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THE "TROUBLE" WITH ART WITHIN A

NORTHERN IRISH CONTEXT

POLITICAL ART OR PROPAGANDA?

BY

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1941-1942

1943-1944

1945-1946

1947-1948

1949-1950

1951-1952

1953-1954

1955-1956

1957-1958

1959-1960

1961-1962

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INTRODUCTION

Political art coming out of Northern Ireland can be examined in relation to its interaction with the society which is its source, and also societies which are alien to it. It is interesting to note how it is approached differently by different artists and how it is received by different audiences. I hope to uncover some of the aims and objectives of Northern Irish political art and some of its reason for being.

I am particularly interested in this subject because not only am I a producer of visual art, but I am also from the North of Ireland. Although I am divorced to a certain degree from the realities of day to day life in the North, the extremities of life in a war torn country, are even more visible, I believe, when seen with a less subjective eye.

With this understanding of the situation, I have found myself compelled to reach for an understanding of the difficulties artists are faced with when trying to confront their lives and circumstances in visual terms and what kind of art is produced by artists in a society where normality is abnormal and life is only too often pervaded by sectarianism and violence.

Chapter one highlights the difficulties which political artists in Northern Ireland faced up to the 1980's, during which time hardly any political art was produced. The strong conservative attitudes of the Arts Councils and gallery owners proved too much of a force to be reckoned with, which resulted in a 'backing down' of artists concerned with real life scenarios, real life in which politics played a large part.

Lucy Lippard's controversial visit to Ireland in 1984 is discussed in Chapter Two, and why it was a fairly fruitless visit for her on her search for political art. The political art she found was not active enough by her standards, highlighting the contrast between two approaches, that of a United States artist and a Northern Irish artist.

These two different approaches to the same subject are dealt with further in Chapter Three. Les Levine's Blame God series is used as an exemplar for an American activist response to the Troubles. Another argument arises in this chapter which is, in what context fine art should be shown.

The weaknesses of foreigners dealing with the politics of Northern Ireland are again shown in Chapter Four through a discussion on Richard Hamilton's controversial paintings The Citizen and The Orangeman

It appears that non Irish artists not only encounter problems when producing work of a political nature about Northern Ireland but problems also arise when exhibiting it. A Tale of Two Cities is an exhibition about 'war torn countries' and concentrates on Belfast and Beirut. The selection of work shown in the exhibition is very propagandist, and is contrasted to the work shown in the Directions Out exhibition in the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, which on the whole, is oblique and indirect. The art shown in A Tale of two Cities, along with the catalogue, shows a leniency towards Nationalist causes, the thin line between political art and propaganda is only too visible.

Chapter 1 - THE VISUAL ARTS IN Ireland and Reasons for a lack
of Political Art

Seamus Heaney once wrote "Smoke signals are loudmouthed compared to us" (Heaney 1975 pp59), this statement can be applied to the treatment of political subject matter in the visual arts in Northern Ireland. Mike Catto wrote in Art in Ulster 2, (pp 130 "most artists in Ulster tend to produce work which has little relationship to "the Troubles". This is not so much the case now, and artists born into the Troubles or whose formative years were shaped by them are addressing the Northern situation in their work. They do so in an understated and oblique fashion, but at least the issues are finally being addressed.

Mike Catto's statement is however true of the period up to 1975. Up until this time there was little political work produced in the North of Ireland. There are various reasons for this, both practical as well as social. Firstly if we look at tradition it is obvious that political meaning was never really carried through visual culture apart from the political postcard, which is a popular art as opposed to a fine art. This was the situation in both the North and South of Ireland. Politics lived through oral and literary traditions, through the writings of Yeats, Wilde and Synge. In the North political incidents passed into folklore and song. John Hewitt in Art In Ulster 1 psychologically analyses the situation and reports that:

The absence of subjects of violence or of the underlying social tensions, outside of the political cartoon, must have been indicative of some deep failure of imaginative realization among artists who might have been expected to have been more acutely sensitive. (Hewitt, pp129)

The whole of visual culture of Ireland was not receptive to any political strife that might be in the country. Artists ignored such incidents as the bloody Home Rule struggle in the North the Faction Fighting of 1916 in the South and of course the Partition, and no body of art was produced. No one seemed interested in observing, recording or commenting, be it in anger, frustration or compassion. Never was there a Liberty on the Barricades, by Delacroix, or anything like Goya's, The Shooting of the Third of May. The gallery system and the heavy hand of censorship had a lot to do with this. Up until ^{the} 1940's the Royal Hibernian Academy had a very controlling influence on the work artists produced in Ireland. The R.H.A. favoured classical themes and directed art into the "pursuit of excellence", and away from society, strong romantic contours shaped their view of the artist and of art. Such artistic conservatism exists in any era, and indeed in our own, Anthony Cronin in Art for the People? 1988 describes art as; "the attempt to attain perfection". This pushes the notion of pleasure as being central to aesthetic experience and that artists are special people in their sensitivities and innate or acquired powers of expression. Cronin expresses a dangerous and narrow minded belief that no doubt was one which the R.H.A. held that; "...the art of the dispossessed is seldom great, precisely because it is the art of the dispossessed" (Cronin pp35)

If the country was in upheaval it was best not to record this in paint as it would make for a bad painting, only pleasant subject matter made pleasant paintings. This ludicrous notion prevailed in the North and South until the emergence of the Independants in 1960, when artists like Michael Kane and James Mc Kenna among others introduced a political or social dimension. In the North there was little until 1969 when the troubles exploded and situation could no longer be ignored. Artists like Jack Packenham and Brendan Ellis bravely faced up to the frightening realities of the situation.

The Arts Council of Ireland also had a governing effect on the art produced. They, like the R.H.A. were fearful of art which might "shake the boat". Up until the mid 1980's the Northern Irish Arts Council's politics were said to be the politics of colonialism, unionism and oppression its trademark being the continual endorsement of pretty, sensual, painterly and provincial art. The arts councils operated as a hierarchy and so when arts council members claimed there were only two types of art - good and bad - they meant it. What they considered "bad" which maybe dealt with "bad" i.e. controversial, subject matter had no chance of being shown.

This was a problem for artists who wished to confront the troubles in their work, as they had nowhere they could show it. There was no infrastructure of small galleries or no support for this kind of artist Brian Maguire, painter and ex I.A.A.(Irish Association of Artists) chairperson, condemns the arts councils knack of exercising; "personal expertise in defining excellence in pointing with their forefingers".

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(Mc Avera 1990 pp130). The Northern Irish Art Council believed itself to be the only organisation qualified in the North to mediate art. It is of course, a powerful organisation and a lot more open to controversial art nowadays than it was in the early '80's. But it seems unfair that one organisation has the right to exercise such power, to pick and choose, and to make or break artists. The kind of support an artist receives, whether from the state or private patronage will always influence or have an effect on the kind of art being produced. This is an unfortunate factor that an artists true expression may be somewhat restricted due to outside parameters. The small art market in Northern Ireland and lack of private commissions may in the long run be beneficial, as the artists can exploit a freedom in their work, their expression will not be restricted.

