

**National College of Art and Design  
Craft Design (Ceramics)**

**Planet Ulster.** A discussion of the work of the artist John Kindness, making particular reference to his pieces dealing with Northern Ireland.

*By Cormac Moore.*

**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and  
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of  
Design in Craft Design, 1995.**

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# **“Planet Ulster”**

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# Introduction



I discovered the work of John Kindness in October '93 when he gave a lecture in the N.C.A.D. I was struck by the technical virtuosity and sheer beauty of the objects presented, be they murals, posters, mosaic sculptures, ceramic prawns, drawings on sandpaper or stamp designs.

What attracts me to Kindness' work is his interest in people; their character, wit and humour. He is an inhabitant of an urban space, and where else but in cities can one find a more compact and diverse population of human beings. This living space - a gigantic monument to their dreams, hopes, achievements, failures and mistreatment. The city is a microcosm of human life. Violence seems to be present in any human microcosm - a natural struggle somehow maintaining a crazy balance. The background from which he hails is a base from which he has confronted Northern issues using Northern imagery, but the problems are universal. Belfast was not the only city plagued with sectarian violence. The social situation that caused the L.A. riots is not so different from that which causes violence in Belfast. This is what makes his work so relevant, not only to the inhabitants of Belfast or Dublin, but to those in New York and London also.

Kindness is concerned with answering the question: How can art maintain a relevance and accessibility to the society in which it is formed? This question seems to take him down two paths - exploring the social hypocrisy as apparent in his native Ulster, and his questioning of the criteria that we use in assessing



art aesthetically.

This thesis is concerned with the former direction of his work, concentrating on works such as *A Monkeytown Beseiged By Dogs*. However, his style and delivery is dictated by his critical assessment of the art aesthetic and due consideration must be given to this as well.

In Chapter one I will take an example of an approach Kindness takes to the important themes of his work. He often uses common denominators to make his point and food is one such a denominator that has infiltrated his work throughout his whole career. I will also discuss his feelings on the importance of an artist's childhood.

Chapter two is a discussion of the origins of his ideas about how to deal with the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland which resurged just as he entered art college in Belfast in 1970, why he came to draw on certain influences and and his attempts to tackle these subjects as a dispassionate inter - galactic observer for a visual journal from outer space.

Chapter three is a description of what he calls 'Planet Ulster', the myths and icons that drive the conflict and the work undertaken by a contemporary of Kindness', Willie Doherty in order to compare and contrast their efforts to incorporate these images into their work, to comment on the situation.

In Chapter four I will discuss *A Monkeytown Besieged by Dogs* and the culmination of ideas Kindness uses - myth, humour, iconography, art -





historical reference and media imagery to tackle a specifically sectarian subject. I will, in the process, compare this to the approach of the English artist whom Kindness himself cited as an important figure; Richard Hamilton, with his depiction of the same subject.

Chapter five is an account of Kindness' commitment to the public work he has undertaken, his approach to his audience and his faith in the beautiful object.

The conclusion will tie together the two directions of his work, sum up the origin, intent, production and effect of his work and hopefully leave the reader with some impression of his importance to contemporary Irish art, and perhaps, the world.



# **Chapter One**

## **The Fried Egg Scenario**



## The Fried Egg Scenario - Belfast 1974 - 1981

### Food - a common denominator

In 1974 John Kindness graduated from the Belfast College Of Art. For his Fine Art Degree show he presented an installation featuring a plate on which had been arranged a sausage, egg, bacon, tomato and tatey bread (1) that had been left to go cold and mouldy. John Carson described being at once "enthralled, appalled, and amused," at the duplicity of meaning suggested, the comment on the Ulster situation (the fry waiting shrine - like for someone to come and eat it, the common denominator of food between the two sides in the conflict.) and the disrespect shown for the art college scenario.

What impressed me was that within a welter of self-conscious artistic strainings, something had cut through the crap and hit me on all targets. Cultural pretensions were out the window and home- truths on the table. (Carson, 1989. Unpaginated)

Food is a common recurring theme. We all need food. Whoever or whatever we are we share this same basic necessity. It is typical of Kindness to isolate food as an object of study in his work. During the course of this essay I will give many examples of his ability to deal with the essentials, to make us see much of ourselves in other people, cultures and backgrounds.

One Kindness piece dealing with the conflict in Ulster and using food as a vehicle for his intent is *Mr. Potato Man*. Consisting of a potato head with a bowler hat and an orange sash around it's shoulders, wearing a red, white and blue cravat, the only word this starch - brained being can utter is "No", as in 'Ulster says No' and "No Surrender!" well - known Loyalist (2) phrases. Other

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(1) Tatey Bread ;Ulster vernacular for bread made out of flour and potatoes.

(2) "Loyalist" is a phrase more or less synonymous with Protestant or Unionist. The terms are used to refer to someone (usually of English or Scottish descent) dedicated to maintaining Northern Ireland's political union with Great Britain. The opposite terms - Catholic, Nationalist, Republican (usually persons of Irish descent) would wish to see the six counties of Northern Ireland united with the other 26 counties of Eire.





treats he has delighted us with have been the *Man Who Ate Cooked Ham Raw* - Jimmy Ripshite in *The Belfast People's Comic*, *Chicken and Chips Chinese Takeaway* and the *Art On The DART* series (Fig. I) - including *Dail Eireann Sauce*, *Bitterness Cafe*, and *Chumrose (for Dogs and Low - Income Families)*. Dail Eireann sauce is the Irish version of HP (Houses of Parliament) sauce. We can see here how food can work as a way of getting your point across. These fake advertisements were placed all over the Dublin Area Rapid Transport trains and consequently had to appeal to the citizens using the service, whoever they are. Everyone can grasp a joke based on the well - known HP sauce. Who can fail to laugh at a child eating the same food as the dog? (That particular idea may have come from an American food company some years ago, whose TV advertisement I saw on a British television programme (presented by Jasper Carrott) that showcases foreign ads. The advertisement was for a tinned food called "Cats 'n' Kids").

Others have used food as a metaphor - for example the American David Gilhooley with his ceramic frog series. *The Miracle of Production* (Fig II) is an announcement for a frog movie production about the processing of raw foods into packaged goods. Featuring Osiris, the male fertility god and frog movie star who is wrapped mummy - like in woven pastry strips with an arc spanning the body, the piece is about over consumption and hoarding, with raw foods on one side of the arc and commercial products on the other. The god's fertility is displayed by the array of colourful vegetables that sprout from his body. Gilhooley's Frog world evolved in the early 70's into a large and complex population which mimics, parallels and comments on human civilisation. This is what Kindness is doing in pieces that feature caricatures of the people in Northern Ireland - *Mr. Potato Man*, *Jimmy Ripshite* and later works



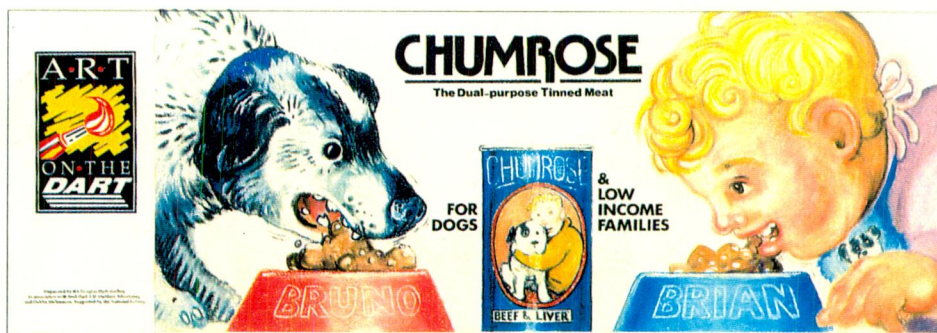


Fig. I Art On The Dart: Kindness, (4 of 5 panels), Chalk on paper, 25' x 10', Dublin, November 1988







Fig. II The Miracle Of Production: David Gilhooley, 1972. Glazed Earthenware.



Fig. III Garbage Ark: David Gilhooley. Glazed earthenware, 1976.







Fig III. Excerpt from **The Hand: Kindness**, 1975-76, 30 x 21 cm





such as *Monkeytown Besieged by Dogs* (which will be discussed in detail later), substituting animals or cartoons for humans, allowing us to look at society from a different angle - ultimately getting to know ourselves better.

### **The Hand**

In 1975 Kindness published *The Hand* (Fig. IV). It is the story of the tragic death of a Belfast youth. In the story, the circumstances of the death of the youth (who is Protestant) are no different than if the victim was Catholic. The Ulster fry that the victim's mother cooks for him at the beginning of the story is the same as that which the assassin ate the same morning. Kindness uses humour in the death scene, as the youth is shot, he falls forward into a pile of dogshit, the youth's death is portrayed as the futile, pathetic act that all sectarian deaths are.

*The Hand* is drawn in a comic - book style, and uses humour to make serious remarks about sectarianism. Comic books are important to Kindness' style. He is a wonderful caricaturist, and knows how to deliver a gag. All this he must have learned as a child, when he was an avid comic reader. Kindness has remarked that many artist's biographies do not include childhood interests; they jump from birth to third - level as if all things important are to be learned from art college.

John Kindness was born in Belfast during the Fifties. His father worked in the shipyards. A working class child's visual life at that time would have been packed with such images as the Colour and pageantry of the Orange parades (3), street murals depicting King Billy crossing the Boyne on his white horse, (4)

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(3). Orange Parades are grand public marches held several times a year by the Orange Order to assert the Protestant ascendancy in Northern Ireland. Orange Lodges, in full regalia, carry large illustrated banners and are accompanied by marching bands.

(4). "King Billy" is the colloquial term for King William III, Prince of Orange, who deposed the Catholic King James II in 1690.





sweet shops, red buses, saturday matinees at the cinema, cartoons, comics and with the coming of television: Cowboys and Indians from American history, English legends such as Robin Hood and futuristic science fiction. Kindness as a boy painted battle scenes with knights and cowboys, and later, portraits of family members.

His childhood influences are still important to him today. A recent exhibition of Kindness' frescos is based wholly on his memories of his family, neighbours and classmates. Telling stories about visiting the smoking monkey on Easter Sunday, his relationship with his father, and the book that his grandfather wrote. The borders of each fresco are decorated with sweet wrappers, bananas and cigarette logos, all remembered images. A self portrait made in 1990 provides images of his Ulster identity - bacon, pigs and chickens, tatey bread, spuds and the red hand of Ulster decorate the space behind him. A Union Jack badge on his lapel turns out, however, on closer inspection to be green, white and orange.

