.

I selected this film for the adult education programme because of the simultaneously pragmatic and esoteric way in which death is addressed. Clunky visceral materials are used to create amateur style stage sets for the protagonists in the film. When each newly deceased person walks onto the stage set in order to inhabit their one
lasting happy memory, they enter into another realm and disappear. The materials and the memory they induce literally take them out of this world, echoing Finn’s (1992) suggestion that the material world is capable of exceeding every conscious glimpse we glean of it and every linguistic structure we impose on it. The playful, elusive and lyrical nature of the film quietly acknowledges the ominous darkness of death, while simultaneously reminding us that alternative, more hopeful perspectives always exist, a perspective I felt resonated with the concept of Thinness.

In a short discussion after the screening, responses to the film were very positive. Many of those attending had been visibly moved by it and therefore found it difficult to discuss the film objectively immediately afterwards. Instead, almost all participants decided to spend time in the gallery space after the screening, looking at and being in the company of the artwork, which again emphasised how important the exhibition was in articulating ideas connected to the “unseen order”. (James, 1985, pp. 70–76)

3.5.3 Symposium.

The education programme offered an opportunity for further engagement with the local community of Carmarthen through a symposium. Participants were given a final day-long opportunity on the 28 February 2015, the last day of the exhibition, to connect the artworks and the catalogue to further disciplines. It was hoped that this would further attune participants and visitors to the multiplicity of the concept of Thinness. All presentations were recorded professionally to create an online audio archive of the day.24

The symposium became a fully booked event (sixty-five people, filling the venue) almost as soon as the tickets went on sale. Those attending travelled from London, Scotland, Ireland, Cumbria, local villages in and around Carmarthenshire and further afield from north and mid-Wales. As well as presenting audience members with a

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24 See http://orielmyrddingallery.co.uk/2015/03/thin-place-symposium-audio/.
multiplicity of world-views that they would see relationally with the artworks on show, I also wanted to engage the speakers with each others world-views. I therefore organised a pre-symposium gathering on the 27 February at Capel Iwan, where I accommodated all the speakers at Glaspant Manor and provided them with a special evening meal. I wanted to facilitate discussion between the speakers prior to the event the following day. This was primarily because none of the speakers knew each other, many of them were working in very different fields and I felt they would be nervous and possibly uncertain of the environment they would be speaking in if they hadn’t been introduced in an informal setting first. The proprietors of the accommodation I selected for the guests were particularly hospitable which helped to make the speakers feel at ease.

The speakers presented their papers in the following order:

1. Dr George Nash, an archaeologist specialising in passage tombs in Wales.
2. Wales-based artist Dr Ruth Jones.
3. Lorraine Flaherty, an Irish/London-based transformational therapist.
4. Mary Modeen, professor of art and humanities at the University of Dundee.
5. Irish artist Jonathan Sammon.

The order played a particular role in fostering how Thinness might be experienced for both audience members and participants.

Dr George Nash opened the morning with a paper titled ‘Megaliths as Mausoleums: Deconstructing Architecture and Mortuary Practices in Wales’. This presentation contextualised the exhibition in place, and offered a historical and archaeological overview of the notion of Thinness. His carefully prepared presentation sought to
connect with the intentions of the exhibition in a very meaningful way, but at the same time his scientific background challenged any romantic narratives we might project on to the people of the Neolithic. He pointed out that even during the Neolithic period, Thin places, as marked by Megalithic mausoleums, had complex rules, hierarchies and strategies designed to enhance the rights and privileges of those in power (see also Owens and Hayden, 1997). I invited him to speak about his practice as an archaeologist as his research focuses in particular on rites of passage, death rites and entrances into the Otherworld through passage tombs from the Neolithic and Megalithic period. I felt his specialism would make the audience feel at ease. Not only did his paper offer a fascinating account of the archaeological record of west Wales and the west of Ireland, it was also empirical, objective and rigorously researched and was therefore a paradigm familiar to the audience and was seen as having a certain authority and importance.

‘Between a Flashing Star and a Gravestone,’ was the title of Dr Ruth Jones’ presentation at the symposium. It contextualised Nash’s presentation very well in as much as it made visual connections between the ways in which communities were organised in relation to place in the past, and how they continue to organise themselves in relation to their place in the present. This relationship between communities, past and present lies at the heart of Jones’ visual arts practice. Based in Pembrokeshire, she is the founder of Holy Hiatus, a not-for-profit visual arts organisation that explores how ritual can be used creatively and therapeutically to engage with people, places and communities. I had worked with Jones at the Catalyst Arts Centre in Belfast ten years prior to our meeting again in Wales. When I moved to Wales in 2011, I discovered that she was not only living close to me but that our practices overlapped significantly. Over the course of three years we met regularly, critiqued each other’s work, shared literature. Her presentation proposed
that the Thin artist today mediates worlds and this continues a polytheistic legacy, which originated in the ancient communities discussed by Nash.

Lorraine Flaherty’s presentation ‘Inner Freedom, Transformational Journeys through Time and Space’ explained her work as a clinical hypnotherapist and specialist in past-life regression. Her presentation followed Nash and Jones’ papers and proposed a world-view that wasn’t so very different to theirs conceptually, however its delivery and critical rigour was rooted in New Age philosophy rather than academic theory. As a transformational therapist and specialist in hypnotherapy for past-life regression therapy, her research is very much marginalised by the paradigms in which ‘academic institutions’ operate. However, her observations and ruminations on her own work, as well as its popularity in recent years, confirmed Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) assertion that the holistic milieu is a growing force.

My rationale for including her presentation in the symposium stemmed from an interest in making fields of knowledge more porous. I was also interested in presenting a world-view from the field of alternative therapy, partly to acknowledge the claims made by Heelas and Woodhead but also to see how this field might further connect Thinness to place, spirituality and the local community.

As a combination of speakers, Nash, Jones and Flaherty presented some challenges for audience members. Journalist Kirsten Hinks, in her exhibition response on the Oriel Myrddin website explained why:

> I think some found particular combinations of speakers at the symposium to be problematic – having academics or scientists speaking next to artists and even spiritual or religious speakers caused some consternation. There was a worry that one speaker may lend gravitas or authority to the next who may be less empirical.

Lorraine Flaherty’s polished presentation on past-life regression therapy was delivered in a style that was more akin to a motivational talk at a New Age conference than an academic lecture. She recounted the experiences of some of her
clients who claimed to remember traumatic moments in their past lives.\(^{25}\) It was interesting to find that this less empirical presentation – which offered anecdotal stories, conjectures and imaginal possibilities relating to the notion of Thin places (delivered entirely as a subjective truth) – was difficult for some people to hold in their minds cointerently with Nash’s more academic presentation. And yet, as Hinks reflected following conversations with those who attended the event:

> It is possibly a more realistic depiction of how the mind really works. Holding different ideas and perspectives, even conflicting ones, at the same time is perhaps quite a natural state of being. Place is a particularly good example of such a state where it is possible to understand a particular place as holding religious significance, scientific interest and personal connections all at once despite the fact that in a strictly factual sense one of these things may render another impossible. Yet in an educational, academic setting we are taught a certain format. Based on the concept of a debate or argument we seek to pit one notion against another in order to attain the truth of the matter. Perhaps ‘Thin Place’ is an attempt to demonstrate a different way to think and a different way to learn.

The fact that these speakers compelled some members of the audience to confront their own dualisms was a deliberate choice for this symposium, yet I was surprised that one of the artists had such difficulty holding these world-views in her mind’s eye cointerently.

Flora Parrott found the subjective world-view posited by Lorraine Flaherty to be “dogmatic, overly simplistic, not rigorous or critical enough and dangerous for those who might be emotionally vulnerable” (conversation with Flora Parrott, 1 April 2015). Parrott was also critical of my curatorial decision to select Lorraine Flaherty, pointing out that there are many people who speak about the notion of a multiverse from a more “rigorous, critically aware and questioning position” (ibid.). Parrott’s points were

\(^{25}\) One example was the story of a man who remembered struggling to protect his family and tribe from wild animals when he lived during what she described as a hunter-gatherer period in history
a valuable addition to the development of this research and also became very useful feedback for me to ruminate on for my future curatorial projects.

While I agreed that Lorraine Flaherty’s talk was very subjective, perhaps a little simplistic and not rigorous within an academic framework, I was also aware that it didn’t have to be, because she practiced in a world outside of academia. She was also, more than any of the other speakers in the symposium, addressing an audience that she knew nothing about. She was aware that most people attending would be expecting something that would sit comfortably within a generally accepted academic paradigm. So, in a sense, she took a much greater risk presenting her ideas to an audience, which historically regarded her world-view as a mistake, a projection and a set of superstitious beliefs. Perhaps her insecurity in speaking to what she (in some cases rightly) felt would be a hostile audience, impacted on the way in which she presented her ideas. (Her presentation was overly confident). During our conversation after the symposium, Parrott acknowledged that Flaherty’s talk had made her realise that perhaps she is more empirically minded as an artist than she had previously thought.