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Chapter 2 - LUCY LIPPARD, CULTURAL DEMOCRACY AND THE
POWER OF ART

The majority of artists agree that a career in Fine Art is not a good way to make money. Art is a way of life, it is as Mickey Donnelly puts it in a recent television documentary on Ulster television-

"Its your life coming out through your fingertips" This is the attitude that a new group of Northern Irish contemporaries have, they are dealing with their lives not divorcing themselves from the realities of the extremities of living in the troubled landscape of Northern Ireland.

It was during the 1980's that the history and culture that lay behind the 'troubles', the problematics of identity of Nationalism and Unionism began to play an increasingly significant role in Northern Irish art, however, unfortunately it was not being exhibited. In 1986, it was written in CIRCA, the only Northern Irish arts magazine that:-

artists living in Ireland have not even begun on anything like ...(the)...level of confrontation which is to be found in non Irish artists who raise Irish political issues such as Les Levine or Lucy Lippard (Lippard pp11)

It was in 1984 that the American art critic, writer and activist, Lucy Lippard made her crucial visit to Ireland to select an exhibition of contemporary Irish art for the Ireland, America Arts Exchange Incorporated, in an effort to expose American audiences to Irish arts activity. This culminated in 'Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind: Some New Irish Art'. Lippard claims that although she saw most of "the more political artists", she found "little explicitly political/social art".

Lippard's standards of political art would be very different to an Irish artist's standards. In looking for what ~~she~~ termed "political" or "activist" art she sought some kind of outspoken, controversial American kind of Activism. However, with the different cultural and political parameters in Ireland the result was that she did ~~not~~ find what she was looking for. She states that:

the complexity of Irish political life appears to be paralleled by the layered, contradictory, images that I often found tantalizingly indirect (Lippard, p11)

This provoked a response from artist John Kindness stressing how Northern Irish artists do not want to "take sides", in order to be what she terms "politically active". He explains:

To engage in the sort of activism she describes from her American experience the artist needs to be committed, s/he needs to take sides, to make choices, this is the choice that most artists find impossible to make in the Irish situation. (Kindness pp25)

The artist Jim Manley ~~asks~~ :

Was the world expecting a flood of Guernicas to pour out of Ulster...? (Lippard p11)

It was probably was something more in the line of Guernica that Lippard sought, and instead was met with the cool objectivity of Willie Doherty and Chris Wilson for example.

Lippard states that:

Political art tends to be socially concerned and activist art tends to be socially involved. (Lippard pp14)

these definitions are almost too neatly defined. The term "socially concerned", almost sounds derogatory and suggests passive and even cowardly retrospection by the artist, portraying the artist as a self indulgent tortured soul, dwelling on and exploiting his troubled surroundings, but does nothing to help

society. On the other hand the only real "activist" art Lippard experienced were the Republican and Loyalist wall murals these of course, not being of the Fine Art tradition were not taken into consideration. The question was raised however, why was there not more of a crossover between the political references in high art and the grass root passions of the street art.

The answer to this would of course include John Kindness's comments on the fear of "taking sides". Only an anonymous painter could declare his blatant sectarian affiliations in such a way. If an artist proclaimed his views in such a way, he would be scorned and his work would be held up as propaganda and not art. Anyway, the artist does not wish to create divisions, merely comment on them and be part of a healing process and hopefully encompass divisions. Art is viewed as neutral ground, and Northern Irish artists would probably be the first to agree that their art will change nothing, they are responding in whatever way they can to the society in which they live.

This standpoint is very different to that of a "cultural activist" in the United States. Unlike in Ireland, cultural activists, reject neutral stances no matter what side they are on. They embrace a renewed sense of the power of culture to affect how people see the world around them. A strong belief in the United States is that cultural democracy is a right, that people have the right to make and be exposed to the greatest diversity of creative expression. It is not that Northern Ireland does not believe in cultural democracy, artists can at their own risk make provocative work, but the artists

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sensibilities stop them from doing so. Being part of the situation makes them realize that it will do more harm than good. (We only have to look at Les Levine's "Blame God" series, and the public reaction to it, ^{to} understand this point.)

Lippard argues that the power of art is curtailed unless it is understood in the broadest sense and accepted as a possibility by everyone it touches. This leads to many notions about the power of art and culture. The power of art is subversive rather than authoritarian, its main power is its ability to inspire emotions by the way in which it communicates issues. Good art generates different attitudes and a new way of thinking. Or is this only to people who understand and are interested in art?

For art to be understood in the "broadest sense", it must be seen by everyone. This brings up the argument, should art be housed inside the "white cube" of the gallery, or is it a good idea for art to be shown on the street? Is this giving art back to the people or shoving it down their necks. (Some Northern artists have made their work accessible to the public, one of the best known being John Kindness, who exhibited on billboards, newspaper hoardings and trains). It is argued that fine artists no longer have the flair to work in the real visual world. Advertising has been far more influential in the 20th Century than art. Commercial artists speak to a wider audience, this cannot be denied, but are their messages as worthwhile? Commercial artists communicate on a different level with their pithy captions, slogans and clever images. They have a purpose in mind which is to sell something, and

do so by generating a taste for a particular product. With fine art there is a different thought process involved. The meaning is not readily readable, so there is more of a dialogue between the artist and viewer. On the other hand not everyone wants to take the time to try and understand art, and fine artists are often written off for alienating the public with ambiguous and pretentious work. This must be remembered when considering bringing art to the public. When dealing with political subject matter in public art it is an extra sensitive area and one which is perfectly illustrated in Les Levine's Blame God series.

Chapter 3 - LES LEVINE'S BLAME GOD SERIES

Les Levine demonstrates an American attitude in choosing to make openly political art. He states that a lot of political art is only political in the context of the state of mind that exists within the intellectual art world. He does not want to make political art for an elitist audience. He claims that a lot of political art is high taste political art. For the work to be general taste it has to be seen by the general public.

Levine calls himself a media artist. He has investigated the media, making video works, photographic works, films, audio tapes, conceptual paintings, sculpture installations, performance works and artists books. Siting works in the flow of urban life has been a common motif of conceptual art and one which Levine has made his own, hoping and intending to reach a non art audience. His work seeks the world. Levine holds the belief that advertising is the most effective means of communication in our time, a presumption of effectiveness is built into the work, which is a major part of its "Raison d'etre".

Levine's Blame God series consisted of twenty billboards installed in public places while full size replicas were installed in the gallery. Each billboard contains images based on photographs taken by Levine in Northern Ireland, and a two word phrase made up of the imperative part of a verb, usually a violent verb like "kill", "attack", "torture" or bomb followed by the word "God". Levine hoped for the works to be installed three times, first in London, then in Derry and finally in Dublin.