He has produced drawings, paintings, prints, murals, mosaics (in varying materials), ceramic sculpture, installation, comics, posters, stamp design, billboards, frescos and even etching on taxi - cab doors. With all this output his work has been ingeniously witty and accessible. His work is available for all to see and it catches the imagination and respect of the person on the street, in the shop, on the bus. He says that to achieve this respect is not such a big deal, that it only takes the real will to do it. His work is not designed to be willfully obscure and to be discussed in pretentious seminar rooms. The origin of this "willpower" that John Kindness possesses to communicate with a wide audience stems from his experience of art college which will be discussed in the next section of this essay.



## **Chapter Two**

**The Belfast College of Art. 1970 - 1974**



## The Belfast College Of Art 1970 - 1974

### The "International" style

In the late 60's and early 70's the Art College in Northern Ireland operated within the British art school system and took little account of its location. The predominantly English male staff came and went; in effect we were an outpost of Leeds or Manchester. The emphasis was on international placeless art. There was no back up system for students upon leaving college with the result that most either emigrated or stopped working.

(Brian Mc Avera, 1986, unpaginated. )

John Kindness was in final year at school in 1969 during the outbreak of the troubles when religious and political unrest turned to street violence. Succeeding years at college "nearly knocked the art" (1) out of him.

There were regular bomb alerts in the college and plumes of smoke could be observed from the studio where he worked, rising from the latest bomb attack in the city. This in itself is frightening, but the reason Kindness was disturbed by what was happening inside the college;

Abstraction was considered the ultimate in sophistication. Representational work was shunned and international art magazines were regarded as a more legitimate reference than what was happening right outside the college walls. (2)

Fellow students were immersed in the principals of Modern Art - a complex and scientific language dictated by the art world in art centres like New York

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(1), (2). Kindness - conversation with John Carson.





by art critics such as Greenberg, Rosenberg and Steinberg. In this language, the paintings existed only to illustrate the text. The leading modern movement of the time was conceptualism - with exponents such as Carl Andre with his *Equivalent VIII*. (Fig.V) Conceptualism was clearly a language created by the art world, for the art world.

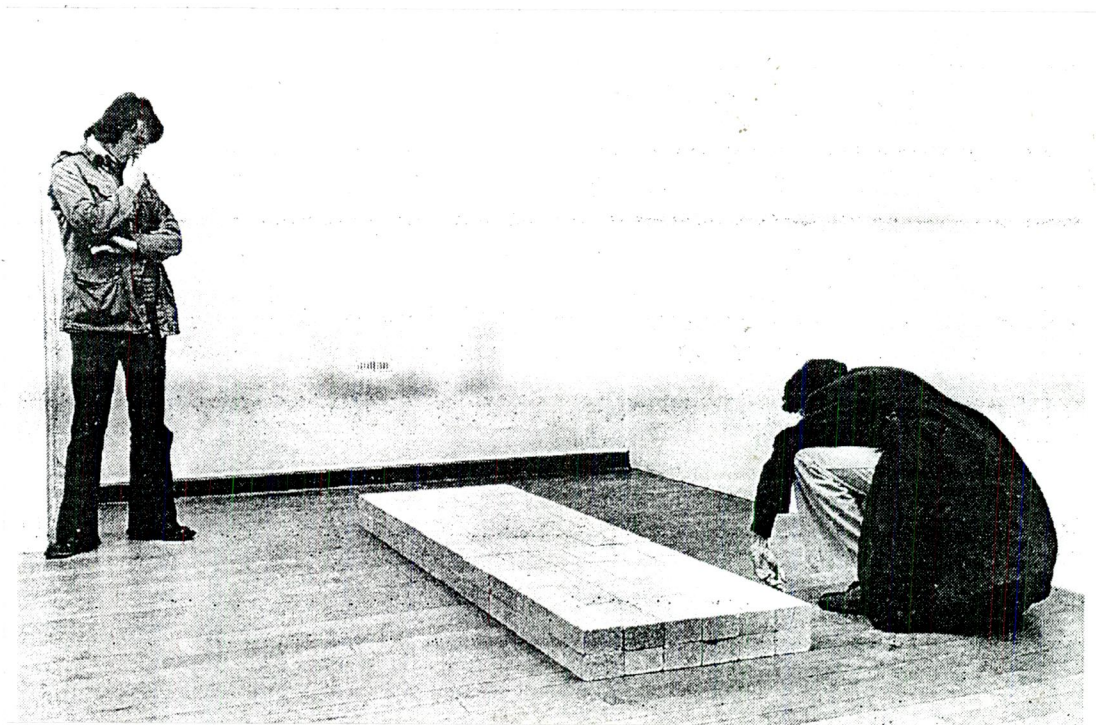
If the history of art can be viewed as a pendulum swinging between the urge to copy and the urge to invent, It is obvious that we are now as far removed from the former as primitive tribes, oriental scroll painters or willful mannerists. Instead of relating to external facts visible for all to see, artists today prefer to retreat inwards and conduct a specialised dialogue with each other, commenting not on their attitude to reality, but on their reactions to art itself. (Richard Cork. 1979. Pg. 98)

Cork goes on to cite how Constable could paint cloud studies one week and learn from Cuyp, the Dutch master the next without fear of indigestion or imitation and asks:

Were his emotions, or those of Cuyp, Gainsborough or Turner somehow debased because they were inextricably bound up with a passion for registering the most evanescent aspects of nature?..... the strength of the landscapists' feelings, and the spontaneous rapport between man and his environment..... are still particularly timely in view of the art obsessed myopia of radicalism today. (Cork 1971. Pg. 99)

Kindness realised the problems ambiguity in modern art could present to those unfamiliar with the scientific terms. Certainly he wasn't the only one to want to describe and comment on the social and political circumstances, and the false ideals of the other students, but it is important that he did. Perhaps he would identify with the words of George Bernard Shaw:





**Fig. V Equivalent VIII:** Carl Andre, Firebrick. Two art Students contemplate the piece in February, 1976. The gallery refused to reveal the price of Andre's pile of bricks, but many members of the public offered their own evaluations.





"If literary men generally were put through the mill I went through and kept out of their stuffy little coteries, where works of art breed in and in, until the intellectual and spiritual product becomes so hopelessly degenerate, I should have a thousand rivals more brilliant than myself."  
(George Bernard Shaw, 30/6/1904 in a letter to Archibald Henderson.)

The realisation Kindness made demanded that any attempt to reconcile the reality of Belfast in art would have to be based on terms other than the art of the time represented by conceptualism. Attempts to come to terms with this disturbing internal/external contrast of worlds necessitated an art practice that would have relevance inside and outside the college.

After leaving college in 1974, Kindness did not exhibit until his Bank of Ireland show<sup>whose</sup> in 1983. He worked as a graphic designer with BBC Northern Ireland for eight years, accepting any freelance jobs available. Whatever the job the answer would always be "yes" and he would then set about learning the necessary skills - from etching to signpainting. He developed a wide visual repertoire during this time. giving him the facility to recycle popular imagery, and develop the craftsmanship that has become so closely associated with him today

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(3) The *Shankill Bulletin* was a local community bulletin distributed on the Shankill Road in Belfast.







Fig VI. Night Canvas: Kindness, Acrylic on canvas, 20' x 8' "Directions Out", Douglas  
Hyde Gallery, April 1987





## Insider

All these stories are the work of an insider. "Kindness is so much a part of the fabric that he has the confidence to toss off ad - libs that an outsider might fear would offend". (4) With his work *Night Canvas* (Fig. VI) we are invited into the living room of a man being shot dead in front of his wife and child. In a cruel twist, the wallpaper is patterned with portraits of both Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams, (5) from which we can draw the assumption that the victim is neutral. He is asking us to get behind the newspaper stories, the photographs and statistics. These characters are not mindless killers, they have a look of desperation in their eyes, as if they are just a cog in a huge wheel which is turning beyond their control.

Kindness picks out the English pop artist Richard Hamilton's (Discussed in chapter 4) as one of a rare breed of outsiders who gets under the skin of things with his painting *The Citizen* (Fig. XXII).

Kindness can seem matter - of - fact about about the threat of the continuance of violence. Kindness says he would like to think of himself as a non - verbal galactic reporter from outer space, "Making as near as possible objective and dispassionate observations of the human condition as apparent in the North of Ireland." (Kindness, quoted by Carson, 1990, unpaginated.)

This statement leads the discussion to a description of what he has described as "Planet Ulster."

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(4). Quote from an article by Anne Davey Orr in "Fortnight" Magazine, 4 November 1989.

(5). Dr. Ian Paisley is a vociferous protestant leader, clergyman and politician. Gerry Adams is the leader of Sinn Fein.



## **Chapter Three**

**Politics and Myth. "Planet Ulster"**



## Planet Ulster - Politics And Myths

The situation in Northern Ireland seems to be an unresolvable and self-perpetuating conflict, at the roots of this problem being the hierarchical structure in the United Kingdom causing neglect - Northern Ireland is a fringe province, one of the last remaining colonies of the once-great British Empire, governed from the south-east of England costing millions in security <sup>with</sup> and which the people of England identify little with, and the Republic of Ireland whose conservative political policies and strong ties with the Catholic Church consistently evade any real progressive legislation. The roots of the problem in Northern Ireland are deeper than the cultural expressions and manifestations of the conflict.

The basic motivations and interests which sustain such a conflict are not a romantic nationalism (British or Irish), or 16th century theology, but concerns with equality, security and the distribution of power."