Following my conversation with Flora I reflected on the fact that the art world has the potential to be as much a life-world today as any other occupation. For artists dealing with themes connected to the holistic milieu, the idea that they might be overlooked because of the subjective nature of their work – or because their work might be seen through a ‘questionable’ ‘non-academic’ lens – is a legitimate worry. I speculated that it must be a great concern for artists like Parrott to have her work mediated and aligned with a set of beliefs she was very opposed to. If the art world is a life-as world, and if artists like Parrott feel that it is important and necessary for the survival of an art career to be aligned to its life-as world-view, and maintain the status quo, then the risk that an art practice might be understood coinherently with Lorraine Flaherty’s world-view can understandably pose a challenge.
On the whole, however, most members of the audience, particularly the other artists in the exhibition found the combination of speakers to be an affirmation of the multiplicity of their own existence. Even if they did not necessarily agree with Flaherty’s arguments, the other artists were not overly concerned about their work being seen through the lens that she developed in her presentation, they were happy and confident to have their work viewed through multiple lenses and in that respect I would argue that they had a Thin approach to their own work. Some of the artists found it amusing; others found Flaherty’s presentation actually further heightened and amplified what they were trying to say in their creative work.

By inviting people to go beyond life-as roles and conventions, I hoped to bring about an awareness of Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005, p. 99) assertion that, that “all life connects”, particularly when the individual realises “his or her true nature in relation with the whole.” It was therefore relevant, and indeed positive, that some members of the audience struggled to accept the coinherence of Nash, Jones and Flaherty’s world-views. Their struggle negated what cultural theorist Philip Napier calls the Western assumption “that we are entitled to get through life – without having to earn our identities” (Napier, 2003, p. xxiii). When the struggle to see Thinly, to see the porosity between each world-view is overcome, it engenders the perfect habitat to enter into what writer David Abram calls a “felt relation with other, non-human forms of sentience.” (Abram, 2010, p.235).

Following the presentations by Nash, Jones and Flaherty, I organised a tour of St Peter’s Church tower over the lunch break. The tower is situated opposite the gallery, and the tour was an opportunity to locate the ideas that had emerged in the morning in the locale. From the tower it is possible to view Merlin’s Hill, an ancient local historic site, and the Teifi Valley. The vicar of St. Peter’s Church led a number of the tours. Everyone attending the symposium enjoyed the experience of locating some of the ideas they had encountered in the symposium within the landscape.
The afternoon session included a presentation by Irish visual artist Jonathan Sammon whose ‘Notes on the Happening World’ explained how his creative practice weaves literature, science and film together. I was introduced to Jonathan Sammon’s work by Galway-based curator Maeve Mulrennan for an exhibition she curated titled ‘By A Route Obscure and Lonely’ in 2010, which came from the first line of Edgar Allen Poe’s poem ‘Dream-Land’ (1829). Sammon’s work looked at the idea of an ‘other place’ or ‘dreamland’, where the rational and linear narrative of the everyday is subverted or inverted. I wrote to Sammon and invited him to contribute to the symposium as I felt that his contribution would be significant to the project as a whole. One of Jonathan Sammon’s film works, titled Merry Peal of Celebration, was presented during his talk. Based on the eighteenth century preoccupation with premature burial, the film opens with a close-up of a bell tolling in a snowy graveyard. It then scans the landscape, always with the bell in the corner of our vision. As the camera pulls back we see that the ringing bell is attached to a string buried under the earth. Often allegorical in nature, his work deals with animism, story, fantasy and liminal places, and these concerns expressed in his practice extended many of the ways in which Thinness was expressed in the exhibition. My rationale for including artists Jones, Sammon and artist Serena Korda in the symposium was also pragmatic. I wanted to extend the artworks in the exhibition out beyond the gallery and offer further artists that I had encountered and corresponded with during the development of my research to have an opportunity to exhibit, if not in the gallery, then in the symposium where they would have a chance to present their work to a local audience.

Sammon’s presentation was followed by a paper titled ‘Interstices, Voids and Vibrant Spaces’ written by Mary Modeen. This was a piece of prose delivered with accompanying found images, which focused on perception as a cognitive and interpretive process. It extended the dialogue on Wonder, Thin Places and Thick
Places which Modeen and I had started in our correspondence. The delivery of both Sammon and Modeen’s paper was eloquent, understated and poetic. The integrity and commitment to their material (film and photography in Sammon’s case, words and images in Modeen’s) was very apparent and many members of the audience were visibly moved by their work.

This contrasted significantly with the final presentation by London-based visual artist Serena Korda titled ‘Zuben Elgenubi: The Price to be Paid.’ Delivered in an enthusiastic, confident and playful manner, Korda outlined how her sculptures, performances, video works, sound works and public art projects were concerned with humanity’s latent desire to find pleasure in fear. She used comical, theatrical and occasionally troubling examples of found images that inspired her artworks. These included references to witchcraft, ancient ritual and superstition. ‘Aping the Beast’ (2013) for example was one of the major projects she discussed. This was a body of work exhibited at Camden Arts Centre, in early 2013. Korda’s work had a compelling connection to my research, yet the visual outcome was radically different as it explored animism, folklore and story but situated it in popular culture and spectacle. The resulting examples seemed aesthetically very far away from the quiet and more nuanced work of, for example, Christine Mackey and Adam Buick, but I believed that they shared a similar epistemology. The two significant differences were that Korda uses popular culture rather than nature to explore secular beliefs and superstitions. Her work was Thin because of its site-specificity and because it involved members of each of the communities in which she worked. The central sculpture Korda created for the Camden Arts Centre in 2013 for example was a latex dragon puppet reminiscent of early horror or B-movies such as Godzilla (1954) and The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953). In conjunction with the sculpture, she produced two film works, both of which incorporated symbolic mystical creatures: a cat and a spider. However, in these films the cat reveals itself to have healing powers and the
A tarantula that accompanies a group of dancers dressed in Beatlemania clothing is a central part of a tarantalla ritual situated in an English village hall. As part of the exhibition, she also organised a series of ritualised performances involving local children and other members of the community, such as a male voice choir.

As the final speaker, Korda’s response to Thinness moved the concept out into worlds very far away from the rural region in which it was first conceived, and this in many ways was the reason why I wanted to include her voice, and why she was the last speaker to present her work. Audience members enjoyed her dynamism and irreverent approach, the way she appropriated ideas and imagery and reconceptualised them in a humorous way. One of her images, for example, presented a series of photographs of black cats being auditioned for an imaginary role as a witch’s aide. This was particularly fitting for a final presentation at the end of a long, diverse and, for some, quite contentious day.

I did not want to project my curatorial agenda too much into the symposium, nor close down the varied perceptions and ideas of the speakers into my own subjective framework. I was also aware that what began as an animistic approach to interdisciplinary practice and place had the potential throughout the day to evolve into something much more expansive than I had previously envisaged, and I didn’t want to risk reducing that back down to the trajectory I had originally set out to achieve.

The positive responses to both the exhibition and the symposium were therefore hopeful, in as much as the majority of visitors quickly identified with a broader spectrum of emotional and relational experiences of existence. This, I felt was indicative of the growing movement away from ‘packaged’ duty-bound life-as roles, towards the coinherence of a more relational, animistic, subjective perspectives. For me, this was an essential part of what makes a ‘sense of place’ exist as a communitas in West Wales.
3.6 The relevance of enchantment to education and Thinness.

In Chapter 2 I explained how wonder facilitated the experience of Thinness. In bringing a ‘sense of place’ into being in west Wales, I also had to think about how wonder could be sustained in the exhibition, the education programme and its aftermath. I wanted to offer the possibility that Thinness as a concept might linger longer in the hearts and minds of the participants and audience members. Bennett’s notion of enchantment / re-enchantment was a useful concept to turn to because I believed it would support Thinness as a concept in the future.

Bennett (2001, p. 174) suggests that:

without modes of enchantment, we might not have the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects, or to contest ugly and unjust modes of commercialisation, or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities.

She also argues that: “These enchantments are already in and around us.” (2001, p. 174). It is therefore the role of the Thin curator / educator to open up possibilities for these enchantments to be brought into being, to be experienced, to be encountered, and for those who encounter them to be given agency. It was my intention that the artworks would make these enchantments visible. Curated together, in the form of an exhibition, they could be experienced, as critic Lear demonstrated.