Trouble started before the exhibition was constructed and lasted until well after it had finished. By the time the exhibition arrived in Derry the images were confined to the sanctified art space of the gallery and public comments were confined to an organized discussion with the gallery - this totally defeated the purpose of the project.

Although the imagery used on the billboards is quite problematic itself. It seems innocuous compared to the text. The images are enlarged silkscreens of oil crayon drawings made by Levine from photographs taken by himself in Northern Ireland in '72. They are quite photo journalistic, depicting orange parades, confrontations with the police and the British Army the British flag is ever present. The images on their own are blatant enough to evoke emotions, however doubled with the text they create an angry confusion in the viewer.

The changing first words on the billboards are "sell, lose, starve, attack torture, blast, fight, block, forgive, execute, hate, kill, bury, defeat, slum, bomb, create, protect, play, parade, control". Sixteen of the twenty words are verbs designating activities that governments engage in during warfare.

Forgive and create are activities usually attributed to God himself. "Slum", unlike the others is a noun or an intransitive verb, that is, a verb which does not take a subject. You can slum or be slumming, but you cannot slum this or that. Slum God, suggests slum Lord, which suggests down and out, beyond help.

The word God is omnipresent. Its omnipresence coupled with the violent verbs and the drawing of different moments of life

in Northern Ireland suggests that every aspect of life in the North is troubled by the influence of religion. The work refers to the dualistic uses of religion for violence, such as the idea of killing for God. Levine exclaims:-

"How ridiculous it is to assume that acts of violence can occur in the name of God.." (ICA, pp21).

The fact that the war in Ireland is commonly called a religious war, suggests that the Irish are, as Thomas Mc Evilley says:-

"backward, archaic and irrelevant.." (ICA pp5)

Despite what propaganda claims most wars are about greed. Levine is critisizing both the religious attitude of killing for God and the British propaganda claim that the war really is about religion. What Levine perhaps fails to notice is that whether one likes it or not the varieties of Christianity in Ireland are historically and inextricably bound up with the political orders both North and South of the Border. The dominant political parties - the Unionist Party, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael and Sinn Fein are directly and indirectly linked with Protestantism or Catholicism and some of the paramilitary organizations will make the same claims about their connections. It is impossible to extricate politics from religion and religion from politics in Ireland. One only has to observe on the 12th July politicians linking arms with the protestant clergy and all marching to the beat of the same drum. Likewise the Catholic church has such controlling influence over some Catholics, it is impossible to separate it from any part of life.

Levine's work must be seen in a lineage of works by Irish exiles who have critized Irish religiousity from abroad. If one erases temporarily ones visions of the words, one sees that the images alone are a devastatingly intense portrait of a people politically and socially in trouble. Those who know and experience contemporary Ireland should be aware of more complexity to Ireland than is summed up by the "imperial oppression" of Britain. Levine believes in making art that absolutely puts your life on the line. It is not enough to create images that are interesting to the art world. Levine states:-

thats what people need from artists, that they're willing to put themselves out on a limb. They're very hot images and as it is with any hot thing, they can be bounced around by many people at different levels. (I.C.A. pp43)

Levine admits that if he were in Ireland he would not be able to practice this kind of art without being in some way physically or mentally harmed.

Levine uses words in a rigorously formal way. He believes very much in the power of words. There have often been notions that language in art is a form of cheating. Expressions like: "Art should be seen and not read", in this age of media and information are met with expressions like: "Art should be read not dead". Levine believes that images are always in search of meaning, whereras language can be used to give an image meaning. Words and images mean more together than they could possibly mean separately. In the Blame God series, the words do little to give the image meaning, the two work separately to create confusion as opposed to understanding

in the viewers mind. Levine creates a partially open meaning which must interact with the peculiarities of the viewers mind, and will complete itself in different ways for different viewers.

This is a common line of thinking nowadays. No longer are art objects expected to make themselves clear in an immediated way. The attention was shifted to that other partner in the construction of experience, the person. The way in which the person experiences the artwork is always pervasively conditioned by the culture and the times and the context in which it occurs.

The reactions to Levine's work spoke multitudes about the society into which the works were erected. In London a large quantity of black paint was thrown over the posters. Levine responded to this saying:

Well, I work in public spaces - and the public is at will to do what they want. But I'm amazed they don't throw black paint over things that say 'there give yourself emphysema. Here give yourself lung cancer. Here turn yourself into an alcoholic'. (I.C.A. pp25)

Other posters were pasted over by the poster company who claimed they had complaints from the Advertising Standards Authority and the police. When confronted a bemused A.S.A. spokesman explained that it would take months for a complaint about a poster to be dealt with. This proved that the decision to paste over the posters was a case of righteous indignation on the part of the bill posters. Levins although disappointed by the vandalism, was sure of their effectiveness. He says:

If it were not effective they would not have done this. The information is so blatant and so clear that they were afraid that people would get the message (Orr)

Levine had good intentions in producing his Blame God series. He wanted to point out how ridiculous it is to believe in killing for God, and by expressing this, hopefully open up a new way of thinking on the subject and the possibility of discussion. Levine has made similar work and posted billboards all over major cities in the U.S. and never has been met with such hostility. Why is it that reactions were so unfavourable in London? Could it be that people see the troubles as a "constant intrusion" (Snoddy pp51), as Richard Hamilton puts it. They would rather try and ignore it and it might go away.

When faced with graphic reproductions of the realities along with such aggressive language they maybe felt repelled and discomplascent. The headline in the Sunday Tribune, 'Dublin artist upsets pious London' suggests a ostentatiously virtuous nation. If the posters had reached the streets of Derry no doubt there would be strong emotions and even anger at a foreigner cashing in on a nation's problems. Subtlety is a key word when dealing with highly emotive issues, a thing which is very much lacking in Les Levine's Blame God series.