(Ruane, Todd. 1987. Pg. 39)

The Unionist population are in a curious position in that they retain control over the six counties with a majority of Protestant people in comparison to Catholics, but in the island as a whole, they are in the minority. This breeds a fear that a papist majority would discriminate against this Protestant minority in a United Ireland, and Unionists must protect their interests - which include remaining a part of the United Kingdom. The problem in Northern Ireland is perpetuated by media sensationalism and sectarian perpetuation of the sense of "Them and Us". The structural problem must be addressed: That is the job of the institutions and political powers that are involved with these institutions. The artists' role is to highlight the similarities rather than the differences through cultural means. Even with the current ceasefire, there are issues that

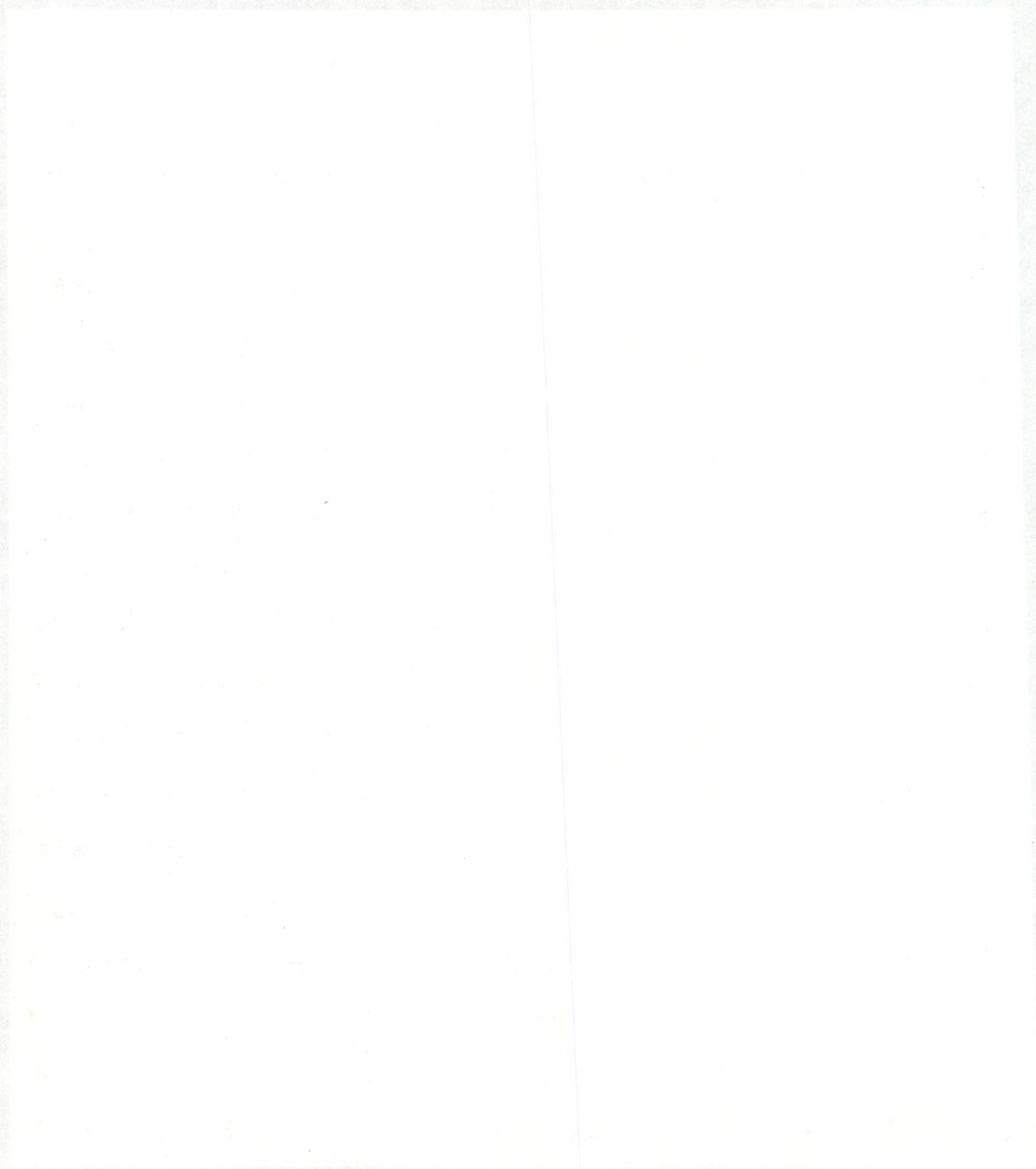






Fig. VII      Oh God: Kindness, Chalk on snappaper.





need to be addressed such as "The problem of the language that has framed the debate on Ireland" (Doherty, Sunday Times, November 1994) - i.e. the media.

Joan Fowler draws attention to Brian MC Avera's question in "Art, Politics and Ireland"<sup>2</sup>: 'What is Political Art?' . Fowler re-phrases the question, making the point that "What is Political Art?" is a misnomer because it attempts a catch-all definition instead of looking to the practices and production of artists and how these connect with the "Social/political cultural/practices and ideologies." ( Fowler, 1989, pg 117). She states that the question is not "What is political art?" but, "How is political art?" Mc Avera had seen much art criticism in Ireland concerned too much with medium rather than content, but he had pigeon - holed art into "varying degrees of social - political statement." (Fowler , 1989, pg 117.) Fowler and Mc Avera both point to another over-simplification of the issue: In 1984 the American art critic Lucy Lippard made a visit to Ireland to select contemporary Irish works for a touring American exhibition. She was particularly looking for political and "activist" art in Ireland. She submitted an article to Circa (artnotes, no. 30, Sept/Oct 1986) describing what she found. The work she reviewed she maintained did not fit into her idea of political or "activist art. She also said that she owed most of what she knew about Irish art to Circa, which is a dangerous limitation considering that one of its descriptive ideologies was that "the future of Irish art lies in the abandonment of myths." (Christopher Coppock, editorial, Circa, no. 14, Jan/Feb 1984, P.5)

Her comments prompted a reply from Kindness who stated that;

To engage in the sort of activism she describes from her American

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experience, the artist needs to be committed, s/he needs to take sides, to make choices; this is the choice that most Irish artists find impossible to make in the Irish situation.

(Kindness, Circa Issue 18 Sept/Oct 1984. Pg. 25))

In the North of Ireland, an individual may feel s/he has to be Nationalist or Unionist, because there is no real "middle" political ground between these sides. The point being that politics may lead art down the road of propaganda. However, Kindness would be the first to point out that the artist deals with inadequacies in his/her society, possibly being pedagogic in suggesting a different society.

Kindness work uses familiar dialogues. He exploits billboards, stamps, murals, advertisements, media imagery. He has wonderful ability to re-cycle these images, images such as Nationalist murals and Orange Parades are very interactive in Northern Ireland, where such icons are part of everyday life, have well-understood and accepted connotations to both communities and are ideological and cultural badges. *Spotting The Difference*, a comic strip for the Belfast People's Comic offered handy hints to strangers in Belfast wanting to differentiate between Catholics and Protestants. Provided are tell-tale clues, such as whether the eyes are close together or far apart, whether the picture on the wall is of the Queen or the Pope, and whether the butter is Dairygold or Dromona.<sup>(1)</sup>

(1) Dairygold butter is made in the Republic of Ireland and Dromona is made in Northern Ireland.





## Willie Doherty

At this point I would like to introduce Willie Doherty (The first artist in the history of the Turner prize to be shortlisted for specifically political work.) - a contemporary of Kindness's who deals with the media specifically and its propagandist tendencies. Doherty hails from the other great Northern urban centre - Derry. His work is characterised by his use of phototext. This is the same medium favoured by conceptualists such as Richard Long (2). He is also very much influenced visually by the American photo - documentary tradition. His work is very much a critique of both these forms however and he uses them in an ironic sense. He addresses the process of artistic production to communicate his intent in his approach to phototext. Thus his work partakes of the "look" of the documentary/reportage tradition but is really concerned with extra documentary intentions.

What is important when viewing Doherty's work is what we cannot see. Let us see what we have first - large scale photo-works incorporating text. The images portray a sense of rootedness, tradition and landscape, deployed as a state of mind which produce both nationalist and unionist ideologies. Although using a journalistic style, he avoids "hot spot" images.

In work such as *Closed Circuit* (Fig. XI), we are given a scene in which partitions dominate, and below, across a road the artist has printed *Closed Circuit*, the sub-title of which is *Sinn Fein Advice Centre, Short Strand, Belfast 1989*. There are no images of riot-torn Derry, no picturesque landscapes of beautiful Derry. He denies the myth of the here now/gone tomorrow photographer just as he discards the misty-eyed landscape photographer - "I want to show that these images function more as unreliable witnesses than

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(2). Richard Long, English conceptualist Phototext artist. See fig. VIII







SNOW  
WARM GRAVEL  
SNOW  
STONES ROCKS  
DUST  
PINE NEEDLES  
POWDER DUST  
GRIT

**PICO DE ORIZABA**

A 5½ DAY WALK FROM TLACHICHUCA  
TO THE SUMMIT AT 18855 FEET  
AND BACK

MEXICO 1979

Fig. VIII

Pico De Orizaba: Richard Long, 1979.





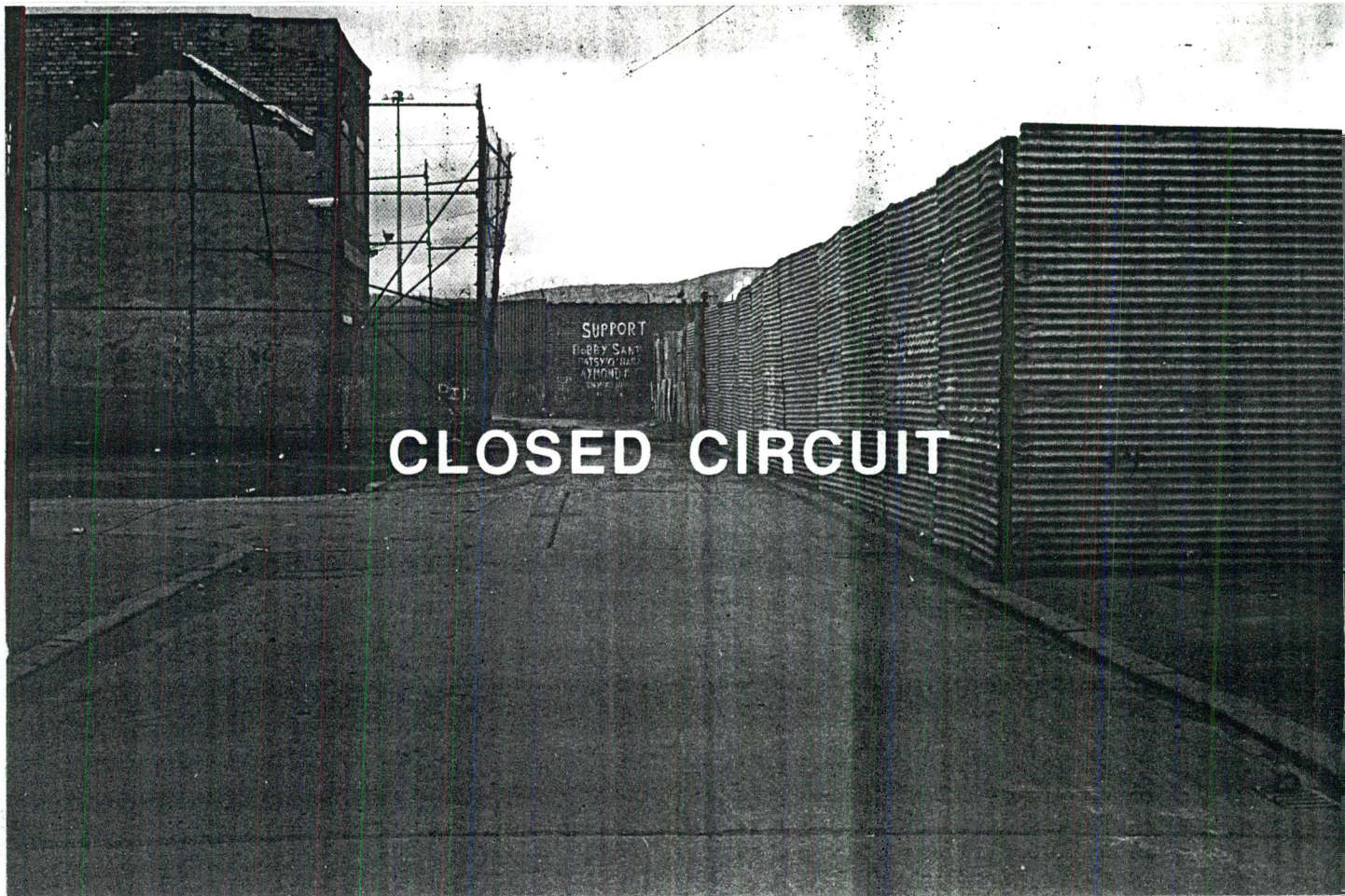


Fig. IX **Closed Circuit** (Sinn Fein Advice Centre - short strand, Belfast) Willie Doherty, Black and white photograph, with text. 1989.





precise truths." (Doherty, Sunday Times, Nov. 17 1994). The work is about boundaries and partitions. Psychological perception, rather than overt political statement is the quarry.