One of the initial ways in which I thought I might mediate these enchantments in the exhibition was through an association with neo-Shamanic practices. While Thin curating is focused predominantly around discussions on animism, I first turned to neo-shamanism as a pragmatist, looking to put my understanding of Reggio Emilia philosophies and Thinness into a particular set of actions. The work and research of Professor Michael Harner, although contentious – and, as I found later, problematic – also informed my thinking.
Harner has endeavoured to lift the study and practice of shamanism away from the surface observation approach taken by contemporary anthropologists. He realised that the scientism of anthropology, as he knew it, had overlooked the fact that, in shamanic cultures, awareness operates in more than one reality. That reality could be reconsidered to be “that which is real and can be experienced independent of human engagement and awareness” (Harner and Buxton, 2014). It was believed by the Academy that anthropologists who ‘went native’ were no longer capable of objective analysis and thus were likely to be “abandoned by the scientific community” (Salomonsen, 1999; Young and Goulet, 1994, cited in Wallis, 2005, p. 7). This attitude, described by Turner (1986, p. 28) as the “positivists’ denial” is a vestige of Enlightenment based concepts of reality and can render the beliefs of the shaman or the neo-shaman into symbolism and metaphor.

Harner discovered that the primary tool across all cultures was what he calls “sonic driving” (Harner and Buxton, 2014), created using a drum or other rhythm-making materials. When a specific rhythm is played it can induce a theta state of consciousness which allows the mind to enter into an intense meditative state, or a “shamanic state of consciousness” (Harner and Buxton, 2014). Through discipline, he discovered that the shaman in traditional indigenous communities, such as Siberia, the Americas and Australia, can enter into an altered state of consciousness when doing their shamanic work, and this is invariably brought on by sonic driving. In this altered state of consciousness they can go on journeys of the imagination which allow them (they believe) to venture outside of their bodies – to upper, lower and middle worlds – in order to gain knowledge which can help their communities.

The term ‘shaman’ has many different meanings in Western European history, often of a pejorative nature. However, Harner’s personal experiences of engaging with shamans and training with different indigenous cultures to become a shaman has
enabled him to recognise that the processes they undergo allows them to see, albeit temporarily, a “non-ordinary reality” (Harner, 2011).

What makes Harner’s approach contentious for some is the fact that core shamanism, as a practice, is available to all.26 As a result, the power and specialist training of the ‘real’ shaman is rendered redundant or eliminated (Jakobsen, 1999 cited in Wallis 2003, p. 50). Once the nuances of the culturally specific are re-contextualised and reduced to ‘techniques’, shamanism becomes homogenised and the religiosity of a people in a particular place is lost. Their suffering in the face of globalisation continues unaddressed while their spiritual practices are appropriated into a pick-and-mix Western New Age canon that is disconnected from place.

Although I am sensitive to these criticisms, I believe that what makes the practice of the shaman valid is not whether the shaman is ‘real’ or ‘neo’, but whether he or she has intentions to engage in dialogue with multiple world-views, and, in so doing, becomes an agent of change in a particular community.

Although the primary motivation behind my research has emerged from an intense dissatisfaction with the fallacy that an objectified world-view is the only acceptable one in Western culture, I was also aware that my engagement with shamanic practice might appear reductive. However, the occult writer Nevill Drury’s (1989, pp. 1–2) comments on shamanism, particularly his observations on its increasing popularity in the West, suggests this might not necessarily be the case. He describes a shaman as being “an intermediary between the gods of Creation and the more familiar realm of everyday domestic affairs … for the Shaman can journey to other

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26 Core shamanism is the approach to shamanic practice that Harner teaches in the West. Those who practice it are often referred to as neo-shamans. Critics often tend to fall into what Wallis (2003, p. 31) calls “the methodological trap” of comparing neo-shamans with ‘real’ shamans. ‘Real’ shamans in this binary form of academic discourse tend to be placed in a distant ‘Other’ realm (often in the past), their cultural distance being the thing that makes them ‘authentic’. On the other hand, neo-shamans, such as Harner, risk being perceived as deluded because their approach to shamanism is reductive and invented.
This assertion, in particular, was one of the primary reasons why I incorporated core shamanism into my education programme to foster a sense of enchantment, to encourage an attunement to enchantments “already in and around us.” (Bennett, 2001, p. 174). In the end I decided to incorporate neo-shamanic practice solely into my education programme because:

- It is a recognised effective spiritual response to current Western environmental socio-ecological crisis (see Adams and Green, 2014; Jenkinson, 2014; Wallis 2005; Grimes, 2000; Harner, 1994, 1990, 1988; Matthews, 1991a; Young, 1994).
- It can validate an animistic perception of the world, particularly in communities where people are vulnerable to being exploited by commercially driven projects (see Harner, 1994, 1990, 1988; Drury, 1989).
- It is motivated by the need to improve relations between the human and the ancestral world (see Jenkinson, 2014).

I believed that these three reasons would help create a new “zone of discovery” in minds disciplined by what Warner called “conscientious and elaborate didacticism” (2002, p. 11). In the early years of the Enlightenment, stories from the Otherworld were seen as a challenge to the authority of the Church and later to the reductive world-view offered by the Enlightenment. At the same time, they acted as a reminder of a period when reality could be felt and experienced through more complex layers of meaning. It was this reminder, this re-enchantment, that sustains wonder and, by proxy, Thinness.

The education programme was one of the most challenging yet most enjoyable aspects of the ‘Thin Place’ exhibition. It was challenging simply because of the amount of physical effort required to run the workshops every week in a way that would nurture enthusiasm in the children. It was a pleasure to do this as the children
easily and seemingly innately were able to connect with the artworks. Helping them to express that understanding through creative writing was very satisfying. The support for the project by teachers and staff, particularly at School A, was not only very useful, but it also helped to amplify how capable children are of engaging in and articulating their experiences of the imaginal realm. To see that sense of enchantment nurtured by the schools following my workshops, convinced me of the effectiveness of this project. While it is not possible to tell if the workshops I held will have an impact on the children’s relationship to place in the future, it is reasonable to hope that the children involved in the workshops, especially the prize-winners (who all received a medieval writing set complete with wooden box, ink well, quill and wax seal) might feel more equipped to challenge systems that render their conjectures irrelevant in the future. Perhaps in so doing, they might be capable of maintaining a level of enchantment with the world that allows them to see beyond the categories in which their young lives have already been defined.

My involvement with the education programme therefore revealed to me that intelligence is indiscriminate, yet Enlightenment-based paradigms ensure that emancipation from socio-economic and socio-ecological difficulties discriminates against this perception. If, as Warner suggests, education is now increasingly dominated by, and subject to, an ideology that serves to maintain reductivism, then those of us who resist that ideology need to find ways to act accordingly. My actions went beyond addressing this issue in children’s education. I also took steps to address it in other disciplinary ‘heartlands’ and with local groups of people from a range of different socio-economic, socio-political and socio-spiritual world-views.

As this key testimonial from one of the participants in the ‘Thin Place’ questionnaire I conducted indicates, the presence of Thinness in contemporary curatorial practice is an effective form of resistance, as much as it is an affirmation and validation for those who have always felt themselves to be of more than one world:
All my life I have experienced slippage into (and out of) other spaces (prophetic dreams, strange experiences when awake). I have consistently kept these experiences to myself because I was unsure of other people’s reactions to this ability/experience. And now at last I feel found, and that I am part of a larger community. It is truly wonderful. Thank you. (Testimonial collected from audience member at Thin Place symposium and exhibition).
Conclusion

4.1 Conclusion.

This thesis reflected on my attempts to develop a Thin curatorial model of practice. The object of my enquiry was to cultivate a greater permeability between disciplines in a gallery space and to relate that permeability to the liminal place in which the gallery was located. This, I hoped, would bring about new and meaningful ways of valuing place, particularly in landscapes where human and ancestral relationships were once well-established. It also would also, I hoped, question the supposed dichotomy of different forms of knowledge, a dichotomy which, I soon found, more or less dissolved during my collaboration with those who came from many different fields and specialisms.

I surveyed the notion of Thinness in relation to Place and discovered that Carmarthen had a rich history connected with animism, spirituality, storytelling and mythology. It also had a large number of archaeological signifiers, indicative of entrances into Otherworlds. Yet at the same time I discovered that Carmarthen had considerable socio-ecological and socio-economic difficulties, ranging from poor health and wellbeing to high unemployment. Such conditions can lead to disenchantment and disconnection from the rich tapestry of histories and narratives that permeate the surrounding environment. Overcoming these conditions impelled my research and helped to inform and contextualise my methodology, epistemology and ontology.

Having outlined the concept of Thinness in relation to place I then discussed the concept of Thinness in relation to Experience using a correspondence I developed with artist and academic Mary Modeen.

In this discussion I proposed that Thinness persists as a concept in spite of the predominantly objective and scientific paradigms that inform ways of being today. It persists in the form of archaic avant-garde art practices, through the holistic milieu
and through the concept of coinherence. Most importantly, I discovered that wonder facilitates a Thin experience.