A worrying fact about this incident is the way in which the heavy hand of censorship can strike so hard. By destroying art Levine believes:

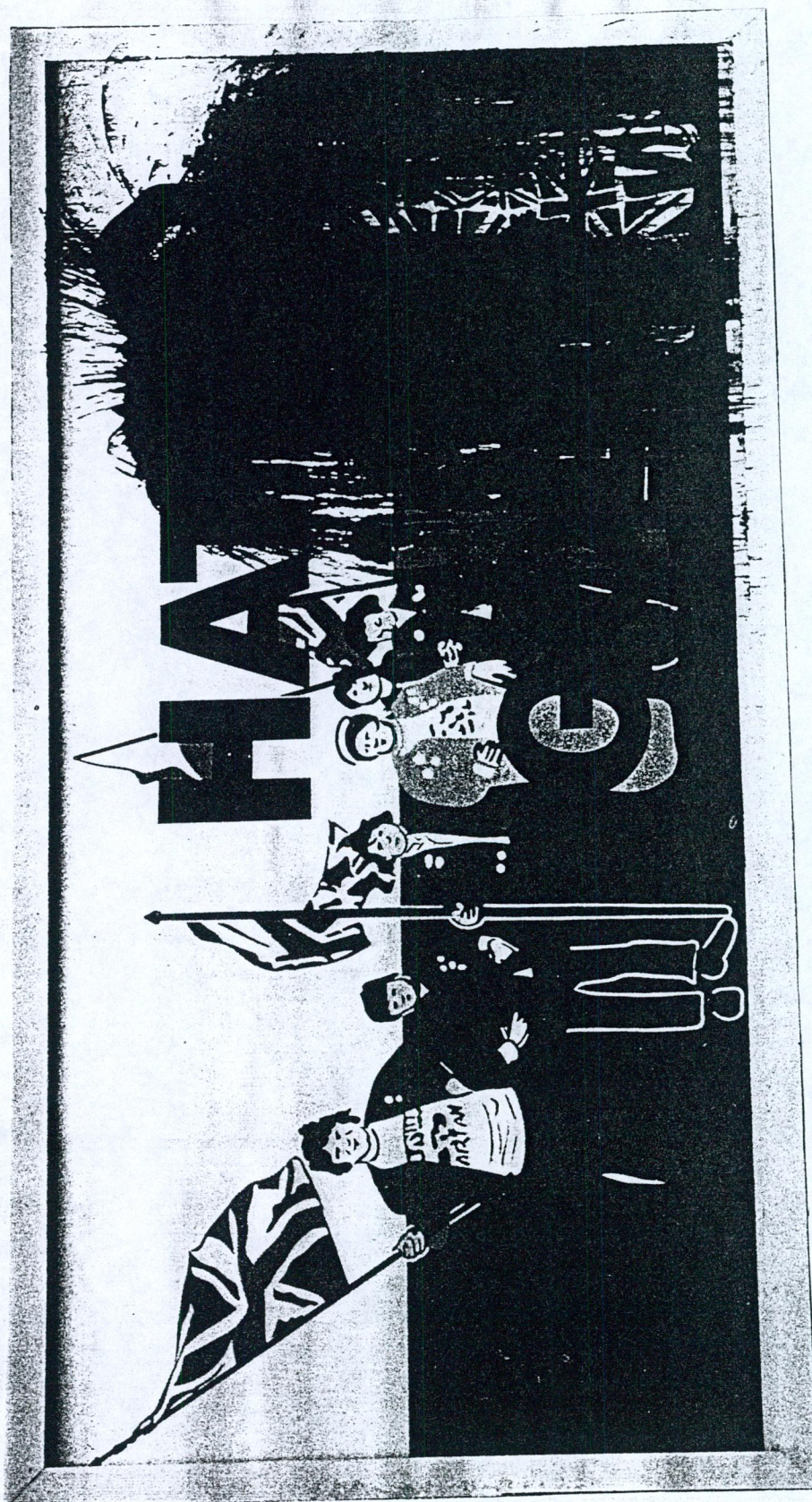
the perpetrators have attacked the possibility of non violence and replaced it with aggression and censorship. They are infringing upon the very premises on which this society is held together, which are freedom and justice. (I.C.A. pp21)

One wonders would these people paste over a Picasso if they disagreed with its contents.

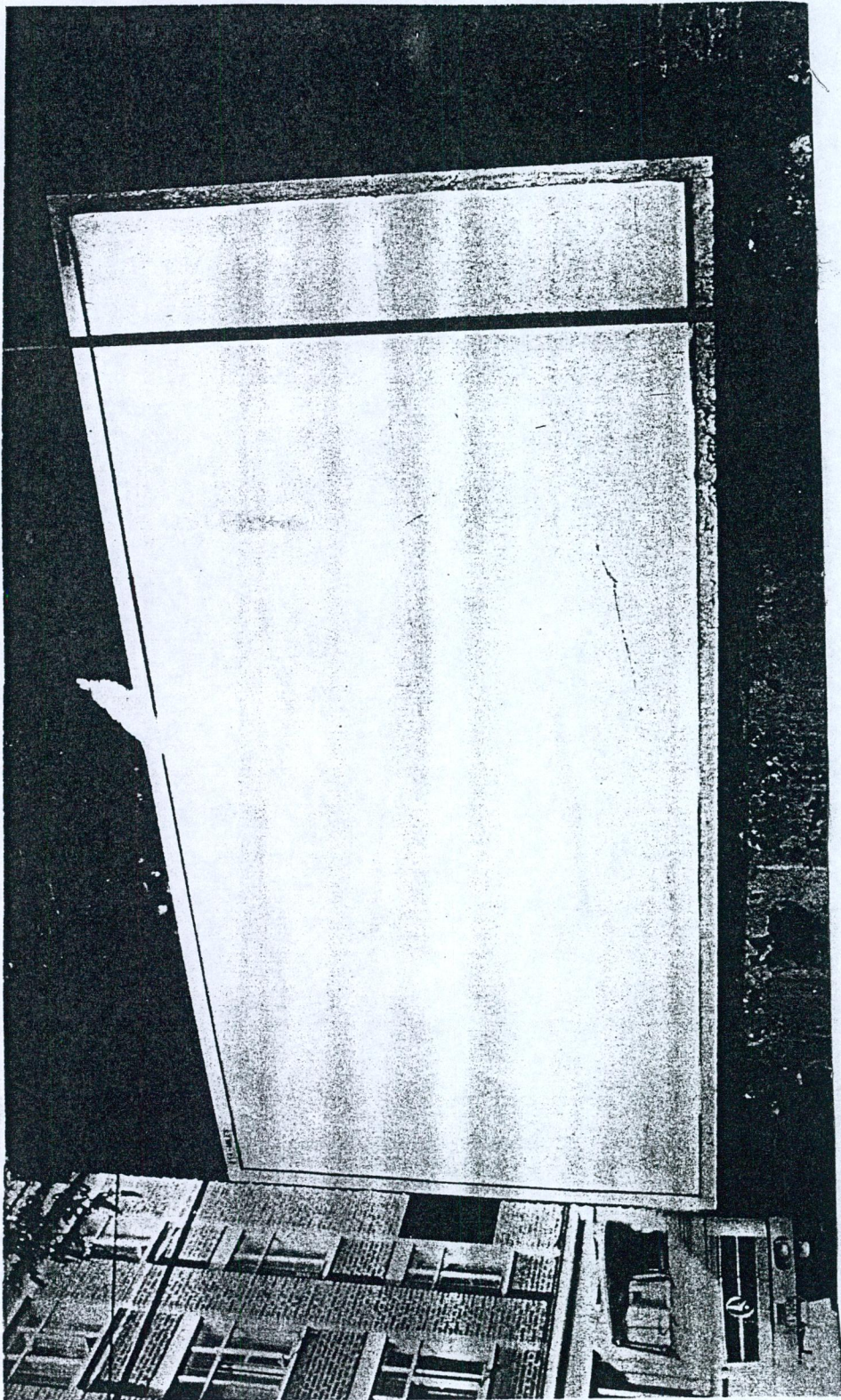
This is a case of public art that did not work. It wasted a vast amount of money. As works of art the posters or limited edition prints were worth £50,000. The project was sponsored by the Institute of Contemporary Art (I.C.A.) and the Artangle Trust. Tonnes of righteous mail bombarded the headquarters of the I.C.A. demanding to know what the work was all about. Many expressed extreme concern at both its contents and implications, while the vast majority of complaints came from religious leaders who christened it "terrorist propaganda", "a calculated, sickening insult to all Christians" "downright offensive" and "elitist". (I.C.A.pp37)



I11. 1 "Hate God" by Les Levine 1985



I11. 2 "Hate God" after an attack of black paint 1985.