So Doherty uses an interplay of image and text to create meaning, visually drawing on the everyday occurrence of similar styles of image in the media to make the image more digestible for the people he wants to communicate with. The text includes vital useful information, creating the scenario and placing it in context - in this case the target is Sinn Fein and the lack of access to the media the party has (or had at the time). The image is made more accessible while avoiding sensationalist images people have come to associate with the Northern Irish conflict. The absence of the human element draws attention to itself, this human element being the most important theme running through his work. Although Doherty's work is very different in form, his concerns are very similar to Kindness' - his interest in the false ideals in the North and his concern for the human element in the urban centre.

For the Tate Gallery's Turner exhibition in 1994, he presented a video installation - *The Only Good One Is a Dead One*. It consists of two video projections - one from a moving car and the other from a parked car on a city street. An Irish male voiceover vacillates between the "fear of being a victim and the fantasy of being an assassin." (Louise Buck, 1994, P.10). "The aggressor and victim are, after all, mutually dependent on each other." (Doherty, Sunday Times, Nov. 1994). Works such as *Closed Circuit* and *The Only Good One is A Dead One* place great emphasis on the technical processes and production and particular media which are rarely deviated from and which appear to be almost

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an end in themselves. Doherty is still involved in a specialised dialogue accessible to those aware of it which may not come across to as many and varied a spectrum of people as Kindness' work, in my view.

## Myth

Kindness offers a neutral perspective and as such realises that the people in Northern Ireland are immersed in myth. These myths are idealised visions and conflicting claims to a universality, originating from outside influences - British and Irish Nationalism.

The images that such visions are manifested in end up in everyday life - murals, historic prints and watercolours on the living room wall. In the 19th century myths were thought of as fable, invention or fiction. Modern scholars approach them from the standpoint of archaic societies to whom myths were true stories - sacred and significant;

The basic human needs of food, shelter, heat and water had to be protected through rituals and festivals. The remnants of many of these survive in Ireland  
(Una Walker, quoted by Brian Mc Avera, 1987, Unpaginated).

The use of myth in contemporary artistic practice includes in its narrative shorthand extensive use of symbol and emblem, and what may at first seem to be a form of Post - Modernist ransacking of art - historical styles. The Irish are no strangers to ritual and visual symbolism - extending the religious icons of Protestantism and Catholicism beyond the site of worship and onto the streets



with parades, murals, banners, political motifs and paramilitary organisations. Although each side has its own colours and emblems, the tunes are similar even if the words are different. Each tradition often has similar references - cross or crucifix, Easter lily or Orange Lily (3). The Irish can relate to myth and symbolism.

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(3). The Easter Lily is a symbol of the Republican movement, representing the Easter rising of 1916, which was the beginning of a chain of events which lead to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921. The Orange Lily is a symbol of the Protestant Loyalists of Northern Ireland in memory of William of Orange, who, in 1690 re-established a Protestant Hierarchy, by Defeating King James II and Taking the British throne. The two lilies are one and the same physically.





## **Chapter Four**

***"A Monkeytown Besieged By Dogs"***



## A Monkeytown Besieged By Dogs (1985)

Kindness attempted in his series of chalk on sandpaper drawings; *A Monkeytown Besieged by Dogs* (Fig X) exhibited in 1985 at the Grapevine arts Centre, Dublin, to transcend the conditioning factors of class, politics and religion by opting for a format which translates scenarios of the Northern Irish political and social context into animal fable. The animals take the place of humans in an Orwellian fashion (1), thereby lampooning the images which sustain the sectarian conflict.

Kindness transplanted the notion of the siege of Derry (2) into the parallel siege of the North by the Republican movement. The Unionists become monkeys and the Nationalists become dogs. The work is drenched in satire. In the piece *A Monkey Leader*, a monkey lord mayor poses with a banana in front of a portrait of one of his predecessors. The Mayor's orange sash is decorated with the skull and cross - bones and the crown. In *Dogs In A Drinking Den*, the Republican dogs snarl, slaver and sleep in front of a map of Ireland turned on its side, thus transformed into the image of a dog. (In a neat twist the six counties look like a monkey's head in profile). Other witty scenarios include a canine crucifixion drawn as a triptych, and a snarling set of monkeys sitting around a T.V. set which feature goat and dog spokesmen on *Silly Nonsense at Six*, (3). The exhibition also featured a large mural painted in - situ.

Kindness has always been preoccupied with characters. As his 1983 Bank of Ireland Show which was full of drawings of rogues that I mentioned in Chapter 1 showed. These characters led Kindness to produce his *Monkeytown Besieged By Dogs*. The chalk and sandpaper in this exhibition give them that extra abrasive feel. The characters are just plain fierce this time - fierce in their beliefs and their

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(1) George Orwell, writer of the satirical "Animal Farm" and "1984".

(2) The Siege of Derry occurred between 1689 and 1690 when James II Catholic troops surrounded Derry after the population of the protestant stronghold refused to allow them in.

(3) A satire on BBC's "Scene Around" Six news program.





unshakeable ideals. This is subversion of sectarian paraphernalia using all the skills and references Kindness can draw from; Nineteenth century prints, Picasso's *Guernica* (i.e. The large *Monkeytown Mural* painted in situ in the Grapevine), Celtic decoration and a fascination with bad circuses and cramped zoos. *Monkeytown Beseiged By Dogs* was in a satirical tradition running from Chinese and Indian legend through "Animal Farm" <sup>(4)</sup> and present - day cartoons and comic strips. The paraphernalia subverted was derived from the iconographical formats that carry the mythological ideals that Ulster communities aspire to.

The subversion neutralises these icons (Nationalist Catholicism, Unionist ), making them universal to the identities of both sides by interpreting them as common denominators, such as food - tatey bread, sausage, egg and tomato crops up again as a large explosion in the middle of the large *Monkeytown mural*, where the two sides are blasted apart by the exploding Ulster fry. Once again, the finely - crafted drawings in *A Monkeytown Besieged By Dogs* draw the audience in, by allowing them to relate to the symbols they are so familiar with. Yet the audience can also see these images from a different angle, they can identify the ridiculousness of the Monkey and Dog caricatures, but they can see themselves as part of this scenario. By highlighting the silliness, Kindness can suggest other ways that one could act.

I mentioned an English artist whom Kindness said got under the skin of things in chapter one. The artist is Richard Hamilton and the painting is *The Citizen* (Fig. XII)

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(4) See (1)



**"The Citizen 1982-1983" Richard Hamilton**

English pop-artist Richard Hamilton's work bears a lot of interesting resemblances to that of Kindness'. Compare works such as *Just What Is It That Make Today's Home's So Different, So Appealing?* (Fig. XI) with Kindness' *Night Canvas* (Fig VI). Both paintings lampoon media imagery in a satirical fashion, Hamilton's works reproduce redundant iconic imagery in the media in which there is no apparent self-conscious comment on it's redundancy. Kindness uses iconic imagery in a very un self-conscious manner also.

Hamilton's painting *The Citizen* provoked much criticism in the North. Brian Mc Avera pointed out that;

"The blanket draped figure exposing (the hunger striker's) chest and thus his crucifix, presents a neat propaganda image of the equation: Hunger striker = Christ = Catholic Church support for the provisional IRA, an image perfectly attuned to the Republican wall murals."

(Mc Avera, 1989, unpaginated)

Hamilton claimed that the painting was a response to the media representation of the prison protest for political status by republican prisoners during the 1980-'81 hunger strikes. Mc Avera and others saw it as a naive copy of the symbolism of martyrdom which appeared in nationalist areas at this time. The argument was that *The Citizen* was not really "art" because it did not "read" as art for those with sufficient knowledge of the language of modernism, and who were aware of the background to the Northern Irish problem. The painting unpalatably echoed the religious pictures of the Catholic tradition rather than modernist painting art and society.





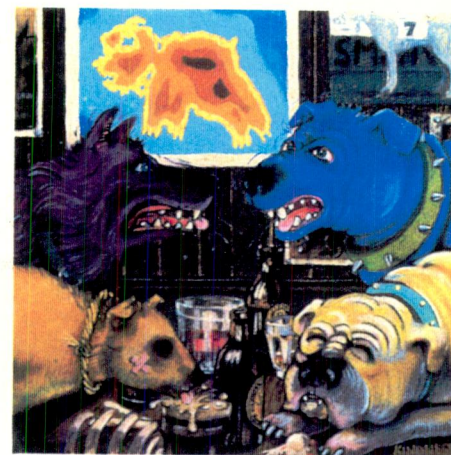


Fig. X A Monkeytown Besieged By Dogs: Kindness, (8 of 9 panels), Chalk On Sandpaper. Grapevine Arts Centre, Dublin, 1985.







Fig. XI Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?: Richard Hamilton, Collage, 1956.







Fig XII. The Citizen, 1981 - '82: Richard Hamilton, Oil on canvas.