This paved the way for a discussion on how I moved the concept of Thinness from Experience to Art Practice and finally to Curation in Chapter 2. Here, I argued that Thin art practices form a reconnexion with the archaic through materials. However, unlike the historicism of early postmodern art, where ideas and figures were appropriated into practice as a means of challenging a meta-narrative, I found that current archaic avant-garde practices engage in what Bennett calls “a neo-pagan enchantment” (2001, p. 40).

I also discovered that the setting of an exhibition plays a key factor in how these archaic belief systems take on meaningful relationships with place and are understood by audiences holistically. For example, I took great care to ensure that the structure and layout of the gallery space would foster a sense of the sacred and the otherworldly by choosing low lighting, by omitting explicit labelling and by relating the works in the exhibition to the church yard and burial grounds directly outside the gallery building.

The relationship between Thinness and curatorial practice was extended in Chapter 3 into a discussion on engaging Thinness in Education. Here I aligned Thinness with the philosophies and approaches taken by the Reggio Emilia schools, particularly their idea that children speak one hundred languages. I also, through a series of workshops, engendered Thinness as Experience using stories, word games, book making, dialogue and shamanic journeying. The outcome of these workshops culminated in a series of essays, written by participating children. These essays clearly identified that Thinness had been experienced.

My analysis of the other education events and the symposium revealed a generally very positive response. While Thinness as a concept was problematic and contentious for some, it also offered an opportunity to navigate difference, to
challenge the immunology of tolerance and, most importantly, to provide a sense of affirmation for those who already occupy and are sensitive to the notion that “we are not alone in the world” (Staengers, 2012, pp. 183-192) and that indeed, there is always more than one world.

The representation of different artistic, academic, scientific and theological viewpoints in the symposium was not an attempt to reveal an existing path, but rather an attempt to invite people to enter what journalist Kirsten Hinks, in her reflections on the exhibition on the Oriel Myrddin website, called “a woodland” - meaning a layering of diverse thoughts and ideas.

Although this was a multi-dimensional research project that expanded beyond the original object of enquiry, I would now like to return to the questions I initially asked before beginning this research. My key research question wished to discover if the concept of Thinness could be moved from place and experience to curation. To find this out I had to ask:

- What impact does the revival of archaic belief systems have on art practice and, as a consequence curatorial practice?

I argued and demonstrated that the revival of archaic belief systems have impacted on art and contemporary curatorial practice in a number of ways. Firstly, Thin art practices, informed by the notion of the archaic avant-garde form a visual, tangible relationship with place, experience, animism and spirituality. The artists I worked with all made their relationships with the west coast of Wales and the west coast of Ireland visible through their choice of materials. (e.g. clay, plant extracts, wood, bone etc.) Exhibited together, the dialogues they created made the places they drew inspiration from appear more porous.

Secondly, Thin curating amplifies Thin art practices by using soft / dimly lit, quiet gallery spaces, where works are displayed both in relation to each other and in relation to the archaic, mythological histories of the area in which the gallery is located.
situated. This turns the gallery space into an archipelago, where different time zones can be represented together, and where, the notion of the archaic avant-garde is produced through the act of making and curating, rather than through illustration. Thirdly, and finally, the use of a catalogue, which included essays from multiple viewpoints, both archaic and contemporary, also increases the porosity of this archipelago. Thus, artworks and texts that emerged from different disciplines can be seen in relation to each other, disrupting any form of linear meta-narrative. The inclusion of local and oral testimonies, historical narratives, subjective memories and personal experiences alongside more academic and objective arguments also extends this disruption.

The archaic avant-garde artworks I selected for ‘Thin Place’ therefore facilitated a discussion on our place and purpose within a particular landscape. The addition of the catalogue, education programme and symposium further questioned the systems by which some curatorial and academic standpoints are privileged over other alternative positions. It was not possible to solely read the works in the gallery, the essays in the catalogue or the presentations at the symposium in a singular way. This is because audience members, speakers at the symposium, children engaged in the writing workshops and the writers who contributed to the catalogue provided many different lenses through which the work could be interpreted.

- In what ways can an exhibition concerned with Thinness engender a greater porosity between disciplines?

Animism, pragmatism and ecosophical discourse provided me with a relevant theoretical framework, which, when applied to my methodology, engendered a greater porosity between disciplines and questioned reductive systems of representation. Using curatorial examples to argue my case, I suggested that environmental, social and emotional crises become more difficult to address if the places and identities in which they are situated are represented in a reductive way.
(Franke, 2012; Guattari, 2008; Jones, 2008; Wallis, 2005; Hughes, 2004; Bennett, 2001; Clifford, 1991).

While specialist academics and archaeologists tend to avoid entertaining notions that a Thin perspective might still be possible today (Waddell, 2013a; Nash, 2006; Wallis, 2005), my experiences throughout this project, and particularly during the children’s education programme I developed, suggested that animism augments the process of experiencing a location deeply. Often we don’t know a place until someone introduces us to it. The myriad ways in which I mediated representations of the west coast of Wales and the west coast of Ireland to audiences in my curatorial practice shifted perspectives on why these places need to be valued.

This “blurred boundaries” (Geertz, 1983) approach critiques the conventional meta-narratives derived from Enlightenment-based forms of thinking. It also questions the indisputable authority of scientific explanatory frameworks and detached scientific impartiality. I did not want, however, to make any grand claims about the superiority of an experiential approach over an objective scientific approach. I was more interested in their coinherence. I also wanted to provide an audience with an opportunity to negotiate and navigate these differences because ultimately this research was concerned with the impoverishment of subjective life, conjecture, spirituality, animism, archaic modes of thinking and of creativity.

Increasingly however, I have become aware that questioning the mechanisms of Enlightenment thinking is not so much the primary concern in this thesis. I am more concerned with the way in which they are mediated in a reductive way. For Science itself, according to the physicist David Bohm, sees the world as an “enfoldment and unfoldment”, (1985, p.4) but its mediation to the public is mechanistic and reductive. Bohm points out that mediation is designed to help us understand and perceive experiences intuitively, for when we interpret things intuitively, they ‘feel’ real. When a reductive reality is ‘felt’ as ‘real’ it is thus perceived to be ‘more real’ than the
polyverse of realities we encounter and experience when we are invited to wonder, to be enchanted, to become the autonomous self-in-relation. It is arguable that contemporary Western culture does indeed possess an ability to respond to certain places through the imagination and that these places, when re-enchanting the imagination, might help us to encounter an altered state of being or alertness. The difficulty lies in the way in which these ideas are mediated. This is why my mediation of the artists and contributors to this Thin Place research project was multidimensional. I knew that multi-constituency dialogues have a thriving - if sometimes precarious - cultural presence of their own. My intention was to ensure they were given a sense of critical solicitude, informed affirmation and, most significantly curatorial support in order to maintain themselves.

Admittedly, many of the participants I collaborated with, particularly those who came from more traditional academic and ‘rationalist’ disciplines (such as astrophysics and archaeology) were already challenging the boundaries of reductive thinking within their own fields. Nevertheless, their positive responses to the exhibition and enthusiastic involvement in the project as a whole meant that their experiences could be relayed to their fellow practitioners, who, in turn, might become more open to regarding Thinness as a positive way of stepping outside of the security of their known universe, to inhabit a polyverse, a thin place.

- How does this porosity alter perceptions of place, experience, art practice and education?

To answer this question I reflected on the origins of ‘Thin Place’, I recognised that it is very difficult not to romanticise and idealise ancient spiritual practices from the perspective of our current time. But perhaps this needn’t be a problem provided romanticism is presented as part of a larger narrative on Place. Then, the idealised and romantic stories that have evolved from a particular landscape can be combined
with current narratives and coinherently they can help to cultivate a deeper relationship to Place through story. For Place never exhausts itself of story, and story is the perfect vehicle with which to reach audiences beyond the art world. This is how wisdom was handed down in the past. If practised sensitively, the wisdom we pass on through story today can make a positive contribution to a community because it confronts the fallacy of the insider–outsider dichotomy with experiential encounters.

It might also be helpful to recall Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) research here. They define the subjective turn as a turn towards the autonomous self and away from being told what to be or how to live. They argue that we cannot be autonomous unless we have the internal space from which to act. Since the autonomous self cannot be a life-as self, it must be based on what we essentially are – our own unique subjective self – and not on external obligations.