I11. 3 "Hate God", whitewashed 1985



Ill. 4 "Block God", "Starve God", "Hate God", "Execute God"
London 1985

Chapter 4 - THE THIN LINE BETWEEN POLITICAL ART AND
PROPAGANDA SHOWN THROUGH THE CITIZEN AND
THE ORANGEMAN BY RICHARD HAMILTON

When foreign artists broach an Irish political subject matter, it can only be expected that the response is very different to that of an artist who has grown up "in the eye of the storm". It might be assumed that an artist who has grown up in the troubles would be likely to produce more force than feeling; that is making work owing more to politics than to painting. This has certainly been proven untrue and Northern Irish artists are renowned for their indirect approach favouring a sensitive approach as opposed to a brash statement. An artist must have genuine and strong feelings to produce work dealing with the political climate in Northern Ireland. The artist and politician, Paddy Gillen casts a critical eye on "political" artists and suggests that political art might be seen as "a trendy thing". He says;

People make it because its expected of them. But the genuine political artist makes art which involves politics because politics are a part of that person. (Mc Avera pp 17)

A statement like this provokes thoughts about why an artist such as Les Levine would want to broach such a subject. Surely living in the United States amputates him from the politics of Northern Ireland; and they certainly could not be referred to as;

"a part of that person"

Levine however, claims he has the right to address the issues raised because he was born in Ireland. He states;

"I was born in Ireland and feel part of the Irish literary tradition". (I.C.A. pp43)

There is a difference however, in making "...a connection with my ancestors" as Levine says, and taking on a God like persona and judging and condemning the actions of a nation from thousands of miles away in America.

Another artist whose "Irish" work caused a lot of controversy is Richard Hamilton. Hamilton is an Englishman who is very much celebrated and respected in the Realms of Pop Art.

As a child Hamilton held a fanciful view of the Emerald Isle which was imparted to him by his father who had served in Ireland as part of the British Army. Compared to the Staffordshire coal mines at the turn of the century Ireland was a Fairyland. So in his love of romantic Irish culture Hamilton turned to the great Irish novel Ulysses. He did various studies of Finn Mc Cool, the semi-legendary figure who was a poet and chieftain leader of the warrior force of the Fianna, from which the Fenian society (the Irish Republican Brotherhood) took their name. The I.R.B. were committed to the achievement of Irish independance through terrorist activities and violent revolution rather than through parliamentary or constitutional reform. In 1981 Hamilton returned to these works. Being a man of the media with an acute awareness of contemporary culture and society, he noticed a striking resemblance between his drawings of Finn Mc Cool and a photograph of a nationalist detainee Raymond Pius Mc Carthy, on hunger strike in the Maze Prison, Northern Ireland. The new drawings merged the two into one, an unhealthy merge, because in doing so he was comparing a terrorist to a mythic, heroic figure.

In his ignorance he brought the romance of old Ireland up to date, just as I.R.A. sympathizers would wish. The activities of the hunger strikers were seen by many as honourable, like the ancient Gaelic laws of self denial and sacrifice. On the other side disapprovers of the fast, the Protestant side of the community among others, could not understand how victimhood could be self inflicted. So it could be said, Hamilton applied a particular ethos to his imagery, one which would be received differently by the two sides of the cultural divide.

Finn Mc Cool had the same controversy about it as the well known paintings, the Citizen and the Orangemen. In Richard Hamilton's Citizen, the doors swing open onto the cell of an Irish Republican prisoner, the source named Hugh Rooney. Hamilton speaks of coming upon the compelling images of the Republican prisoners "on the blanket"¹ via the television screen. Freeze shots showed prisoners with "the crucifix" round their necks". (Snoddy pp51) and an atmosphere of "monastic austerity" (Snoddy pp51). Hamilton speaks in a very nationalistic way, which may make one wonder if art for him is a neutral ground. He says in the hunger strikers he saw;

A strange image of human dignity
in the midst of self created squalor
it was endowed with a mythic power
most often associated with art ... (Snoddy pp51)

He refers to the spirit of Irish patriotism as being "noble".

The painting's title bears direct reference to the "troubles" in Northern Ireland and the civil rights marches of the late 60's and 70's. ^{The title} The Citizen, is taken from the Cyclops episode in Ulysses in which Bloom comes into contact with a quarrelsome Fenian bar fly known to all as citizen.

The name is symbolic of the republican's one eyed perspective on the 'New Ireland'. The title is ironic also, because the prisoner is alienated from the bounds of free society and very much beyond the pale of citizenship.

The way in which Hamilton portrays the hunger striker as a Christlike figure is naive. It portrays an attractive, sad looking figure draped in a black blanket as if it were a royal robe. He stares endearingly from the painting with melancholy yet defiant dark eyes. The left hand panel is an excreta smeared wall. Despite what it is, it does not disgust the viewer, its abstract swirls, twirls and smears are ironically quite aesthetically pleasing. The whole painting conjures up connotations of martyrdom, of the physical against the spiritual, punishing the flesh, transcending it, triumph over humiliation. Brian Mc Avera creates an equation to describe The Citizen, which is;

"Hunger-striker = christ= catholic churches support for the Provisional I.R.A." (Mc Avera p114).

Although it is not as simple as that, all Catholics are no so religiose, the equation is a rather apt one. The image of the martyred saint is perfectly attuned to the republican wall murals. According to Hamilton he was;

... conscious of the contradictions inherent in using what he saw as the classic religious image of the hunger striker ..(Mc Avera pp115)

he continues however;

My intention was to produce an ambivalence rather than glorify the activities of the I.R.A. which I abominate. This (i.e. hungerstriking) is a respectable mode of conduct for the I.R.A. Its dignified. (Mc Avera pp115)



Ill. 5 "The Citizen" by Richard Hamilton

In these statements it seems Hamilton is contradicting himself. Firstly he says he is aware of the contractions of using such images, then he states that he was trying to create an ambivalence. Surely this is impossible when using such loaded images. It is impossible to look at The Citizen, without a sympathetic, emotional response, even though the viewer knows it is wrong. The way in which it is painted is undeniably sympathetic to the subject. Referring to hunger striking as a respectable mode of conduct promotes the idea that these people are noble, brave ... etc., ^{whereas} these long drawn out suicides were nothing but a skillfully handled media exercise, which used lives ruthlessly. Hamilton through this painting is doing the same as the terrorists do in their republican wall murals.