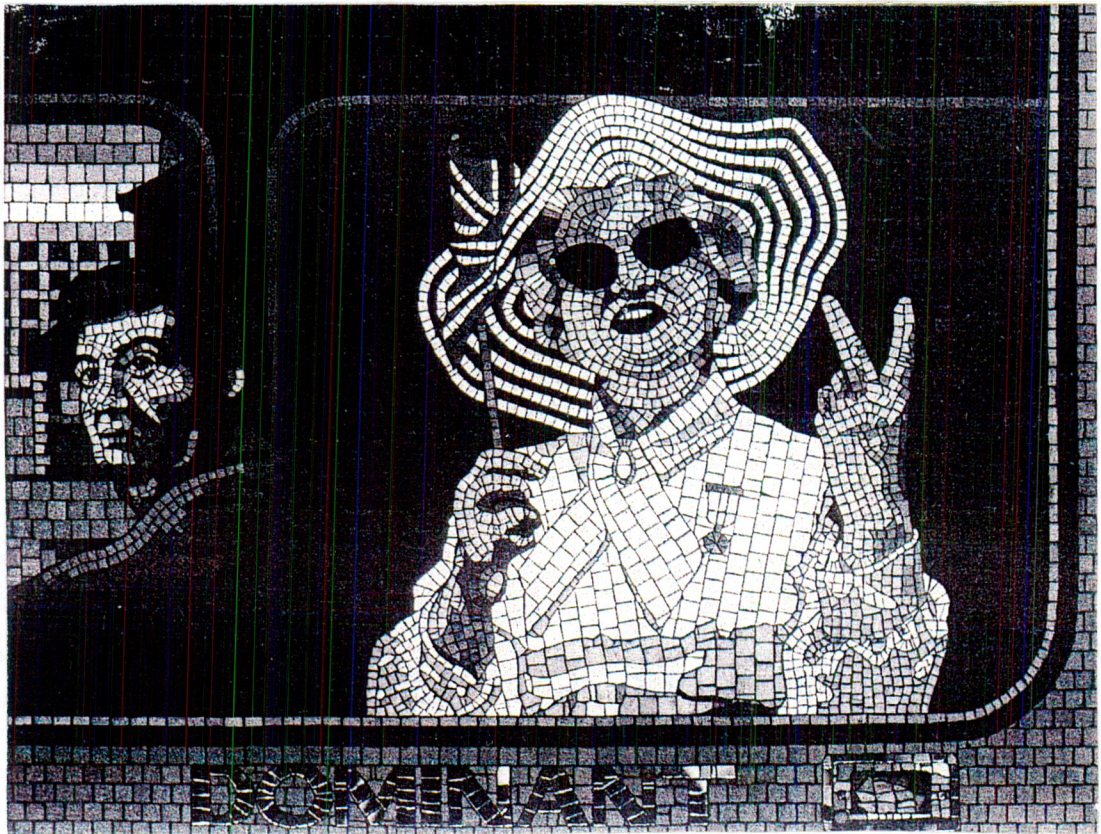


Fig. XIII

**Dominant:** Kindness. For the Ulster Bus Project, 1981. Glass Mosaic, 115'x85'.







The painting is therefore important because it raised historical and ideological questions about art:

- The *Citizen* was ~~was~~ readable in such a way that it downgraded alongside Nationalist street images.

- Form and content were essentially non-modernist.

According to Joan Fowler, the lesson to be learned is that art is -  
predicated on structures of representation which are not reducible to a purely propagandist message. The art context is involved, and it is through this that works are interpreted. (Fowler, 1989, Pg. 118)

Kindness disagrees. The "art context" was forced into him during his time at college. The Citizen was refreshing, because it was a blatantly un-selfconscious media image, the work of a pop artist. Hamilton exemplifies simply the iconic function of an image, which is pinned down as a stereotypical, mythological Irish image in this case, attempting to explore the underhand methods which the media use to force such image down our throats. Kindness, aware of this, also uses these images, but he re-activates them as vehicles for his intentions. For Example; taking the image of the Queen Mother and changing her customary wave of the hand into a fearsomely assured gesture in *Dominant* (Fig XIII).

Hamilton reproduces icons with the respect which religious ornament allude to whereas Kindness disrespects such icons. For him, they are devices of



imperialism and he tries to make us see that the media exploitation of such images ensure preservation of the North/South conflict. Pieces such as *Night Canvas* aim to de-construct idealised visions in people's heads, visions that are associated with and acted upon.

### Primitive

I have mentioned the idea of the problem in the North not being solely a cultural one but a structural one. Kindness feels <sup>even</sup> that without the British factor, the separate and distinct Protestant and Catholic cultures in Northern Irish life will always bring about some degree of friction. We could construe that he is presenting a notion of Ulster's population as animals at each other's throats, engaging in tribal warfare, however Kindness maintains that he is dealing with Irish culture by looking at what is basically important Irish people - "The animals they hunt, the food they eat, the artifacts they value, and those they define as enemies" (Kindness, quoted by Carson, 1990, unpaginated.) He says that he is not regarding Ulster people as savages and he does not consider the words "Tribal" and "primitive" to be insulting.

A primitive culture is not necessarily unsophisticated. The smartest peoples are the ones that don't aspire to progress since they have their systems working efficiently.

(Kindness, quoted by Carson, 1990, unpaginated)

He also said that if their was real will on either side to solve the problems in the North that they would be solved tomorrow. People are not sick enough of the troubles to end them. Perhaps he means that the struggle provides some





with a sense of identity. The North has seen a ceasefire Since August 1994, and a lift on the ban on terrorist - sympathising organisations such as Sinn Fein appearing on television, and are involved in discussions with all the parties in the North, the Republic and Britain. There is a long way to go, but it may well be that people are now 'sick enough' to end the troubles.

Kindness' talent for reductiveness was very much in evidence in the 1986 piece *Monkey and Dog Fighting*, a follow - up to the *Monkeytown Beseiged By Dogs* show. The piece is a large, beautiful, spherical glass mosaic of a monkey and a dog in conflict - inextricably entwined and evenly matched. It is a very refined idea. The beauty is disquieting because it springs from such violence and confusion. It is a universal image where connotations can be drawn with the present see - saw struggle between good and evil/Yin and yang/black and white It is not just a geographical or socially specific image. His work is political, but not party - political. Making any art in Northern Ireland is a political act of refusal to surrender to barbarity.



# Chapter Five

## Precious Ornaments





## Precious Ornaments

### Monkey and Dog fighting

*Monkey and Dog Fighting* was the beginning of a new phase for Kindness. After this piece the dogs which haunted and taunted us in the *Monkeytown* show lost their Republican tag and became less fierce. They developed into large three-dimensional beasts, smooth and seductive with finely patterned mosaic coats and curved poses. The *Howling Dog* (Fig. XIV) which now resides in the artists sitting room is a mosaic of broken crockery recovered from the beach near Belfast - the colours of which are reddened in parts by the rusting iron oxide brought out by long periods of its immersion in salt water. The *Howling Dog* does not seem to howl at anyone, it howls at full stretch to the heavens in ecstasy, or is it despair? It reminds one of *Oh God* (Fig. VII). The crockery used is a hark back to Kindness's past - the cupboard in every kitchen with the best china on display. He enjoys using this old broken crockery because of the sense of history behind it, the resonance (1) he gains from it. This stems from his belief in the power and preciousness of beautiful objects, his love of the idea that they be passed on for the future generations.

Where he grew up in Belfast, people collected ornaments; the china cupboard filled with delicate and precious trinkets - "Cheap tokens of other climes or romanticised visions of the homeland." (Carson, 1990, unpaginated.) The Irish cottage ashtray, the glazed pink flamingos and the inevitable duck trio in full flight on the wall. Every holiday, outing or mother's day added to the collection.

*Big Ornament* (Fig XV) is a reference to this past. It is a beautiful mosaic of broken earthenware ornaments on a plaster armature. The ornaments were

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(1) Conversation with the artist, November 1994.







Fig XIV.      Howling Dog: Kindness, Ceramic mosaic 1989.









Fig XV. **Big Ornament: Kindness**, Mosaic, 36 x 24 x 10, 1989.







Fig. XVI

Teenage Ninja Turtle Harp: Kindness, ceramic mosaic, 1991.





purchased and broken carefully. They were then glued to the cockerel - shaped armature and grouted. The "feathers" are made up of smaller bird ornaments, brightly glazed, although donkeys and sheep pop up here and there.

With *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Harp* (Fig. XVI) he made a wonderful point - he has talked of the usurping of Irish culture by the American and British culture that is cabled into our homes every day. It must be remembered however that images such as the harp, the shamrock and the round tower are very much a product of the Celtic Revival that took place in Ireland between 1880 and 1930 and which lead to independence. Ireland was occupied for so long by the British that we struggled to identify ourselves, find out about our own culture. With a lack of a visual heritage because of our colonial status, the icons (especially the tourist orientated icons) we associate with our culture are often inaccurate to say the least.<sup>(2)</sup>

For Kindness, tradition is a constantly changing animal, it is a process. The idea that tradition validates contemporary attitudes, and is therefore unchanging, is false. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Harp* is an example of the possible homogenous effect that the international media can have on tradition and culture around the globe. The media is powerful, and it is here to stay. I hope that individual cultures will not become indistinct because of it. Somehow I don't think this will happen, it must have an effect, but so had the Celtic Revival, we are still looking for our identity on this small island in this increasingly small world, but there is plenty of our heritage to be found.

With *Turtle Harp* he encapsulates this wonderfully. One can just imagine the

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(2) The last time that an Irish visual language flourished was in the 8th - 10th centuries, when the Book of Kells was illustrated and masterpieces of metalwork such as the Ardagh Chalice were made. (This during a period the rest of Europe called the "Dark Ages".)



smirk on his face as he bought all those cheap Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle mugs, and took his hammer out of the drawer.

In making *Big Ornament* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Harp*, Kindness has taken objects of Kitsch or "Low" art and transformed them into "High" art. This action puts him within the realm of other ironists such as Marcel Duchamp and, more recently Jeff Koons.

### High art/Low art.

The view that the fine arts are distinct from liberal arts or skilled artismanship is a nineteenth century one.

Art was closely related to skilled making and was contrasted with nature which allows beautiful things to be 'found' rather than 'made'.  
(Raymond Williams, 1981, p. 34)

In the early twentieth century Dada "Fell upon the fine arts" (Hans Arp) - in an effort to free itself from the past ideas of skill, harmony and beauty. Hardly any assumption of these and earlier aesthetic theories has remained unchallenged not to say actively defiled by the twentieth century. Take Marcel Duchamps' exhibit in 1914 - a readymade urinal which he called *Fountain* (Fig. XVIII) and ironically signed R. Mutt;

This is now regarded as a most significant artwork, and to an eye shaped by nineteenth century aesthetic ideas, has had ever more outrageous successors - by playing with the rules of the artgame - placing embarrassing objects in artistic contexts thereby making them function as artworks. These and many other artists changed the rules of





that game.

(The Arts Committee, 1981. P.24)

Duchamp's and Koon's intentions may have been to shock; by placing such common household objects and ornaments such as Duchamp's *Fountain* and Koon's *Popples* in a gallery environment, forcing us to question their significance and art's significance on the whole. Of this Kindness has said (3) of Duchamp that the idea was a valid and original one at the time that it was formulated, but that he has little faith in artists such as Jeff Koons who are merely re - treading old ground and who have no input into the making process (Koons takes kitsch objects and blows them up to larger than life-size replicas). Koons is a cynic, sneering at kitsch and relying on the smugness of the art coterie, he is concerned with a certain loss of meaning with regard to sculptural objects, whereas Kindness has not lost faith in the precious object into which he wants to reinvest meaning.