This issue is, as Abram (2010) and Stengers (2012) point out, an issue of our time and it prevents the development of a meaningful relationship with the animate earth. Standing in a bookshop one day, Abram suddenly understood why:

No wonder! No wonder that our sophisticated civilizations, brimming with the accumulated knowledge of so many traditions, continue to flatten and dismember every part of the breathing earth … For we have written all of these wisdoms down on the page, effectively divorcing these many teachings from the living land that once held and embodied these teachings. Once inscribed on the page, all this wisdom seemed to have an exclusively human provenance. Illumination—once offered by the moon’s dance in and out of the clouds, or by the dazzle of the sunlight on the wind-rippled surface of mountain tarn—was now set down in an unchanging form. (Abram, 2010, p. 281)

Yet David Abram still uses language as his primary means to connect with the animate earth. I draw from this approach when I propose that the language of Place, most especially the experience of writing about artworks that respond to Place could become part of the recovery, part of the resistance towards what Stengers calls “the
“either/or” dismembering of experience.” (Stengers, 2012, pp.183-192) This was certainly the case in many of the contributions from the children on the education programme I devised. When describing Adam Buick’s work, Lowri Bowen, the award winning writer of the Children’s Writing Competition wrote “I could feel the breeze” making one feel that the artworks on show demand some kind of experiential response. Critic Rowan Lear endorsed this idea that Thin Place ‘animates’ the viewer when she ruminated on the fact that the ‘strange feeling’ she experienced when visiting the exhibition remained with her for a long time.

4.2 My original contribution to knowledge.

I have demonstrated that non-conventional, spiritually attuned, place-based curatorial practice can play a fundamental role in generating an alternative lived experience within a changing culture. This knowledge is predicated on the conclusion that the archaic spiritual belief in Thin places was particularly common along the western coasts of Ireland and Wales, with the consequence being that these regions have the potential, if re-invoked, to foster coinherence between multiple world-views. This might at first seem paradoxical. On one hand, I am claiming that a multiplicity of views and an animistic perception links all beings. On the other, in the context of this thesis, I have given primacy to a geographically specific place.

My original contribution to knowledge argues that Thinness fosters coinherence between disciplines and is a spiritual form of ecosophy. This is a new and socio-political contribution to curatorial practice and to interdisciplinary thinking as a whole. While the consumption of avant-garde ideas into mainstream culture is an inevitable part of the dialectical movement of art history, what amplifies it as a concern for me today is the sophisticated ways in which the ideals put forward by the archaic avant-garde can easily become usurped by institutions so as to become what the art critic Dave Hickey calls “spectator-food” and “scholar-fodder” (1997, p. 153).
This becomes particularly problematic when projects that address meaningful, radical and alternative approaches to reality, developed as pragmatic responses to ecological and political crises in a particular locale, are efficiently neutralised and subsumed into consumer culture. In social science, Heelas and Woodhead (2005, p. 147) use examples such as the Sainsbury’s ‘Be Good to Yourself’ range as an indicator of the ways in which the relational ideals of the holistic milieu are repackaged to maintain the status quo of individuated capitalism.\footnote{A more recent example has revealed how this subjective-life is now more vulnerable than ever to being repackaged into a multi-billion dollar industry for new digital commodities. Entrepreneurs and app designers at a 2014 conference in London titled ‘Hacking Happiness’ have consulted nutritionists, psychologists, sleep experts, mindfulness coaches, Buddhist monks and other “representatives of the contemplative industries” (Godwin, 2014) in order to develop data technologies that can be purchased by individuals to monitor ways in which they can “upgrade their existence”. Sebastian Nienaber, one of the entrepreneurs involved in developing the conference and the new technologies attributed the growth in the industry on developments in science which, he says, “have now started to provide evidence for the benefit of things once considered to be quite hippy or new age-y – such as the efficacy of meditation” (Godwin, 2014).}

In light of this, how can Thin curatorial practice produce meaningful ways of inviting human beings to see that they are not the only beneficiaries of the world, that they are intrinsically connected to place and that the destruction of place will also lead to their disfigurement and demise?

- I have demonstrated that Thin curating makes these overlooked presences visible through experiential encounters, and in so doing it uncovers sacred and mythical narratives, rituals and rites of passage, scientific, archaeological and artistic responses \textit{particular to} the locations in local communities.
- I have argued that the revival of an animistic world-view within a community can help to dissolve the frameworks and boundaries that divide us from the ancestral world and from each other.

I could not have reached these conclusions were it not for my multi-sited approach. I wanted to engender conscious alterations, which might dismantle the fixed nature of
identity as prescribed by certain fields of knowledge. The conclusions I reached on this project are by no means comprehensive, and there is still much scope for further investigation and discussion on the effects that this curatorial approach might have on communities in other parts of the world.

Woolf’s literature was an enduring inspiration throughout this period of research as it helped me to develop my awareness of the concept of multiple selves and place as a multifaceted entity capable of its own subjectivity and agency. Woolf’s perception of the world in her books is often overwhelming and intense. Her use of multiple selves offered her the ability to cope with the tumult of seeing from a wide-angled vantage point. She referred to her many selves as her “six little pocket knives” (Woolf and Woolf, 1942, p. 34) These ‘knives’ allowed her to empathise with and see from a perspective beyond her human form:

I remember lying on the side of a hollow, waiting for L[eonard] to come & mushroom, & seeing a red hare loping up the side & thinking suddenly ‘This is Earth Life.’ I seemed to see how earthy it all was, & I myself an evolved kind of hare; as if a moon-visitor saw me. (Woolf cited in Lee, 1997, p. 379)

The Thin Place curatorial model I developed re-attached value to this ‘Earth Life.’ It’s transparency and porosity gave agency to the “global breath” (Guattari, 2012, p. 49), to the authority of the first-hand experience, to the subjectivity of all living entities and, ultimately, to hope.
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31/3/2015
Appendix A: Sample of Questionnaire presented to curators in West Wales and the West of Ireland, February 2014
Survey of Curatorial Approaches in publically funded contemporary art galleries in West Wales and the West of Ireland. You are being invited to take part in a research study for my PhD. Please take the time to read the confidentiality information at the end of this questionnaire. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Name:

Please tick which institution you work(ed) for:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>West Cork Arts Centre</th>
<th>Oriel Myrddin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Custom House Studios and Gallery</td>
<td>Mission Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galway Arts Centre</td>
<td>Aberystwyth Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo</td>
<td>Oriel Mostyn</td>
</tr>
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Do you curate exhibitions independently of this institution:

| Yes | No |

Please put an x beside terms applicable to your curatorial approach (please tick as many as you wish):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Subjective</td>
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<td>Transcendental</td>
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<td>-----------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please add any other terms you think might be applicable to your curatorial approach:
Please identify and describe an exhibition you curated that you feel to be most representative of your curatorial approach. *(Please feel free to provide hyperlinks or information on catalogues etc).*

Did you curate this exhibition independently or did you curate it for the institution you work[ed] for?

How was this exhibition received by the general public and in critical reviews? *(Please feel free to provide hyperlinks or information on where reviews were published).*

Have you ever been involved with an exhibition where you felt your curatorial approach was compromised? Please give details. *(All answers will be treated as confidential. Please see confidentiality details below).*

How was this exhibition received by the general public and in critical reviews? *(Please feel free to provide hyperlinks or information on where reviews were published).*

Can you give of an example of a curatorial approach that you admire? Please give details.
Are there any particular theorists, philosophers or writers that have influenced your curatorial approach?

Please describe an exhibition that inspired you to think about becoming a curator.

What impact has working in West Wales / West of Ireland had (if any) on your curatorial approach?
Appendix B: Complete correspondence between Ciara Healy and Mary Modeen
Dear Mary,

I have been reflecting on the similarities and differences between our Thick and Thin places. This layered Thick Place - your home - that you so beautifully describe through Thick description is only possible to perceive, I find, if one’s perception is Thinned. Reading your letter made me think about Geertz’ notion of Thick Description, which was a way of capturing the accumulation of structures that the anthropologist encounters in the field. I felt your home became increasingly present through your Thick Descriptions. As you wove your words through twisted willows, out to the edge of your garden, beyond to the river, to the fish at the mouth of the ocean, your Thick Description conveyed, to me, the experience of seeing ‘Thinly’ - Thinness being the great transparency through which we see everything simultaneously. I feel that your Thick Description leads to a Thin Perception.

However, the individual layers that make a Thick Place often run the risk of being perceived as unrelated to the other layers they push up against. As a result, Place can become rendered into a reductive framework, objectified, separated and re-ordered into a hierarchy. I have just finished reading Ammonites and Leaping Fish by Penelope Lively, and savoured the vivid Thick layers that made up her childhood experiences. She describes sitting, age 7, in animistic communion with the world in her back garden in Egypt. The plants, birds, eucalyptus tree, bright cloudless sky and the call to prayer in the distance all constitute a Thick Place, in the way you have used the term. But it was the moment of awareness that each layer was part of an interconnected constellation, each layer related to her and to everything else that led her, I felt, on her shady veranda, to understand the suspended whole of Thinness for first time.