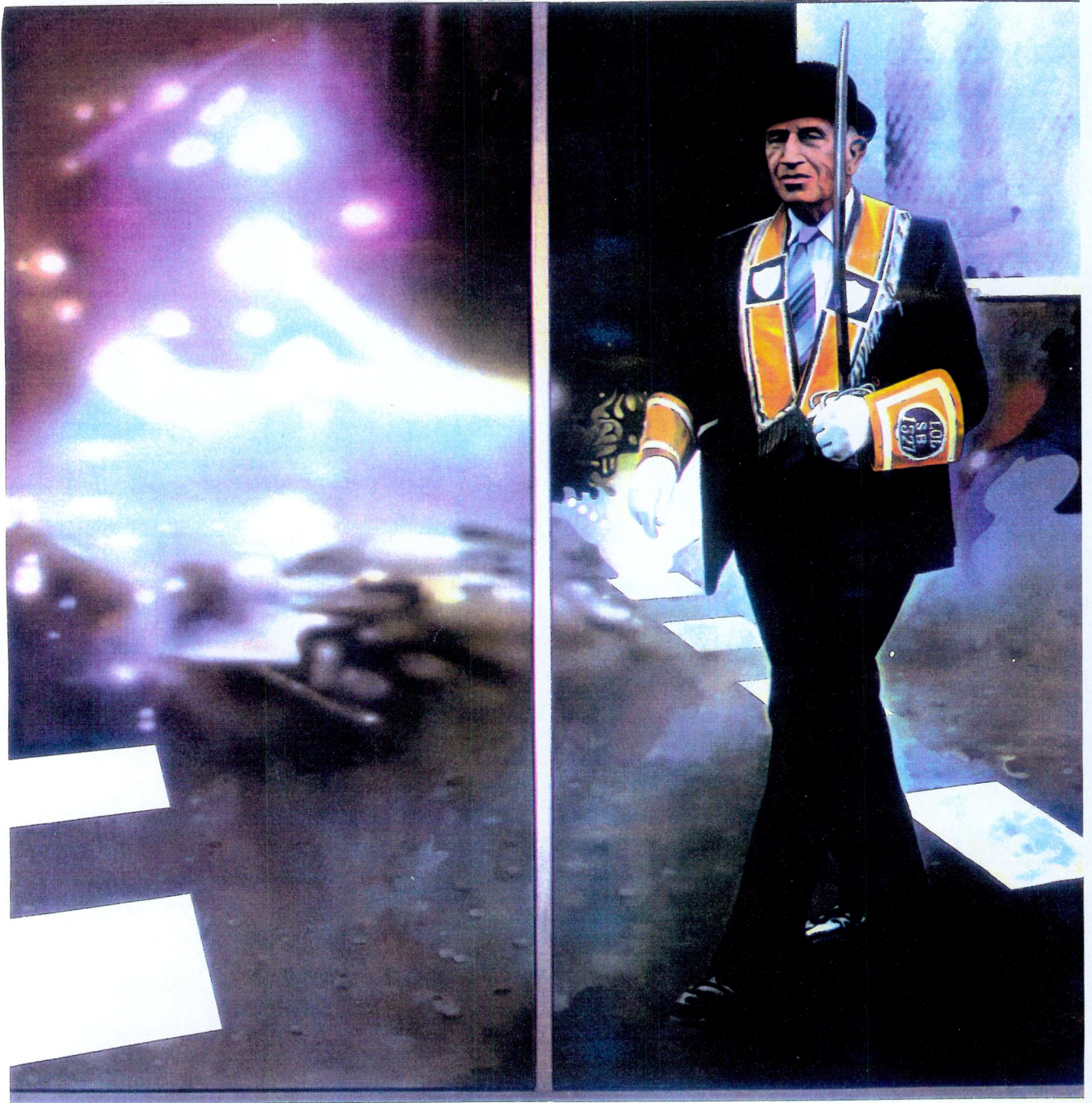
He is steeping his image in religious imagery, the same is done in murals to legitimize the actions of terrorists. Parody has not part in their murals, they do not care for the Christian ethos, instead they wish to use it for their own means. These murals are highly regarded by a minority. How is it that a fine artist can get away with it - plead ignorance and say that he or she does not realize it is offending people or promoting a particular point of view.

The Orangeman or The Subject, as it is otherwise known, is The Citizen's autonym. Although the two have the same dimensions and are a pair, it was not Hamiltons intention or expectation that the two paintings should be kept together. This however, has been the way, and ever since the completion of The Subject in 1990 they have always been shown together. There are very different feelings created by the two paintings.

The Citizen stands silent, nailed, vulnerable and primitive, his surroundings saying nothing of the outside world. The Orangeman strides onward through the street, sword in hand staking out his territory with a militant, messianic air about him. Both figures have a great defiant look about them, suggestive of the stubborn attitudes which banish hopes of reconciliation.

Although The Orangeman may have the appearance of a gentleman, this garb is well chosen. The hard bowler hat symbolizes a helmet, the black umbrella a sword, intended to clear Ireland of Catholicism or as the old saying goes; - "...from popery, wooden shoes and brass money" i.e. superstition, oppression and poverty.

However, the viewer cannot tell these things simply by looking at the painting. The Citizen appeals to our primitive persona, a rare thing in to-day's materialistic world. The picture speaks of an inner spirit, whereas The Orangeman is very much to do with real living, outward appearances and materialism. Again, how a person looks at these two pieces will be coloured by his own cultural experiences. Of course, a native of Northern Ireland knows at glance what The Citizen is about, coupled by The Orangeman, the subject even clearer. One might wonder was the Orangeman merely an afterthought of Hamiltons used to balance out his highly emotive Citizen. The Orangeman certainly does not have the same impact. Both images are iconic yet redundant, no real comment is communicated by the artist, we take the work at face value as one might with propaganda.



I11.6 "The Orangeman" by Richard Hamilton

Both images are constructed from photographs which have been worked on top of photojournalistic images. In the North, twenty five years of photojournalism and television have reinforced the truism that photography lies. One only has to look at the press coverage for the Falklands War in which of the 202 official photographs released, none showed blood and guts, even though two hundred and fifty three people died and seven hundred and seventy seven were wounded. The single pristine image is converted with ease to propaganda. Seeing is believing only to the innocent or unaware eye. This form of propaganda found in Richard Hamilton's Citizen and Orangeman assume everything and explain nothing.

