

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF A PLACE

(An analysis on the attempt to build a culture in Derry)

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PREFACE

The Post-modern situation has provided a critical review of the modern experience. It has been involved in attempts to survive and come to terms with its insecure end: "of trying to catch its' tail in its' mouth and to understand the destiny inflicted upon it."(1)

The efforts to build a culture in Derry take account of the development of this post-modernist culture and the influence it has exerted in the Western world. Analysis has been made of the major source of this influence namely America and attempting to illustrate shifting trends through the visual arts. I have chosen artists who have exhibited in Derry since the inception of the Orchard gallery and whose work bears a relation with the context of the gallery. I have also been interested in illustrating contrasting styles and developments in attitudes through the inclusion of artists both of whom in each case represent shifting perceptions. The conclusion draws on theoretical arguments whose effects can only be judged through time.

FOOTNOTE.

- (1) Donald Kuspit discussing the relevancy of abstract art in post-modernist society: "Back to the future."

INTRODUCTION

The Orchard gallery, since its' inception in 1978 has provided a framework enabling artists of international standing to work within a specific environment. From the outset it has been the aim of the gallery to forge a link with the community in the belief that art has a special role to play in society; that art can have meaning in a troubled environment as there exists in Derry. Concentration on the space as a mere receptacle for exhibition purposes have been swept aside to allow for the development of a broad mainstream of music and performance, plus expansion into new buildings including planned sites for new gallery spaces. The visual arts programme attempts to engage the community in the processes involved in the production of art through regular film/slide shows to the requesting of exhibiting artists to hold brief workshops and discussions about their own work.

Internationally, art has evolved into a state of pluralism as exists today, professing no one dominant style or no orthodox criticism. The breaking up of late modernism has led to an aesthetism of the anti-artistic, producing many new forms of art, site-specific work and textual pieces to name a few. It has also led to an institution theory of art. The many postures of pluralism suggests a cultural stalemate, an assured status-quo, even a political screen. In a sense late modernism stood for order, specificity and tradition, holding its' place in a patriarchal culture. Greenberg defined modernism as "the historical tendency of an art practice towards complete self referential autonomy." (1) Borne out of this thinking was a belief that late modernist art held a position simulating a superior culture, a means to an intuition of the subline which for Lyotard, a contemporary of Greenberg, meant "the

unrepresentable-that which allows itself to be made present." (2)

The autonomy of the act of art outlined in the aesthetic proposals of Greenberg and his contemporaries lost ground fast. Political events eroded abstractions' hold on mainstream art during the 1960's. The emerging of conceptual art undermined modernism paving the way for a post-modernist culture that has become during the 1980's associated with consumerism. Culture has become an industry of its' own, crucial to the world economy. The artistic avant-garde has been embraced by mainstream American culture and has become an integral part of it. Obsession with newness has led to uncritical acceptance to whatever is chic regardless of its true worth. In effect the avant-garde has been reduced to an agent of formalist innovation. A fashionable situation has arisen, answering both the need to innovate and the need to change nothing. The resulting atmosphere masks a profound social inertia.

Marxist interpretation of these events relates to post-modernism as the necessary culture of late capitalism. The bureaucratisation of the art world has led to the rejection of any serious concerns about arts' moral centre. In turn, lack of criticism has induced an unwillingness on the part of contemporary youth to explicitly attack on-going events, an effect of being so deeply immersed in post-modernist space. Central to this argument is what Frederic Jameson claims to be a new schizophrenic mode of relating to the world, that is not having a sense of time as continuous. The persistence of an identity over a period of time has been described by Lacan as the sentence not recognising the time element in language.(3) As a consequence of this breaking down, concentration becomes focused on the literalness and presentness of the particular context. Living in a perpetual present is, from a Marxist

viewpoint, the disappearance of a sense of history which post-modernism seeks to unleash.