Ciara.
Dear Ciara-

Apologies for the delayed response to your wonderful letter. I have been mulling this over for all this time.

Reading widely about Thin Places, I have often felt discouraged by the attempt to define these within a Christian framework of the ‘veil between heaven and earth’ (Mark Roberts), or the ‘geographical location where heaven and earth are close to each other’ (Brorson and Clayton). The narrowness of the concept, the diction and the proselytizing choke me, and I hope to run as quickly as possible from a single point of view.

In your last letter you also wrote:

‘… the individual layers that make a Thick Place often run the risk of being perceived as unrelated to the other layers they push up against. As a result, Place can become rendered into a reductive framework, objectified, separated and reordered into a hierarchy.’

Well, this is what has triggered for me a set of musings about the nature of ‘layers’, which we artists easily adapt as the verbal equivalent of those things that we can see and say, and about which I will say more later – precisely on this aspect of multiplicity, which stands in stark contrast to the attitude described in the first paragraph here. Multiplicity of perceptions of any given place is the result of what you called my ‘Thick Description’ of a Thin Place. (Which makes me laugh.) This inclination of mine toward Thick Descriptions is the insistence that there are many visions inherent in the moment, the ‘layers’ of perception, memory, intuition, emotive states and apperception of the numinous, though in ways that we cannot begin to specify. You speculate that my Thick description of this process may lead to a ‘Thin Perception.’ Maybe the question, more aptly put, is ‘how can anyone think that they are seeing anything as a single moment, a single glance, or a ‘true’ visual phenomenon? Since the complexity of the experience itself leads one to understand that each experience is complexly interwoven, always in fact Thin as Perceptions. Against the backdrop of this complexity, you rightly introduce this idea of hierarchy.

How do the many aspects of Thick Places, described carefully, end up being reduced, objectified and (re-)ordered? Is it inherent in the attempt an artist might make, for example, to indicate the nature of polyvalent perception through the iterative process of layering? Or is the
reductive, and ultimately, failing insistence on any hierarchy, a culturally influenced pressure to describe and represent constitutive qualities in a Place-specific phenomenon? It would seem to counter the artistic impulse itself, would it not, to deny the ability to include the numinous within the phenomenal, to preserve the non-visual and enigmatic within the visual, as the artist desires? Is the artist doomed to Thickness by the very fact of attempting the layers of perception? I think not: the enigma of the work of art is the material manifestation of the complex vision re-embedded in matter and re-integrated in the condensation of signifying layers.

Which brings me to another question: are we to understand the term ‘Thick’ as ultimately equated with the non-integrated, simply detailed and unconsidered amalgamation of elements? Geertz used ‘Thick’ as a favoured ethnographic methodological imperative, because for him it included an interpretive mandate. And for him as well, Thinness was less satisfactory because there were only factual accounts involved, and a lack of hermeneutic interpretation. Artists and ethnographers have arguably differing intentions, so perhaps the Thinness that is less useful for ethnographers has more to offer artists and poets?

What I would like to pursue is the notion of ‘layers’, of Place, and of agency in the next letters.

Mary
Dear Mary

In my last letter I talked about Thick Places and alluded to what I felt a Thin Place might be. Thin Places are Thick with layers, they seep into one another, they are equally present, each containing the other. The scientist and philosopher Roger Corless described this perspective as coinherence, and used the analogy of Jesus in the Johannine tradition: as being in the Father, the Father in him, he in his disciples, and his disciples in him. He argued that we are all more than capable of inhabiting more than one world-view simultaneously. I wonder if our Thick and Thin Places could be mutually understood like this?

A Thin Place in history was always seen as an anomaly. These anomalous breaks in the homogeneity of space - cliffs, caves, springs, waterfalls- signified boundaries or gateways between this world and other worlds. The remains of ritual activity around these places found in the archaeological record re-enforce this understanding. While Thin Places in pre-history were specific sites, where the dead were buried, I think Thin Places today appear when the polyverse of worlds we co-inhabit, simultaneously become present to our minds eye. It is love, I think, that motivates our search for Thinness; just as love can open the doors into everything, including what the poet May Sarton once described as “the doors into one’s own secret, and often terrible and frightening, real self.” This real self, which the Sufis call the Perfection of the Absolute comes from the very ancient mystical need to experience existence within one dynamic whole; that of a collective consciousness. I believe Thinness makes the sorrow for that lost real self visible and tangible. It asks us to be accountable for it’s demise. Yet it is also an invitation for re-discovery, to create a consequence that could be otherwise. It was our need to continue loving that once pulled us to Thin Places, where we could convene with our dead ancestors. I suspect they are still in need of our memory today. Perhaps now more than ever - for it is our memory of their wisdom, that will keep them, and us, alive.

Ciara
Dear Ciara-

Yes, here are finding how our terms Thick and Thin have slid and slipped as slithery creatures do. ‘Thick and Thin Places inhabiting more than one worldview simultaneously’, you say?—Yes, absolutely I would agree with that, and reference the multiplicity of my last observations.

I wanted to mention Place more prominently in this letter because I saw in retrospect that most of my last was concerned with the nature of perception. We know the power of place to capture our imaginations, or indeed, sometimes it feels, the very core of our being. ‘Anomalies’, you call these places-portals, sacred in the old-fashioned meaning of that term and related to the hierophanies of Eliade, meeting places for the polyverse of worlds we co-inhabit. In fact, the occasional sorrow for the real self that you mention has a fitting parallel with Eliade’s states of melancholy, for the lost moments of epiphany that he experienced as a ‘golden green light’ when he was young. Is it the Place itself, entirely apart from any human presence or interpretation, past or present, that exists a priori to any epiphany it may inspire?

Is the Thin Place an anomaly because humans perceive it to be so? How complexly we humans interact with our Mother Earth!

I would agree that the real self comes from the need to experience existence within one dynamic whole: that of the collective consciousness.’ Consciousness is the key to the wholeness of the experience: awareness and heightened sentience. The holistic quality is attributable to the integration of the experience as intrinsically sited—that is, that the Place, the environment, is wherein the wholeness of awareness, well, ‘takes place’. Language betrays the centrality of our experiences as sited. It is our desire—and yes, our love!- that pulls us to the longing for a (re-)united marriage of self with Place, happily reconciled to the vibrant interactions and barrier-less interrelationships between the anomalous places on Earth and ourselves.

And it is the difference of each and every experience with this re-discovered interwoven deep resonance that makes Thin Places the portals to the Otherness of perception in its complexity of inward-facing and outward-facing layers. The desire of artists and poets to represent the layers—as I was saying in the last correspondence—this longing to represent sited
knowledge, arises in the same way that storytellers wish when they tell a well-known story over and over again, new with each telling. The storytellers, the artists, the people who reconnect with deep knowledge in Thin Places—each finds a way to connect the real experience with the timeless repetition of living on the Earth.

Mary
Dear Mary,

In my last letter I spoke a little bit about Wisdom and Ancestors. I have been thinking more about the way in which our perception of Place is passed on and understood. It seems to me that our biggest challenge, and perhaps even ultimate responsibility as humans today, is to be vigilant, to the best of our capabilities, at deciphering the difference between innate intuition from that which has been mediated. Or, at the very least, to cross-reference various intuitive feelings against each other in order to avoid becoming slave to a particular mechanism of thought. I think a lot of what we are both trying to address in our work is connected to the consequences of mediation, in particular the ways in which reductive thinking is mediated as the sole ‘reality’ of the experience of living. We have both tried to make a polyverse visible and literate in our work -and yet the dominant paradigm we seem to be continuously presented with is that Place is a one dimensional resource, as mechanistic.

So what I have become increasingly interested in is not mechanism per se, but the way it is mediated, or the way those who mediate it perceive mechanism in a reductive way. Science itself, according to David Bohm, sees the world as an “enfoldment and unfoldment”, but it has been mediated to the public as mechanistic and this means we understand mechanism to be intuitive. Mediation is designed to help us understand and perceive experiences intuitively, for when we interpret things intuitively, they ‘feel’ real.

When a reductive reality is ‘felt’ as ‘real’ it is thus perceived to be ‘more real’ than the polyverse of realities we encounter with our bodily (and spiritual) senses. Mechanism is not embedded in all aspects of life and is a core component of patriarchy. When it is mediated to us as ‘reality’ so many problems arise! However, even though I find mediation to be problematic, if used subversively, it can contort, confound and creatively unpick the narrative that tries to separate us from our bodily selves. Perhaps this is where our art practices can make a difference?

Ciara
Dear Ciara-

Your third letter has me reflecting on the nature of mediation. But first, I have suspicion that you may be as irked as me when you hear someone claim, usually in a rather superior tone, that one must 'live in the real world.' Of course, what they almost always mean by that, is that one must live in a world which is exactly in correlation to the world as known and understood by the speaker, the 'real' world.