FOOTNOTE:

1. "On the blanket" refers to a campaign in which prisoners convicted of politically motivated offences refused to wear prison uniform, the badge of the common criminal, and instead covered themselves with their blankets. The protest led on to the dirty protest and the Hunger Strike.



I11. 7 "Blessed are those who hunger for Justice" -
a Nationalist wall mural 1981. Belfast



Ill. 8 "You stood by them then! Remember them now"
Nationalist Commemoration mural, 1991 Belfast

Chapter 5 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO EXHIBITING -HOME AND AWAY

An example of what could be seen to be propaganda masquerading as art, is illustrated in A Tale of two Cities, an exhibition held in the Alternative Gallery, New York, showing work from Belfast and Beirut. The museum's mission is to provide a venue for provocative art exhibitions with social and political content. The museum identifies itself as a forum for controversial thinking and a showcase for sociopolitical art. The show supports a kind of political tourism with photojournalistic work alongside art that functions as emblems of protest and resistance, and art which expresses a purely personal experience of political conflict. The work appears to suggest that absolutely anything which might be sensational or controversial is worth showing, and as a result the show is eclectic to the extent that an astonishing lack of strategy in the selection becomes evident.

The works shown use imagery that invites an aesthetic reading. Surely this is not the point of a sociopolitical show.

The artistic director shows his bias when in the catalogue's introduction he writes;

...In the North of Ireland I found that
the human misery so savagely meted out
by the British troopers against the Catholic
Irish was so like that of Israeli troopers
a Palestinian civilian population..(Salmon pp 118-119)

This statement demonstrates a one sided view of the political situation in Northern Ireland, in saying that the British are ruthless perpetrators of human misery. The museum's position like that of its director does not appear to be neutral.

The catalogue echoes the same bias and is a mixture of information, assertion and expression with an extreme lack of analysis. Images of anonymous suffering, death and ruined cities are one dimensional and say nothing of causes and complexities. This is more so the case when the viewer is not familiar with the situation being portrayed. In A tale of two Cities, this problem was combated by a text for understanding the work. The museum sponsored two panel discussions and a catalogue which not only produces artwork but includes essays not about specific works but about the issues addressed by the works. Essays like this in some cases might be frowned upon because they place too much emphasis on meaning.

Must someone know everything about a piece before he or she can appreciate it. Is the viewer not capable of drawing his/her own conclusions. When too many clear explanations are given, the work loses its position as "art" and becomes an illustration of a group of ideas or meanings.

Arts ambiguous power of communication is one of its most endearing qualities. In any art experience the person and the work of art make and remake each other in the most complex and subtle ways. If the work is genuinely innovative, it may also have to create a context which will shape experience in a way that is appropriate to its novelty. The work creates its own space.

In relation to A Tale of two Cities, the work had its "space" created for it. There is no room for it to breathe, to function on its own, because of the propaganda and polemics that surround it.



Ill. 9 "A fresian coughed over Drumsnat on the Death of
the Reverend George Walker of Kilmore" by Dermot Seymour.

Essays by such people as Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein, and Peter Whelan, a republican prisoner, are bound to taint ones vision of certain incidents. Like the work itself, the opinions of these people speak to those who are already informed, they make old attitudes stronger through one-sided language, but say little to those who are unaware. Like propaganda it assumes everything and explains nothing and demonstrates that assertion without explanation does not persuade.

Artists involved in this exhibition were among others, Paula Allen, Sue Cole, Bailey Doogan, Kevin Noble and Dermot Seymour. Dermot Seymour is a painter and native of Belfast.

His imagery seems to focus on the structure and external reality of myth in the Ulster situation. Physically, however, the pictures portray stone throwing loyalist youths, gun toting policemen, army helicopters and other essentially cliched symbols and emblems, irrelevant imagery that provides little insight beyond the obvious. The Levine billboards imagery could easily be paralleled with Seymour's paintings. Both seek to highlight the effects of the Troubles, yet both equally fail to present images that go beyond this, both seem to grapple with simplistic imagery yet neither seem to realize that simple imagery alone can never hope to explain away the complexity of the Northern Ireland situation.

In contrast to the Alternative Museums Tale of two Cities, the Directions Out exhibition of 1987 at the Douglas Hyde Gallery demonstrated a more honest reaction to the political climate of Northern Ireland since 1969.

It was basically a showcase for political art from the North, and the first exhibition of its kind. It was felt that this exhibition was necessary because of the lack of knowledge in the South of Northern artistic concerns, especially those which responded to the political and social situation. Patrick T. Murphy in ^{the} catalogues foreword states that;

...art which responded to the present political and social situation had not been given a proper platform. (Douglas Hyde pp 1)

He continues;

"..I hope this exhibition will go some of the way to contextualising and elucidating the artist's intentions.."

This yearning to bridge the gap demonstrates the need for understanding which it is felt is needed. Artists long for this union. The Northern artist Colin Mc Gookin stresses an important point and one which corresponds with Brian Mc Areva's reasons for organising the Directions Out exhibition, which is that artists are free thinkers and keep discussions open when other lines of communication are closed or entirely focused e.g. political discussions. It is the artists privilege to speak through his work and communicate in whatever large or small way he can to other artists and the general public. To spread his message in his own way and help encourage new or different ways of thinking or seeing. The Directions Out exhibition concentrated upon the thematic angle, focusing on those artists whose work reflects and refracts the political, religious and social tenor of life in Northern Ireland. Artists included in the show are Diarmuid Delargy, Fergus Delargy, Willie Doherty, Graham Gingles, Gerry Gleason, John Kindness, Colin Mc Goolin, Liam Magee, Victor Sloan, Dermot Seymour and Chris

Wilson. Although some of the artists involved had exhibited in Dublin before, the wide belief was that the context from which their work arose was not sufficiently articulated and this caused misreading and misunderstanding of what they saw as the objectives of their art. It cannot be denied that the years of unrest in Northern Ireland have ensured that the life experience of artists in the North is markedly different from their Southern confreres.

The show visually was quite interesting, with a variety of media and approaches, ranging from Diarmuid Delargy's superbly expressive etchings dealing with natural and animal imagery, to Willie Doherty's cool photographic works. Willie Doherty is essentially a photographer who like Les Levine uses language as an extra tool in its armoury. Doherty, of course, is a native of Derry, who appears to have a greater understanding of the complexity of the Ulster problem. Willie Doherty's images are fresh, they go beyond the obvious, and subtly seduce the imagination with sensitive aesthetic imagery yet stir and provoke the consciousness with lucid word usage. Doherty uses content with great purpose and thought clarity and insight is the result, clarity of meaning, firstly in terms of content and information and secondly in terms of direction and direct insight into the everyday reality of pervasive alienation and insecurity. Central, of course, to the effectiveness of Willie Doherty's work is subtlety, sensitivity and a real understanding of the nature of the Ulster tragedy.