In many respects, parallels may be drawn between the programme instigated through the Orchard gallery and the fashions established by the pluralist formations during the end of the 1960's. It may not be too unreasonable to presume a link with the social changes occurring at this time and the call for civil rights during the outbreak of trouble in the 'North'. Media coverage has played its' role, defining the situation as located in one corner of a small island, off Britain, off Europe. Ironically the marginalisation legacy is the hallmark of centuries of division, the past is still very much part of the present, still occupying territory mapped out since 1690. The aspirations of the Orchard gallery to align the international and the vernacular plan to dispel the cultural and social inferiority entrenched through history. Its administration unites people and ideas within the community to ideas from outside dealing more with process than the product of art activity. In a certain manner this may pave the way for a paradoxical interpretation of the Orchard gallery as it attempts to locate itself within an international community.

Again, heavy condemnation of the 'media' may be a hazardous approach as it becomes too readily attributed to all social evils. Endorsing it with fabulous powers becomes an excuse for not redressing our involvement in the media's contribution to formed views on particular situations. The machine, according to Marshall McLuhan was not to blame but what one did with the machine.(4) From the time Cubism seized on instant, total awareness, announcing the medium as the message, the impact of a unique aesthetic statement has lessened with advances in the communications system. According to Harold Rosenberg challenging the version of events disseminated by contemporary

propaganda machines with a painting or sculpture is like "battling a tank division with a broomstick." (5) Capitalism has rendered the production of art as a commodity. Recognition of a more direct means of communication has encouraged the promotion of performance based art. This critical position in relation to the production of art acknowledges a desire to see art as an engagement at both economic and superstructural levels with political and social realities, avoiding any appropriation by the dominant culture. It is the belief that all cultural practice represents a definable politics, denial of which only serves to produce an art susceptible to manipulation. The grip of the political status-quo on the arts is often ignored, leading people to picture 'political art' belonging solely to the left. As Lucy Lippard states, "Delusion of cultural powerlessness parallels the powerlessness in the real world that makes working people passive in the face of government harassment. Both are producers without whom those who profit from production would be profitless and powerless." (6)

Current regionalisation policies throughout the U.K. operate under such controlling systems. Private sponsorship threatens to take control of the arts resulting in controlled education, culture and expression. The arts council exists to distribute funds to art projects all over Britain, yet its committees are not democratically elected. The audience is continually defined as consumers of cultural products, the government is no longer interested in public subsidy for the arts, resulting in continued attacks on funds. Private sponsorship has the effect of delivering the audience to the sponsor, not the art to the audience. The damage resides within the structures of mediation as pressure increases to locate the audience. In 1972 the community arts movement began in England. The association of community artists formed as a result, believing

in the need for cultural production. The government increasingly calls for the need to democratise culture claiming the arts to be enjoyed solely by a small higher educated minority, causing problems for their continued support in a democratic society, pressing the need to broaden education facilities to allow for greater appreciation for the arts amongst ordinary people.

Art and politics are seen as part of culture, part of the process in establishing an identity. Declan McGonagle of the Orchard gallery is most adamant on this topic stating "there is no such thing as non-political art or non issue based art because you either condone a set of circumstances by producing work which operates within one set of conversions or another.(7)" There exists a view of art proffering its innocence, informed by the status-quo. Artists living in Ireland have been accused of not reaching anywhere near the level of confrontation found in non-Irish artists who raise Irish political issues such as Les Levine. Lucy Lippard, American art critic has commented on the lack of explicit political/social art. In America during th 1970's the feminist politics of that era advocated this more direct approach in tackling social issues. The different historical and social conditions that obtain in America present a difference in emphasis on interpreting cultural activism. The political violence in the North of Ireland adds an extra dimension where artists see first hand what the results of warring factions are. There exists different cultural parameters. Artists are interested in art which analyses rather than propagandise. The overall perception is of a need to examine art itself; the means and social relations of its production; the contexts in which it is produced and accorded recognition.