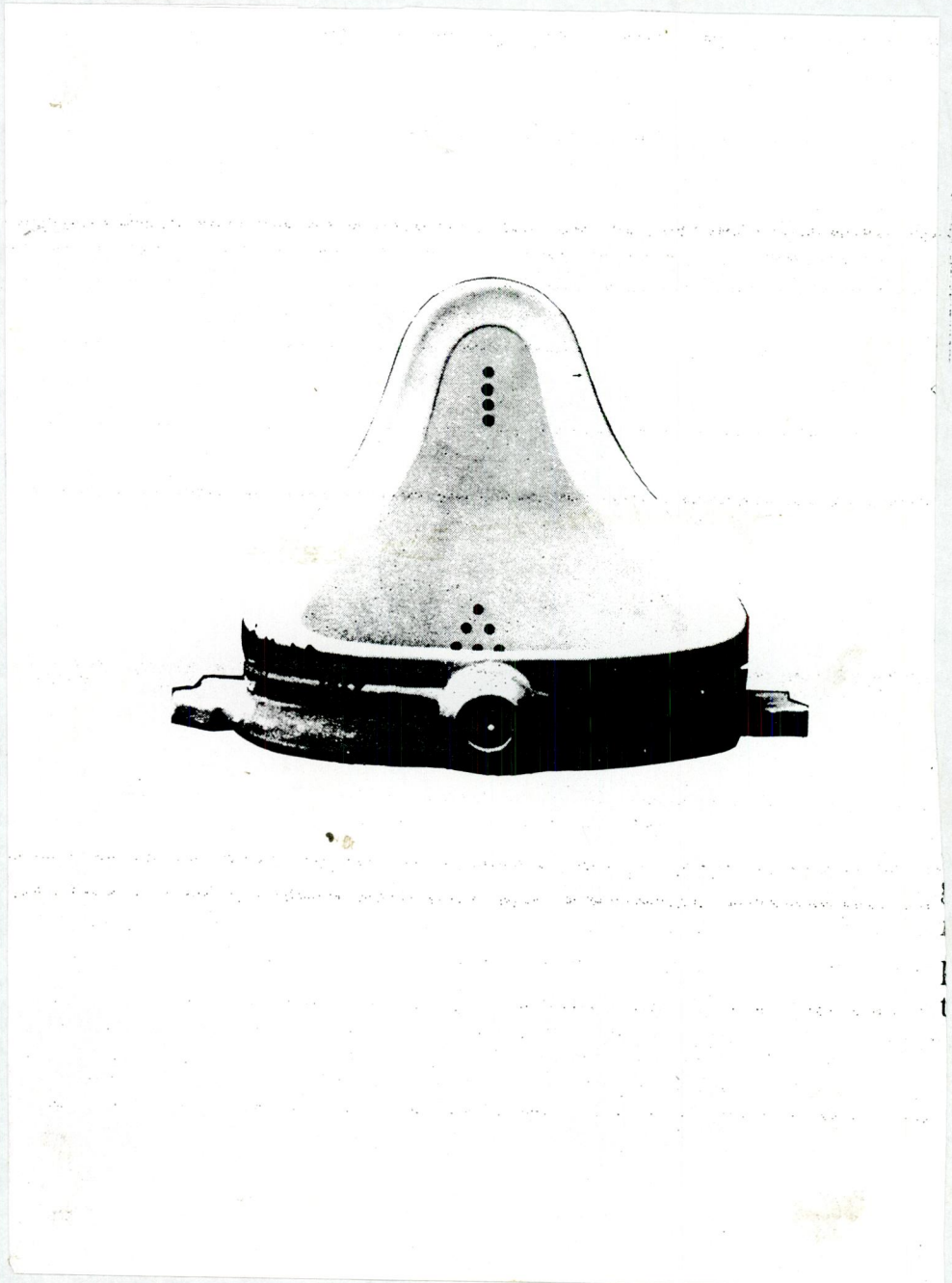
Beautiful objects have a power and preciousness because they are created to instill a sense of delight, awe and appreciation, to make one marvel at the power of human imagination and skill needed to produce them.. Throughout this essay I have discussed the slant on life that John Kindness has expressed through his work. This expression is often manifested in his ability to recycle common objects and symbols in our lives.

I think Kindness tries to break down the apparent distinctions between "High" and "Low" art. Ernest Hemingway is quoted by Jaques Barzun as an exemplification of the arrogance and factual ineptitude of the claims of self -

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(3) Conversation with the artist, November 1994





**Fig. XVII**

**Fountain:** R. Mutt (Marcel Duchamp), 1914. Glazed Ceramic Urinal.









Fig. XVIII      Stacked: Jeff Koons, 155 x 135 x 79 cm, 1988.





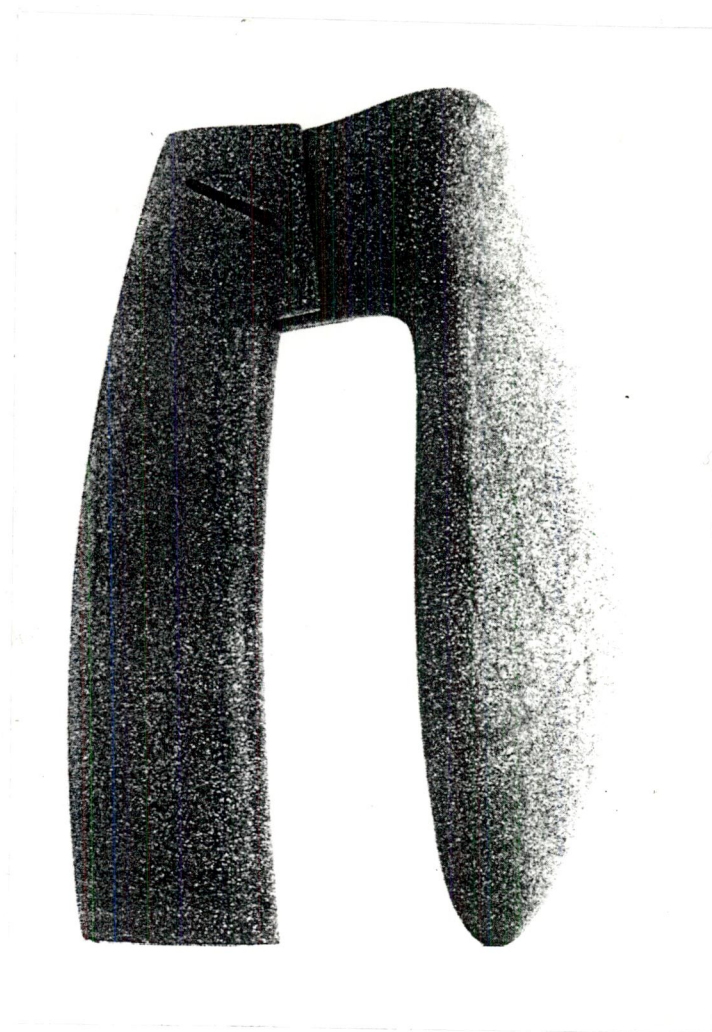


Fig. XIX

Detente: Deirdre Mc Loughlin, Ceramic 1993.









Fig. XX Spire from the Sagrada De La Familla: Antonio Gaudi, Work still in progress.





glorifying High Art:

A country, finally, erodes and the dust blows away, the people die and none of them were of any importance permanently, except those who practiced the arts.....a thousand years makes economics silly and a work of art endures forever. (Hemingway, quoted by Barzun. 1974 P. 18).

In reality fragments of art certainly remain, but usually because of physical robustness. Many other cultural achievements also endure over millennia - achievements in social science/organisation, law, science and engineering for example. Hemingway conveniently forgot this.

Kindness makes his objects so exquisite that they will be protected, or so robust that they cannot be broken. He has combined these two approaches; for example, the creature made of plaster with a coat of broken eggshell grouted and lacquered on. Whatever he does however, he crafts it meticulously. Most people respect craftsmanship, and he is well aware of this, as is Deirdre Mc Loughlin (4) who believes, to use her own analogy, that most good dancers go through a period of deep training, which they then apply to their art, rather than just saying that "training is old - fashioned, I want to express my soul." She makes this statement because of comments she received from some quarters about her sculpture:

People have told me that\ my work is well - crafted and that therefore cannot be art now at the end of the 20th century, and maybe that's so. But I still feel that in the society out of which you come most people are workers, they have skills. It doesn't matter if they don't understand what I make, but I feel it is more honourable thing if they can come and see that it is worked well.<sup>^</sup>  
(Mc Loughlin, quoted by Aidan Dunne, for the Sunday Tribune review of her exhibition in the Green on Red Gallery, Dublin, November 1993.)

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(4) Deirdre Mc Loughlin is an Irish ceramic sculptor. Her pieces consist of large, finely textured forms. She displays an uncanny aptitude for her material, and can manipulate it as very few ceramicists can.





It is true that a well - crafted work is not enough, one cannot discount the fact that the art forum is a highly - developed world, where one cannot merely re - tread old ground, after all, art is supposed to be innovative. To say that a well - crafted work is not art is also a misnomer. Mc Loughlin's work is highly crafted, however it is also about sculptural innovation, why should craftsmanship be considered old hat?

The truth is that a fully committed Artist is different from people whose work lies in other fields not so much for what they are as for what they do.

(The Arts Committee, 1981. P.25)

Artists are not super - human. While some of them may be exceptionally talented people, They are still People, and surely the best art is fundamentally concerned with people, their nature and the nature of their lives. Takeshi Yasuda (5) once said that people here are always trying to separate art, philosophy and other 'Highly Charged' occupations from life. They say art is for the artist, or that philosophy is for the philosopher. Art is life, philosophy is life. He loves throwing pots, his pots reflect who he is, and he uses them everyday. His art is part of his life. Takeshi is very much against making pieces for gallery exhibition specifically. For a thrower to work solely for exhibition is ridiculous to him. He shares the belief of Mike Robinson (6) who said that everybody should own beautiful cups to drink out of. If people lived with beautiful work they would realise how important art is to life. Why is art only placed in galleries where it is elevated to something above material existence, it is to be worshipped, whispered around like a deity. The gallery is like a shrine,

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(5) Takeshi Yasuda was born in Japan where he ran a successful pottery for ten years. He moved to Britain 15 years ago and is now a lecturer in the Belfast College of Art.

(6). Mike Robinson is a former curator of the Ulster Museum. This para-phrase is taken from a lecture he gave at NCAD on 7th February 1995.



a church.