Doherty's piece in the Directions Out exhibition was entitled This We Will Maintain/Our Day Will Come. The two large photographic works complimented each other in the form

of an installation. One shows the West and other the East bank of the River Foyle. The West Bank is traditionally Nationalist and the East Bank traditionally Loyalist. Doherty states;

The River Foyle is mud and stones;
it is also an emotive symbol of how
we perceive and understand our city (Douglas Hyde '87)

Originally the two photoworks were mounted in opposition to, each other so that the spectator literally stood "across the divide". Along with the image of the West Bank, the accompanying text written in green across the stones is "Tiocfaidh Ar La" - (Our Day Will Come). Above that in larger black letters it says "Stone Upon Stone". On the East Bank of the River Foyle the words, "We Will Maintain", are written in blue along with, "Stone Upon Stone" stencilled in white.

The works are about boundaries. The message is portrayed through psychological perception rather than an overt political statement. The conflict is not in terms of outward violent manifestations, we do not see any blazing images of riot-torn Derry. Instead we experience an inner conflict between states of mind and images of identity summed up by the historical battle of "Our Day Will Come" and "We Will Maintain".

The images used are not at all obvious, unlike Les Levines for example. The East Bank image presents the stony foreshore as a bulwark against the river, standing strong and determined, whereas the West Bank image emphasizes the infinity of the river and its ability to encroach upon the foreshore. The river's heedless advance is a metaphor for a much looser psychological state, and symbolizes a preparedness to blend or mix, or even find a compromise. Doherty's works are metaphors for a divided



111. 10 "Stone upon Stone" by Willie Doherty.

society, which use the emblematic properties of both visual and verbal images in a manner deliberately and coolly calculated as a critique of simplistic attitudes to the North.

Directions Out was however, criticized for its local prejudice claiming that it highlighted the problems of marketing The Troubles as a particularly Northern experience, and reinforced the self obsession of provincialism. This is a contradiction in terms in a way, because as a show of work about The Troubles, it is only to be expected that the work will be about The Troubles and how they affect lives and people, some pieces being more obvious than others. As for marketing The Troubles, it would be unlikely that any Northern artist would do this. This can be backed up by the way in which artists take an indirect and oblique approach to working. A Tale of Two Cities, on the other hand could be accused of marketing the Troubles, it perhaps being easier for them to show work of a propagandist nature because they are amputated by distance to the issues being addressed.

Aidan Dunne states that "Big issues...do not make big art!" (Dunne 1982, March 29). True, and it is in fact the most indirect pieces in the show which are most successful. For example Diarmuid Delargy's On through the not so quiet land, Willie Doherty's Stone upon Stone, and Chris Wilson's In October Light. An artist does not have to hammer home a point, to the extent that his work fails. If an artist is genuine this will express itself in his or her work. The title of the show itself Directions Out alludes to this way of working in the North, i.e. obliquely, by stealth and indirection. Seamus Heaney's words illustrate this;

Northern reticence the tight gag
of place and times. And whatever
you say you say nothing. (Dunne, 1982 March 29)

The title itself comes from a line in Hamlet "By indirection,
find Directions Out"(Hamlet Act II S1).

It worked for Hamlet and this approach also works well for
artists using it in the North, where it is often said that one
cannot speak too loudly.



Ill. 11 "On through the not so quiet land"
by Diarmuid Delargy.

CONCLUSION

It has become obvious that as a source for visual art, political issues do raise certain problems. The artist whose art engages with the social and political context of his local surroundings is open to all kinds of critical responses from the public, depending on the viewers own cultural and political affiliations which colour this vision. Artists whose work broaches political issues which are not directly related to experienced life are even more open to attack.

In the cases of Les Levine and Richard Hamilton they approach the political situations in Northern Ireland overtly and dramatically. Although both had the best intentions in mind they were met with accusations of being tactless and insensitive and their work was labelled as propagandist. This is the biggest problem an artist dealing with political imagery has to face.

As we have seen the majority of Northern Irish artists escape this problem by working in a coded, oblique fashion.

The question arises whether these artists work like this for fear of offending people, or is it because they themselves find it hard to confront in their life and work, the realities of living in a troubled society.

This was very much the case in the years after the Troubles erupted, when many of the student generation who saw and followed the onset of the violence were shocked into numbness and silence.

They did not know how to confront the violence in their work and instead retreated into placeless internationalism. This was the trend in the behaviour of students generally through the 70's.

As time went on and with the re-emergence of figurative and representational painting, the 1980's saw more artists developing the self-confidence to draw upon their social environment. However, with the continuing violence in Northern Ireland and the fact that things are not getting any better, it is perhaps the case that although artists are addressing the troubles, it is still "too close to home", too horrific to be dealt with in a blatantly open way. This is the reason perhaps that so far, only foreign artists have made blatantly obvious work about the situation in Northern Ireland.

In contrast to this the majority of artists in the North tend to articulate a more explicit relationship between the personal and the political. They tend to deal in a more interactive way with myth and reality, and discernibly local figures or personally mediated reflection on social circumstance.

They deploy traditional icons or historical symbols in commentary on contemporary conditions linking the particular to the universal. In chronicling human suffering the work does not necessarily have to be seen in a Northern Irish context, but can be applied to any country in civil strife. A major concern of the Northern Irish artist seems to be to comment on the bleakness and futility of war, which is a universal problem and not just restricted to the six counties. The artists take sides only with the suffering and their pride in, and attachment to Northern Ireland is tempered by condemnation of the inhumanity which masquerades as principle.

It was written in "The Crane Bag" 1977, that;

Politics is far to grave a matter for the

politician. Art is far too potent a medium for the artist. (Fowler pp.117).

Although some might try and ignore politics, others might try and ignore art, it is obvious that in Northern Ireland, political affiliation does sometimes restrict the artist's ability to represent different subject positions, thus limiting his or her art. The link between politics and art is unsteady.

They are opposites and yet can work together. It can be argued whether politics is too fixed and uncompromising for imaginative recreation, or whether there is the possibility that artistic vision can be projected to the forefront of the political stage.

Although art and politics are autonomous, art hopes to be a corrective to politics. Richard Kearney writes that art is not just an imitation of reality, but the artist also has the ability to recreate and that;

"Each work of art is an attempt to see the world in a new way". (Fowler P 129).

In this light politics should not just inform art, but art should also inform politics, and again as Richard Kearney says;

"Art without politics is arbitrary,
Politics without art is blind". (Fowler P 129)

Northern Ireland after years of seeking integration with the global conversation, is now addressing the native attributes which in the past many were so keen to shed. Artists no longer embrace the fashions of internationalism which so "studiously ignored a sense of place" (Wallis pp 45). In this light the concept of a specific Northern Irish visual art is ripe for development.

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