CHAPTER I

The initiation of the Orchard gallery and its visual arts programme in 1978 provided a basis with which to assess the Derry region in terms of its location within a larger context. The provision of an outlet, not only for promotion of Irish art, but also attitudes to Ireland formed through centuries of tradition, has generated an energy laid dormant during the last few decades of struggle within the community. Once the direction of the Orchard gallery had been decided, a programme was set in motion in an attempt to correspond with related activity in Britain and eventually further afield. Early projects established links with English artists experimenting with the new mediums of performance and photography. The conceptual strand within art circles during the seventies allowed for site-specific and textual work to be carried out, a process closely allied to the interests of the Orchard's development as a community outreach programme. Photography, given new emphasis and being widely explored, became an effective medium in challenging political issues. In Britain particularly, expression became manifest in their age-old association with the landscape. An influx of photographs involving the passiveness of the earth as exemplified by Richard Long's walks through Britain echoes Herbert Marcuse's statement that "the world really is at appears in the work of art."⁽¹⁾

Early exhibitions at the Orchard gallery sought to embrace the photo-works emerging from England which were seen as potential elements for comment on sensitive issues in Ireland with its own oppression of landscape in the past. Artists included Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, Tony Rickaby, each introducing their own particular way of working considering the environment in which they operate. The landscape tradition in Britain, dating back to the developments in the sixteenth century has

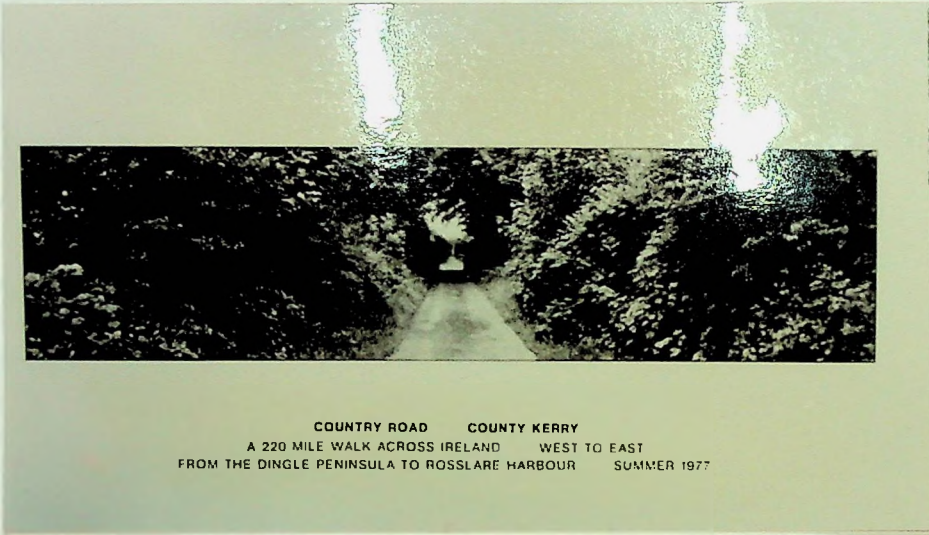
presented such notables as Girtin and Turner, although perhaps most resonant in the haunting portrayals through literature by the likes of Hardy, Blake and Lawrence. England is a land attached to a past brought to memory through books, buildings, pictures, travelling beyond the immediate past to a remoter past as was exemplified by humanism during the Renaissance in Italy or Pre-Raphaelitism and the arts and crafts movement. Even during the reign of the present conservative government, such prevalent thinking resting on the belief of such a 'great tradition', representing the best of mankind's achievements whose lineage can be traced from classical Greece, through ancient Rome to the Renaissance and the glories of Elizabethan England, affects its policies on the terms of a 'serious art' in contrast to popular culture which is often seen as a lesser form of activity.