### **Price of an Artwork**

I think that John Kindness has realised that art demands a sense of craft and understanding of materials in order to appeal to the layperson. Consider the price of an artwork. A quickly executed painting on canvas in a good frame in a gallery will cost a certain amount of money, that this amount necessarily accounts for exhibition costs, gallery commissions, framing, plinths, slow turnover and the time needed to work up the idea involved, sketching, etc. is often not apparent to someone with little knowledge of such costs and the amount of money asked for the piece may seem extraordinarily high. In fact the artist will probably not be receiving enough money for the effort involved. However if the artwork demonstrates to some extent the work put in, the time involved and the skill needed to produce it, it may make more of an impact, allow people to understand the effort put in, demand closer inspection. Kindness stresses the importance of

Pieces that strike you from across a room, and don't disappoint on closer inspection. (Conversation with the artist, November 1994)

He himself often dispenses with framing etc, or simply incorporates them into the piece i.e. the frescos exhibited in the Kerlin late last year, where he hung his plaster boards on the wall without any frame, and with the ragged edge of the plaster un-squared. He also had a glass case displaying relevant pages from the Craftsman's Handbook and some source material for the





exhibition on display, as he has done for other exhibitions, giving insight into process and inspiration.

### **Audience**

When asked what was really lacking at art college in Belfast, Kindness said that it was an audience. (conversation with the artist, November 1994). Since then he has concerned himself avidly with creating as wide and varied an audience as possible. The first exhibition he organised in 1983 was not at a conventional art venue. He turned the lobby of the Bank of Ireland in Belfast into a studio and exhibition space for three weeks, and met many people happening upon him and his work each day. He has said that the biggest barrier between artist and audience is the hierarchy of curators and administrators and institutions who hold the keys to the front gates. His anti-elitist attitude has consequently allowed him to create studios in Dublin Airport, (*Big Shoe Dog* (Fig. XXI)) and St. Stephens Green shopping Centre (*Mr American Express* (Fig. XXIV)) as well as getting involved in public art projects such as the *Waterfall* in Belfast Bus Station. Kindness has often cited the Catalan architect Antonio Gaudi as an inspiration. Compare Gaudi's spires from the *Sagrada Familla* (Fig. XX) to Kindness' mosaics, for example. Gaudi, a native of Barcelona, drew his inspiration for such buildings as the cathedral *Sagrada De La Familla* (Still under Construction) and the *Parc Guell* from the existing buildings in the city, and metamorphosed these highly organic and ornate designs to form his own style. Consequently, his buildings melt into their architectural settings. They are still unmistakably Gaudi, yet also unmistakably Barcelonian. His ceramic mosaic decorations are the work of a







Fig. XXI

Big Shoe Dog: Kindness 1989, from "Gateway To Art" exhibition, Dublin Airport.







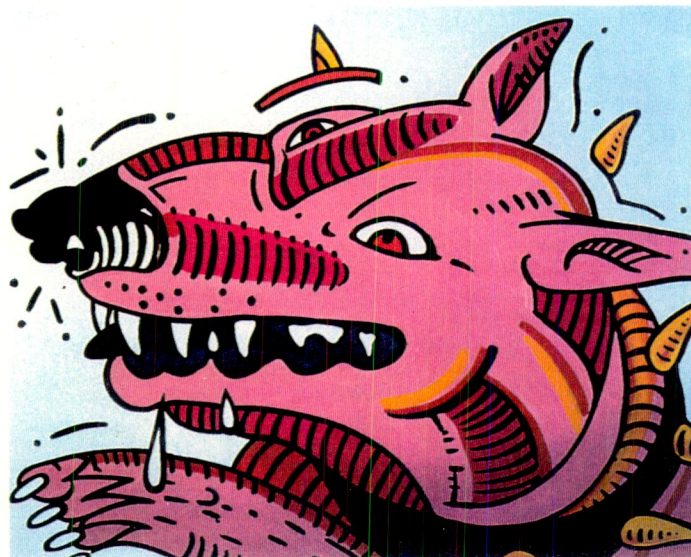


Fig XXII

Some Dogs Not Allowed On Belfast Buses: Kindness. Acrylic on fascal vinyl. From Skybreaker Belfast Bus Art: , 25" X 2", 1984.







Fig. XXIII

The Dealers: Merchants Quay, Dublin, Kindness, September 1987.  
Handpainted Billboard for "Artists On The Boards", 20' x 10'.





master and his wrought iron gates seem to come alive. Kindness would like to work in the same manner. He does not want to impose his pieces on the public, he uses references to their own lives to allow them to identify with his pieces.

#### **Waterfall - Belfast Bus Station, 1991**

This sculpture is made of the same cheap broken crockery, (a ceramic harp section appears in a recent "Smithwicks" advertisement) as *Big Ornament* (Fig. XV). mentioned earlier. It hangs from ceiling to floor, a mosaic on a concrete armature. The crockery again reflects the homes of the people who use the station. It is obvious from its glass and ceramic construction that this is not a "real" waterfall. A real waterfall would have probably been easier and cheaper to construct. The piece is a plea for people to recognise the urban environment, for the public space to be regarded as a living space and not a location for endless bronze sculptures and waterfalls.

Kindness has made many one - off pieces in the presence of his audience - *Big Shoe Dog* (Fig. XXI), a plaster form whose coat was a cladding of leather from shoes donated by the users of Dublin Airport (into a box labelled *Old Shoes For John Kindness*), is a good example. He is simply telling us how easy it is to get people involved with your art and show them how it is made. He knows if he respects his audience they respect will them. The people who did donate shoes will remember Kindness if they pass through the airport again, and smile to themselves as they recognise one of their old shoes stitched onto the back of a bullet - shaped dog.





### **Skybreakers (Fig. XXII)**

He made the streets of Belfast in 1984 with a selection of fierce slavering dogs, erected on buses, that were painted with acrylic on fascal vinyl in the finest tradition of the master sign painter. The huge dogs growl and bare their eager jaws above the nonchalant passengers inside, making them all the more frightening - is this a comment on the media stories of sectarian violence that we have all become so used to?, or does Kindness just think that dogs should be allowed on buses? There are many more questions that you could ask yourself.

### **The Dealers (Fig. XXIII); Merchant's Quay, Dublin 1987.**

In 1987 Kindness created a billboard on the streets of Dublin entitled *The Dealers* (Fig. x) depicting a well - known postcard image of two youngsters loading turf into a donkey's panniers. Kindness had them instead loading Heroin,<sup>(7)</sup> with syringes hung around the donkey's neck. An acidic comment indeed on the idealised tourist image of Dublin.

### **Mr. American Express (Fig. XXIV); St Stephen's Green Shopping Centre, Dublin 1991**

In 1991, Kindness created a biscuit mosaic in one day on the floor of St. Stephens Green Shopping Centre. The mosaic depicted the well-known profile of the symbol on the American Express credit card. Let us consider the meaning inferred here. The St. Stephens Green Shopping Centre is a shopping mall, a common occurrence in the urban environment to day. It is like all shopping malls, a consumer heaven with multinational chain stores vying for trade in an air-conditioned white cube complete with plastic plants and cash

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(8) Dublin has an extensive heroin problem in the inner - city in particular.







Fig. XXIV

Mr American express: Kindness 1991. Biscuit Mosaic 5' x 5', St. Stephen's Green Shopping Centre, Dublin.





machines. It has little in common with its immediate locality and from the public sphere. Kindness played on this, re-creating the American Express symbol, a symbol of buying power and thus an implied sense of happiness, security and well-being that such symbols may falsely represent in the middle of this monument to such symbols to the shopping mall. Not only this, but he presents the symbol made entirely out of Biscuits, from which we can draw a myriad of meanings. Biscuits are advertised as wholesome, carefully prepared and therefore as good as home-baked, when in fact they look like something NASA developed for deep-space missions. Kindness calls for a re-assessment of our lives when such symbols as the American Express card give us comfort.





## Conclusion



## Conclusion

In 1988, over a two - week period, Kindness was able to play his political edge with the *Newsprint* (Fig. XXV) project. He would work from 3 30 am every morning scanning the morning editions of the newspapers, teaming up with screen printer Robin Carson at about 6.30 am to put the day's image on a screen. The printing was done in full view of the public in the shop window - like space of the Octagon Gallery. the posters were then delivered each day by the Belfast Telegraph to 50 newsagent's all over Northern Ireland where they were mounted on headline boards.

Responding to a headline that the Unionists had agreed to consider taking part in the Anglo - Irish talks, Kindness produced an image with Ian Paisley, Charlie Haughey and James Molyneaux standing under a sky of winged pigs (Fig XXV). The most popular image however was that of Jackie Charlton who had lead the Irish football team to victory over England in the European Championships that year, sprouting shamrock from his head (Fig XXVI). The irony of an Englishman as an Irish National hero must have been irresistible for Kindness.

In my introduction I said that their were two directions in Kindness' work - his critique of the social hypocrisy in Northern Ireland, and his concern with the aesthetical criteria we use in considering what is art. It is not easy to choose single works by him that are taken over by any one of these directions. Both directions are dependent on one thing - his commitment to the public. For if he did not care about what people were doing to themselves in Ulster, he would not be so involved in getting his art across to them, which means assessing your aesthetic approach to making art, in order to reach your audience.





In the 60's Mike Robinson was perusing the Tate gallery, and came across a painting that was so funny he laughed out loud. He couldn't believe it when a guard asked him to leave for laughing at a humorous piece of art, and told the guard where to F@!£ off, whereupon he was forcefully removed. If this were the security procedure in a gallery exhibiting the work of John Kindness, you might need riot police. Thankfully as it is, one is free to laugh at Mr. Kindness' pieces, since they are delivered with the skill of a comedian. It was Kindness who stated his intention the best - "Humour draws people in, you nudge them to look at things your way, from your perspective." (1)

With his *Art On The DART* (Fig I) series he exercised his comic skills to great success in a very popular series of false advertisements. When an early idea for his Valentine's day stamp designs (none of which were published) was that of an Orangeman embracing *Mise Eire* (2), was rejected for being too politically potent, he made a toned down design - *Cupid* (Fig. XXVII) of a cupid sharpening his arrows that is humorous, but not as strong as the Orangeman idea.

Much of the work I have discussed in this essay relates to the Northern Irish situation. Kindness lived in America for a year from 1989 to 1990, due to a fellowship from the International Studio Programme in New York. There he produced much work, the most popular being his etchings on taxi - cab fragments. The idea came after passing an old taxi - cab door that was lying outside the studio door every morning, and finally deciding to use it for something. The result is a selection of bright yellow doors and various other

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(1) excerpt from the short explanation of his work for the *Art On The Dart* series.

