Christine Borland Oration

Chancellor, by authority of Senate I present to you this person on whom the Senate desires you to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters:

Christine Margaret Borland

As I am sure you will all know, Christine is one of the most successful graduates of The Glasgow School of Art. Christine has been nominated to receive an Honorary Doctorate today from The Glasgow School of Art and the University of Glasgow for her meritorious artistic practice and her services in support of creativity and enhancement of the arts in Glasgow and beyond.

Christine was born in Darvel, Ayrshire, Scotland and currently lives with her husband, Ross Sinclair, and their family in Kilcreggan outside of Glasgow. Christine studied at The Glasgow School of Art on the newly established Environmental Art Department course, before going on to complete an MFA, Master of Fine Art degree at the University of Ulster.

In the early 1990’s Christine spent a formative period as a Committee member at Transmission Gallery, the longest-standing artists-run space in Glasgow. Along with her peers on the committee, she established important links between the city and artists and organisations across the country and internationally, including exchanges to Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland, London and exhibitions by international artists mixed with those from the burgeoning Glasgow scene. Notable amongst these was a visit by the senior American Conceptual artist, Laurence Weiner, who remembers that the Transmission Committee was to discuss "how art could be integrated into society and yet 'remain art'."

Christine and many of her peers from the Environmental Art Department, became renowned for work which was socially engaged and often embraced public participation or collaborative methods. In 1993 Christine was selected by Matthew Slotover, the editor of Frieze Magazine, for the UK’s exhibition in the ‘Aperto’ section of the Venice Biennial where she exhibited alongside Damien Hirst. In 2004 Christine’s career-defining exhibition "From Life' was shown at Tramway. In 1997 Christine was nominated for the Turner Prize and I would like to quote Virginia Button, from ‘20 years of the Turner Prize’ where she describes some of the ideas and processes employed by Christine:

'The work, From Life, 1994, was based on a skeleton acquired by the artist through a medical mail order service. With the help of several academic institutions Borland was able to discover basic biographical information about the person (female)
originally incorporating the skeleton, and to have her face reconstructed in clay. From Life expresses Borland’s desire to bring out the personal aspects of a body which become hidden in hospital and forensic operations and Borland states: ‘I think the ways that we are forced to be institutionalised or compartmentalised by the institutions surrounding the body – health, medicine, birth and death – is an important subject and one which we must try to repersonalise’

It is important to consider the interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary focus of Christine’s research and artistic practice. Exploring medical, forensic and scientific collaborations and/or connections, she is able to unearth new and vital methods for approaching the making of art, it is in these terms that Christine’s work is so important in the contemporary context of the art world; in fact she has been a leader in the formation of interdisciplinary approaches (with particular reference to medical sciences) to art making within which new and often normally unobtainable information can be uncovered and displayed to the public in different forms and importantly different contexts. Christine does not merely expose her findings within the gallery but creates deeply poetic works that reinvest clinical data with a human dimension, introducing aesthetics and ambiguity to arenas, which are often dominated and restricted by function and objectivity.

Throughout the 1990’s Christine taught in the Sculpture Department at Glasgow School of Art and continued to be a Research Fellow from 2000 to 2011 when she took the post of BALTIC Professor. With colleagues from BALTIC Centre for Contemporary art in Newcastle and the Department of Arts at Northumbria University, she has initiated collaborative dialogue between the research and practice of the two institutions. These have resulted in a series of public events, exhibition and symposia with an interdisciplinary focus, often exploring the way artists negotiate with experts in the fields of science, the environment, health and medicine to generate new ideas, research and artworks.

Reflecting this interdisciplinary collaborative approach and a desire to tackle the most challenging of subjects, Christine’s most recent and on-going work is a collaborative project, Circles of Focus, with the artist Brody Condon. By developing cross-disciplinary relationships and sharing their evolving research they interrogate societal, artistic and ethical attitudes to death and the preservation of the body, exploring the potential of body donation for artistic as well as scientific research.

Throughout her career, Christine has exhibited internationally in venues as prestigious as Manifesta, the Lyon Biennial, the Munster Sculpture Project, the Tate Gallery (London and Liverpool), the Lisson Gallery (UK), the Institute of Contemporary Art (UK), The Wellcome Collection (London) the Andy Warhol Museum (USA), the Jewish Museum (USA, Charlottenborg Museum (Denmark), Sean
Kelly Gallery (USA), the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (UK), the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Ireland), the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston (USA) Museum für Gegenwartskunst (Zürich) and the Centre for Contemporary Art (Australia), with work in the permanent collections of many of these institutions.

Christine has also undertaken notable permanent sculpture commissions, which include a permanently cited sculpture within the grounds of Glasgow University, titled; ‘To be set and sown in the garden’ and another recent commission for the newly restored Whitworth Gallery in Manchester and permanently installed in Whitworth Park. She has very recently stepped down from the post of BALTIC Professor in order to undertake a prestigious Art Fund & 14 - 18 NOW, WW1 Centenary Art Commission, involving a long research period in the collections at Glasgow Museums, leading to a permanent piece installed in Kelvingrove Museum, to be unveiled in 2018.

Christine’s research is world leading in terms of its originality, cross-disciplinarity and mode of presentation, it is also highly collaborative and public facing, bringing complex issues to the fore and public attention.

Although Christine’s work has taken her across the world, I know that Glasgow is extremely dear to her heart and it is an honour to be able to award on behalf of The Glasgow School of Art and the University of Glasgow, Christine Borland with an Honorary Doctoral Degree.

Chancellor, I invite you to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters on Christine Borland.