The reason this rankles so, is that, like you, I object to the claim of authority for any reality, especially for a singular reality, for an appeal to the listener to supposedly be shamed into a compliance for any imagined codes of behaviour based on the speaker's terms, and finally, for an insistence on an unmediated, unchanging, static absolute version of 'real'.

What is missing in this exchange, besides the obvious lack of humility, is the speaker's benighted refusal to contemplate polyverses, simultaneous multi-verses, or a world in which any claim to 'reality' is as slippery as trying to catch the wind.

The 'real' world of the speaker is imagined to be static, lived by rules (apparently), and—given the shaming tone—is probably hard and unforgiving (no accident that these same descriptors might be applied to the speaker as well!).

What is also missing is the mediation of which you speak: the sense that not only is the world many realities—and these are shifting with types of experiences and those who do the experiencing—but that there are ways in which attitudes, sensitivities, and predisposed expectations have the capacity to shift the reception of experiences. In short, to mediate.

There is also the possibility, to which I think we both adhere, that there are spaces in which the power of the creative imagination is a powerful tool of mediation.

Through thought experiments, through our 'visible and literate …work', as you put it, '…the dominant paradigm we seem to be continuously presented with is that Place is' a multi-dimensional 'resource we are able to occupy' through the insertion of ourselves into the spaces in-between.

And by that, I mean the spaces between solid forms and solid opinions, between expectations of one sort or another, and even between atoms of matter, 'producing space' as LeFebvre has it, producing the room for our intelligence to inhabit as intrinsic to the Place itself; knowing
through being; knowing through being a part of; knowing by being a part of nothingness; knowing by being the mediation between our consciousness and that of all potential energies. And perhaps thereby, to make a difference.

Mary
Dear Mary

Thank you for your letter. This last letter to you is a reflection in many ways on all we have spoken about over the past few years in our correspondence to each other. It is also an attempt to articulate how our thoughts propose something hopeful, something - if nurtured - that can bud and grow in new and vibrant ways.

The Enclosures sealed off and privatized John Clare’s beloved fields and woods, they were and continue to be the exponents of Ferberization - the system of childcare that keeps a child separate from the warm and mysterious messages of a parent’s body, and, by proxy, from the secret and animate whisperings of the earth.

Yes, the claim that the ‘real world’ is somehow more superior to any other worlds is one of the on-going issues that we both contest and challenge in our work and in our thinking. This ‘real world’, as a singular, reductive entity is the world imagined and made manifest by what Jay Griffiths in her book Kith so eloquently called the ‘Enclosures’.

The Enclosures facilitate the dumb sameness of consumerism and most of all they maintain a fear of all kinds of border and threshold crossers, particularly artists like you and I.

But I don’t want to continue identifying all the fences, checkpoints and locked doors that the Enclosures have established in our day-to-day lives, dividing, sorting and representing the world in fixed categories and certainties. To me, they are simply the products of the Enlightenment. A belief system which was, what Owain Jones called “a vast body with great diversity and momentum” whose current destruction involves the “breaking of many things, over large tracts of thought, space and time”. Relying on just simply revealing this destruction, particularly the impact it has had on the environment, only further perpetuates inertia and a sense of pointlessness and hopelessness at the idea that change might be possible.

For me, challenging these conceptions requires a certain degree of pragmatism, because pragmatism makes interventions into the world rather than solely revealing it in its current fairly miserable state. As a curator, educator and writer, I have found over the years that by making interventions into that destruction, I have managed to salvage something from the wreckage of Enlightenment-based thinking and as a result I have been able to work with communities to re-construct new and embodied forms of being.
My Thin curatorial research was one attempt to configure this. By including the work of some wonderful artists whose practices addressed liminality, Otherworlds, And Place as well as developing and facilitating workshops, curatorial talks and a symposium involving many people from diverse disciplines, such as yourself, I demonstrated that it was possible to find multiple ways of having a critically reflective dialogue on how we might engage more effectively with this troubled world.

The workshops I developed for children in particular helped to facilitate that. Reading them stories of Otherworlds, inviting them to take a moment to dream and imagine, to interpret the exhibition through many different lenses To engage with it physically and to allow it to open up new doorways in their thought processes, offered them an opportunity to recognise that their conjectures of Place were just as valid as the narratives of the ‘real world’ as told to them by the Enclosures. I invited children to enter a writing competition to describe how the exhibition affected them and their relationship to Place. Those that wrote some of the most engaging and considered entries received a prize of a magical medieval writing kit in the hope that they might continue to use creative writing and image making as a means to cross thresholds and feel part of other worlds. Recently I have been working with an artist called Serena Korda, who was involved in the Thin Place exhibition I curated in Wales earlier this year. Her latest project, titled Black Diamond, was an exploration of the sonic, poetic and mythological power of the river Cleddau in West Wales.

Transformed into a dance track, the music on the CD she produced at the end of the project came from recordings by people of Haverfordwest and surrounding communities in conversations, workshops, open lectures, encounters and musical recordings in ‘sweet spots’ – which are those places along the river that have a divine acoustic for performing. The inspiration for the project initially evolved out of a series of conversations between Serena Korda and I, which circled around the layers of histories that had formed the landscape and communities in west Wales. And at times, I felt that the environment itself longed to feel the reverberations of a drum, the memory of which still lingered perhaps from the anti-capitalist ideals that formed part of the ‘Reclaim the Streets Movement’ in the 1990s, when sound systems set up in fields and disused barns across Wales were used for free parties.
Or perhaps this topographical longing I was convinced I could feel emanating from the rolling hills and narrow lanes was much more ancient than that. Perhaps it was a pulse from the traces of those people, plants and animals who had gone before.

For me, the landscape's need to have this music performed, confirmed the presence of something neglected in the Western psyche, something that the politics inherent in the culture of British dance music from the 1990s fleetingly captured in its strange spiritual potency: that certain places in the west still hold a powerful, even sacred presence.

This means that the cosy hubris of rural life as presented to us in episodes of the Archers or Countryfile can be transformed into something much more vibrant and radical. It calls us back into the half forgotten realms of the underworld, where the instances of the world we are told to believe in and the instances of the world as we intuit it might be, overlap.

The origins of the repression, destruction and consequent loss of this permeable, animate world in the Western psyche is best exemplified in the testimony of Isobel Gowdie, a Scottish peasant from the village of Lochloy, who was accused of witchcraft in the 1660s. She was subjected to a cruel ‘inquisition’, and burned at the stake when forced to confess her alleged dealings with Satan. Her testimony reveals the magical and mystical powers which impacted on the physical and emotional geography of both herself and her peasant neighbours. At times, her embodied experience of Place was frightening, complex and uncertain, yet always animate. She was, like so many others, one of the hapless victims of the most violent aspects of the Reformation in Europe. This was when witchcraft was seen in even the smallest and most harmless signs of piety, in the rituals of many indigenous peoples, in the invocation of saints, and in the traditional gestures of conciliation with nature spirits and fairies.

What we do in our work Mary, and in our conversations and reflections, in many ways is an attempt to re-dress the abandoned sacred wells, fields, laneways and harvests so beloved of Clare. By adding metaphorical ribbons and posies, we invoke the natural rhythms that sustained the world-view of Isobel Gowdie and all of those like her who inhabited the animistic world. In sharing our knowledge of poetry, folksong, art and even the Saturnine sounds of early British dance music we temper, albeit in a small way, the great unlearning of the Enclosures.
We do this when we collectively extract and excavate these traces of Otherworlds, when we propose a challenge to the monotheism and reductivism of ‘the real world’.

Most importantly, when we salvage the interdependencies inherent in animistic thinking and weave them back into new creative projects and conversations, we suggest to the Enclosures that it is modernity, not animism, which will soon become a ghost.

Ciara
Dear Ciara,

In our hybrid practices dedicated to Green Knowledge and promoting polyvalent understandings, we are occasionally at a loss to know how to begin describing our work to others. ‘Resistors of Reductionism’ seems a possibility, though it rings unfortunately with a tone of caped crusaders. With a nod to your reference to Isobel Gowdie, ‘witches’ might have been our name in another era.