(2) *Mise Eire* is the mythical Mother Ireland.







Fig. XXV

Newsprint; Kindness. Screenprint on paper, 20' x 30'. Octagon Gallery, Belfast and 50 sites throughout Northern Ireland, 1988.







Fig. XXVI

Jackie Charlton (Newsprint Project); Kindness. Screenprint on paper, 20' x 30'. Octagon Gallery, Belfast and 50 sites throughout Northern Ireland, 1988.





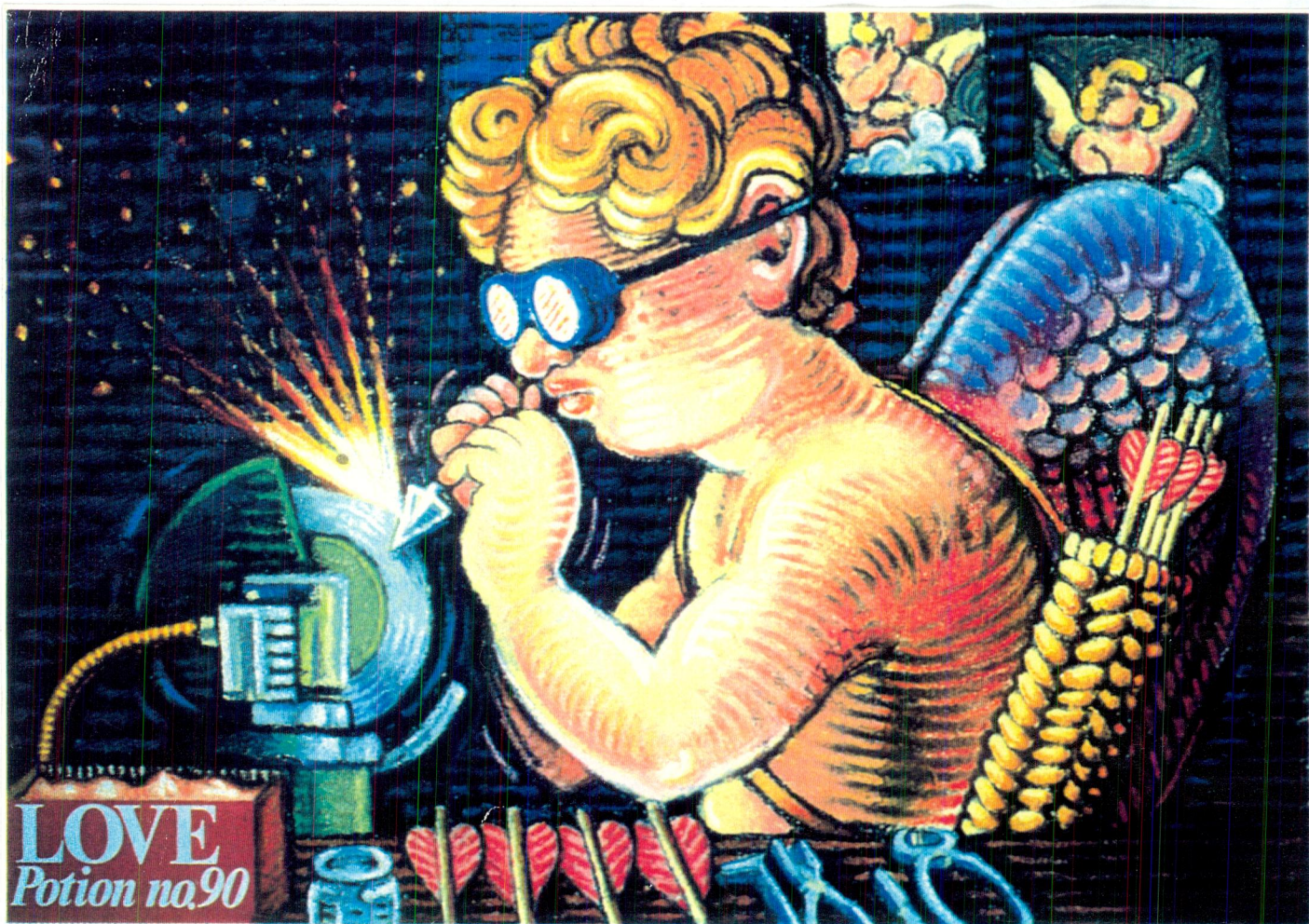


Fig. XXVII      Cupid: Kindness, chalk on sandpaper, 37 x 24 , unpublished stamp design 1989.







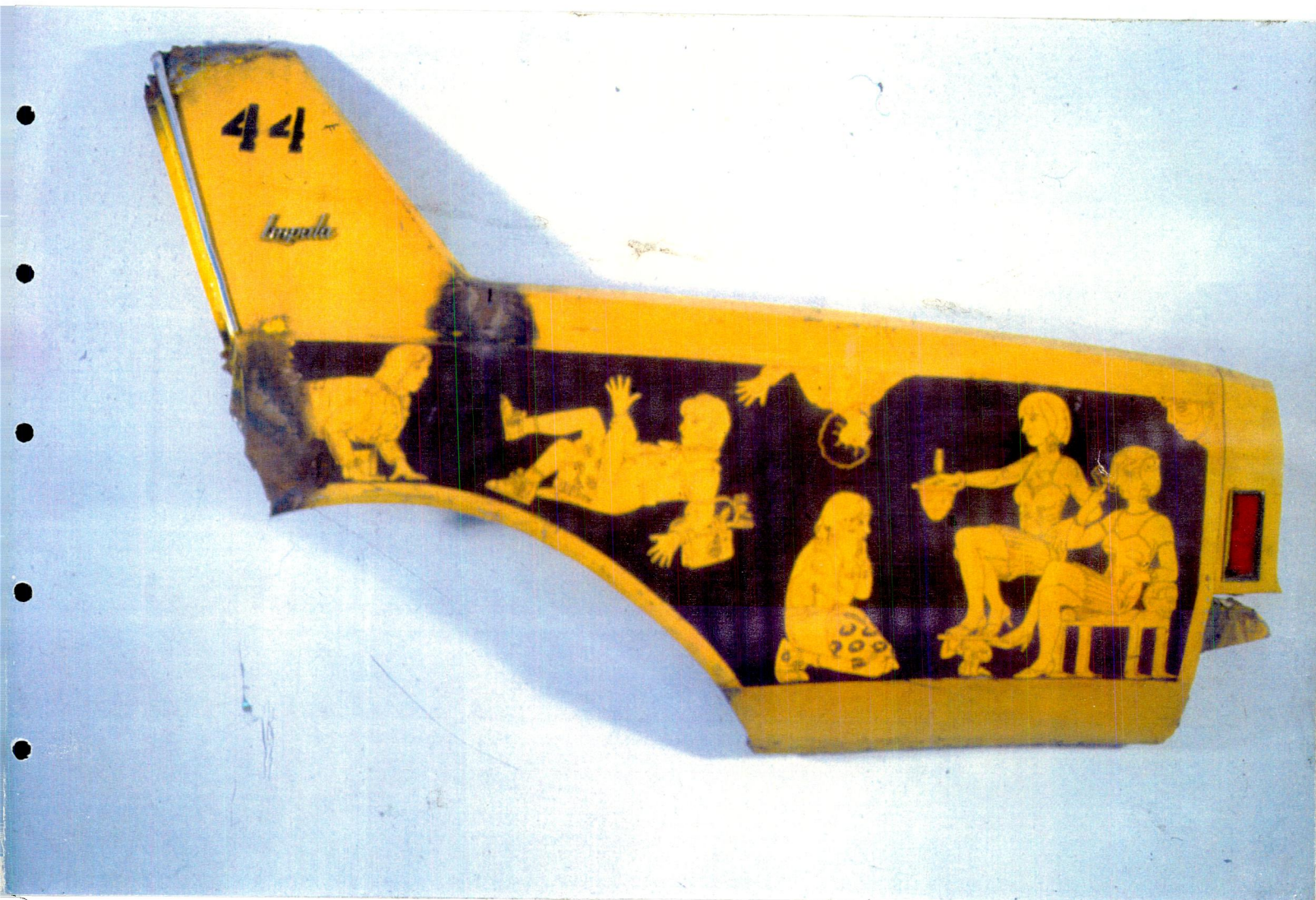


Fig. XXVIII    **The Fall Of The Corporate Women: Kindness.** Etching on Taxicab fragment, 1990.









Fig XXIX

Monkeytown T - Shirt: Kindness 1985. From *A Monkeytown Besieged By Dogs*





parts of taxis etched in black in a style similiar to classical Greek pottery decoration. This is an Irish artist in New York, working in a style that is very much his own, but making satirical comments on New York life in such pieces as *The Fall Of The Corporate Women* (Fig. XXVIII), depicting a dowdily dressed woman falling into a pit to her knees in front of two powerfully dressed women playing with their hair and resting their feet on pedestal, looking through the fallen woman's purse. Kindness gets a couple of dog references into the pieces yet again; people with pooper - scoopers. His method of production and approach to his art - making did not change because of his sojourn in New York, the subject barely changed, and most importantly, the relevance of his work is not diminished by the fact that he is a foreigner in a foreign city. He has always dealt with the universal, and this is always relevant.

It should be evident from my discussion of John Kindness' work that he has many talents and many influences. He is an individual, he refuses to be tied to any medium, or any subject. He approaches each new project as if it were a fresh start. Learning the skills, and getting familiar with the qualities of the medium, he experiments, confuses and overlaps categories. He says,

Why can't an artist be like a filmmaker, who plays across genres, or an architect whose every building will neccessarily be different in response to different circumstances? (Quoted by Carson, 1990, unpaginated.)

Why indeed? I believe Mr. Kindness to be very special. He is a comedian, communicator, caricaturist, and master craftsman. He has consistently come up with intelligent and humourous visual playlets, speaking for so many, and teaching people the meaning of his art, as an important activity that can make





our world more pleasureable, and can teach us to laugh at our own ineptitudes.

Kindness has a great effect on me, and my approach to my work. His un-self-consciousness is refreshing, and he has shown me the meaning of Mc Luhan's "medium as the message". I am grateful for what I have learned; now, perhaps I won't be afraid to remember how visually important my childhood toys were to me and be as likely to draw from that source as from Egon Schiele or Viola Frey.

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned from him was his advice to young art students leaving college. He told us to get our art seen - to go directly to the public. He said that galleries are not important. Set up shop on the pavement, or wear t - shirts with your art on them. Never be intimidated by the hierarchy of administrators and curators that seem to have the key to the front gates. He has proved that it is possible to find side entrances.



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## **Interviews**

My discussions with John Kindness were informal conversations and were not taped.

1. Conversation with John Kindness, 28th September 1994.
2. Conversation with John Kindness, 5th October 1994.