We ‘trace the Otherworlds’ as you say, and evoke the rhythms of natural forces, promoting the understanding of interdependencies and, as Henri LeFevre said, ‘producing space’ wherein interconnections abound. We are also crafters of metaphors that help us mediate the embodied world as we encounter it. All of this has made it impossible for us to see the world as ‘simple fact’. Barbara Hurd revels in the inter-connected surprises of the phenomenal world in her love of bogs and mud. She wrote: ‘I found a mass of frogspawn in a small pool and tried to lift it out of the water with a stick. Picture a limp honeycomb, its amber-gold drained to transparency, draped over a stick. Or picture the stars of a galaxy, the Milky Way, for example, in a glop of silver-white gel, swaying two feet over the pond. If babies in utero can hear music, sense their mothers in rocking chairs, what did those tadpoles feel, their embryonic eyes locked in gel, their prenatal world lifted into the bright blue sky, the wide sweep of reed-studded, cotton-tufted swamp spread and glistening below them? And what vision disappeared when I, guilty, lowered them back into the ravel of stem, water, and mud? Here’s Blake damning Newton and his mechanistic view of the world: “his eternal life/Like a dream, was obliterated.” Which landscape was a dream? Which is our home? The silky, soft mud of our origins, the finespun linings of its womb coating our skin, our eyes? Or the sudden gasp of blue space, the spiritual world, as Blake says, materialising all around us?’ (Hurd, 2008:18-19) Hurd, Barbara (2008), Stirring the Mud: On Swamps, Bogs and Human Imagination. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. Sublime. Hurd’s rage against mechanistic worldviews, by way of Blake, is a point well made here: Blake is prime Crafter of Metaphors, a visionary, whose inspired works have enabled all of us to see differently, to see complexly in the link and spaces of the physical and metaphysical worlds these past two
hundred years... 'in the sudden gasp of blue space.' Blake wrote: “The imagination is not a State: it is the Human existence itself.” We end where we began this exchange—in the liminal spaces and transitional portal between spaces, residing in the in-between-ness as a space productive of more considered, and more nuanced multiple, perceptions. Your last letter mentioned ‘that certain places in the west still hold a powerful, even sacred presence.’ Yes, I would agree, and believe that this is as it has always been. It is not just that the wells, natural springs, cave entrances, laneways, sea arches or golden harvest moons beckon our kinship and desires to join the Other, or serve as entrances to this world of connections, overlays and potentials, to enter the spaces of enigmatic possibilities and unseen energies. It is the receptor, the eye of the beholder—us, in short, who have the sensors to receive the colours without names, the quartertones and glissandi between the more ordinarily detectable sounds. It is our willingness to pay close attention, to apply our imaginations honed to a fine edge, to find and make the spaces for this reflective way of deep knowing, of inhabiting this ‘green knowledge’.

Mary
Appendix C. Sample questionnaire on ‘Thin Place’ exhibition and events at Oriel Myrddin
Survey of Responses to ‘Thin Place’ Exhibition and Events.

You are being invited to take part in a research study for my PhD. If you have any queries regarding confidentiality please do not hesitate to contact me.

Please tick which aspects of ‘Thin Place’ at Oriel Myrddin you engaged with:

<table>
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<th>Thin Place Exhibition</th>
<th>Thin Place Catalogue</th>
<th>Thin Place Symposium</th>
<th>Thin Place Lunchtime Talks</th>
<th>Thin Place Education Programme</th>
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Please mark which words relate to your experience of the exhibition and events:

*(You can mark as many words as you like)*

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<th>Artist-led</th>
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<td>Connecting</td>
<td>Daring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecological</td>
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<td>Hopeful</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Multi-layered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscillating</td>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site-specific</td>
<td>Socially engaged</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Transcendental</td>
<td>Unsettling</td>
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Please feel free to include any other words of your own:
Please mark a statement which resonates with you as a result of the event(s) you attended. *(You can mark as many statements as you like)*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Statement</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Thin Place made me more aware of connections between different disciplines.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin Place increased my self-awareness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin Place altered my perception of my local environment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin Place made me more aware of ancient world-views, and the importance of engaging with those views today.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin Place provided me with a sense of hope.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Thin Place helped me to see the world in a more relationally.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin Place improved my literacy and critical awareness.</td>
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</tbody>
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Please feel free to add any other comments on your experience of the exhibition and events. *(Please feel free to continue overleaf)*
Local schools often work with Oriel Myrddin because...

Teachers use gallery visits for a number of reasons. Our education programme stems from the content of the current exhibition so teachers tend to plan visits to an exhibition which explores a theme or medium relevant to the curriculum subject they are working on e.g. During Thin Place School C visited with their year 2 group who were studying the environment and sustainability. Several of the pieces spoke powerfully about human impact on the environment, from Ailbhe Ni Briein's abandoned spaces to the fossil fuel warning in Jonathan Anderson's 'Pylon Totems'.

Sometimes schools are looking to expand their experience in a particular area or medium in visual art e.g. 3D making, drawing or print. The cross curricular nature of artists' practice makes visual art a great starting point for teachers to launch new projects or introduce a new idea to their learners. A gallery visit involves group discussion and analysis of what they see, and drawing and writing to record their experiences, promoting higher order thinking as well as individual expression through verbal and visual language.

The schools engaged to take part in the Thin Place Education Project were especially interested because of the emphasis on creative and critical writing.

The Thin Place educational programme was particularly relevant to local teachers because....

The exhibition could be explored as part ‘Cwricwlwm Cymreig’, Welsh curriculum which promotes Welsh culture and heritage. The exhibition provided an opportunity to look at the work of contemporary Welsh artists working locally and whose work relates to the landscape (Place). Also the stories, mythology and magical literature connected to the notion of 'Thin Place’, e.g. Mabinogion and relation to Irish stories.

The use of magical imagery in children's literature, and storytelling in the workshops as well as the critical writing competition was ideal for engaging schools who are currently focused on improving literacy. Further to this what I saw was an inspiring use of writing which may have sparked the children’s imagination and made critical writing a more engaging activity, a live project writing in direct response to a first-hand experience of the exhibition. The teacher at
School A mentioned that while writing skills are firmly embedded in their curriculum the school day lacks opportunity or freedom to write creatively and imaginatively.

*Do you have any responses from teachers about the interpretive pack I prepared?*

I didn't I'm afraid get much response on this. The schools who visited came with their own themes and I used the pack and the initial guide you gave me (education hooks in each work) to tailor sessions to these groups.

*Do you have any feedback statements from any of the teachers in general to the Thin Place project as a whole?*

I tend to get the quite general quotes as below:

"Thank you Seren it's been a wonderful experience for the children, they really enjoyed it! Looking forward to the next art project! Thanks again, Karen."

However, anecdotally the teacher said to me that while his group (visited about 4 times per year) have loved their previous visits and workshop sessions this project had sparked the children’s imaginations and kept their interest more deeply. They got more 'into' it. And he believed this was due to the writing.

*Do you have any comments to make about working on the Thin Place project yourself?*

- Thin Place exhibition emphasised to me the very cross-curricular nature of artistic practise and how *everything* is an artist's business. It had many different entry points or themes through which to view the work.

- Element of competition is something we don’t often get involved with, but for children this was a motivating factor, visible in the enthusiasm of their written entries. But what was touching was the visible sense of pride form the three winners and two runners-up whom I feel will have been inspired to persevere with their writing. The fact that someone can ‘win’ through writing may also be a motivating factor for all the group,
recognising the value of these skills. There was clearly enjoyment of the writing process among all entries.

- I felt that there was something courageous and ‘about time’, in all of the artists’ work in broaching and exposing subjects of personal spirituality and relationship to place.

Would you like to say a few words about your experience working with me on Thin Place?

I found you Ciara inspiring to work with, finding a good pitch to work with children, introducing the complex themes of the exhibition from a perspective a child could find accessible e.g. the portal in the Lusmore story, the journey in the sleeping man story. It also is rare to be given such a thorough guide to the educational hooks for each artist and piece in the exhibition. The talks, essays and additional reading provided many entry points for the exhibition. It felt like a collaboration in the gallery where we were working together to allow the children to lead the tour around the gallery and hopefully to allow them to interpret the artwork. The way Ciara brought storytelling into the classroom was great. It is rare to have the opportunity for quietly listening to a story and I observed the children becoming relaxed and focused and engaged in the stories. I think they themselves were surprised to be talking about magical things.

The word games were well pitched. Although the words and context of the words stretched beyond the children’s vocabulary, the word game, I feel, made a safe space to learn new and difficult words. The introduction of competition was effective and created a sense of excitement and even magic when they got their special prizes.

What would you like to add / develop for the future?

I can already see how critical and creative writing can be embedded meaningfully (not as a literacy add on) into gallery visits. E.g in the current exhibition (‘The Pram in the Hall’, Angharad Pearce Jones, March 2015) during a year 5 and 6 school visit we came up with sentences in response to the exhibition then wrote down our sentences with a view to encouraging someone to the the exhibition. They wrote things like “I feel like the pram is going to roll over me” and “the toys are surviving on an alien planet”. I did not previously bring this kind of creative writing into school visits. I think a longer term writing project would be
good. Having sparked initial inspiration, children could develop their confidence and style with more prolonged workshop leaders input and exposure to gallery exhibition programme.