As a representation of a particular community there exists a governing body which must raise certain contradictions on the allegiance of the gallery to its audience, a feature in common with the divorcing of the region from the mainland. However, the photoworks in question, notably those of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton do not pursue any form of patriotism to the extent as practised in the more distant past. Their relationship with the landscape verge more on universal concerns illustrated by their enthusiasm for exploring different lands. Intrusion into foreign territory may be regarded as expressing an underlying political point of view, only to be dismissed in terms of its effectiveness as a product outside of its natural environment. Modern, suburban America may have difficulty interpreting the work of Hamish Fulton who prefers to let the landscape impose on him. In contrast, the United States represents one of the most dynamic clashes between nature and culture. The artists in America who, like Fulton, work out of doors with the environment meet this clash

face to face and dually became part of the pioneering avant-garde movement known as Earth art. Landscape was no longer capable of being used as a metaphorical image, becoming a material to physically manipulate via pneumatic drills and bulldozers. A type of art voiced to be necessary due to the age of the 747 aircraft and the moon rocket etc.

It is perhaps ironic then that Fulton first drew his inspiration from journeys made in the United States during a visit in 1969. The photographs he took impressed on him the nature of landscape as a particular kind of art-form. The focus of Fultons art is nature and mans most basic relation to it; walking in it. Unlike an American earth artist such as Michael Heizer, Fulton makes no reference to technological or urban culture. Highlighting differences to cultural divides becomes endemic to the process involved bringing to light traditional approaches to art-making and its attached value systems. The existence of a border in the context of Derry condenses the wider divide of the concept of a technological utopia against the barrenness of certain landscape traditions of a largely European origin. The separation of Derry from its natural hinterland of Donegal exaggerates this clash providing two forms of landscape existing side by side; an organised, more affluent state of land in tandem with the largely undeveloped celtic nature of the Donegal region.

Hamish Fulton concentrates on the more primitive aspect of not only walking through the landscape but also the presence of the land he chooses to photograph and document. Donegal presents this challenge to Fulton with all its traditions and antiquity. The mystification invoked by the monastic settlement on the Inishowen Peninsula are akin to the Stonehenge monuments in England reassuring the former existence of a distant perhaps more civilised community. The relationship struck between the



(Fig.1.) "Country Road County Kerry," Hamish Fulton.
(Twenty Walks 1971-1977.)

Donegal landscape and the nationalist people of Derry instills strong associations with past customs, referring to a remote historical epoch not easily dissolvable. The existence of myths, referring to identity of the living generation with past generations living in the same territory, is rejected by Hamish Fulton in the western tradition of landscape art which he claims "manipulates nature according to our passions."⁽¹⁾ Fultons philosophy maintains we are part of nature, our individualities inscribed in the relationship with the natural world. Thus his creations behave as commemorations of moments where there is an instinctive reaction to what he sees. The actual photographs themselves read in a rather mundane way similar to any family album snap. They become an accessible means to the average person, avoiding any aesthetic construction which may be designed to voice opinion. Dependence on intuitive methods of working to present ideas based on certain universal notions linking man and nature may raise questions as to the validity or integrity of the work produced outside the artists culture. Inherent in the romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a quest for a freedom from the tradition of previous generations, allowing impulse to come to the surface and expression through experience. The universal implications of Fultons' work carries with it, its own ideological and cultural baggage, the creation of an outlet for such expression becoming the main feature of the work produced.

Hamish Fulton, a prominent member of that now much dated brigade of British landscape photographers becomes another link to the rapid fading modernist movement. With strong emphasis now on progression, art is fast becoming a non entity, hinting at the failure of modernism in relation to its previous critical power. The black and white photography which brought in the conceptual movement behaved very much as a visual medium as oppose to an offering of any critical analysis of its

social uses, particularly in regard to such land artists as Hamish Fulton and Richard Long. Future development would increasingly seem to involve a need to recognise and embrace advancing technology.

In contrast to the previously discussed photographer Hamish Fulton, a more recent development by English artist Paul Graham allows the encroachment of colour photography to impinge on our visions of reality. Unlike Fulton who exclusively uses the black and white photograph, Graham introduces us to a world of colour, opening up critiques on the controlling mechanisms affecting our day to day social realities. Unique to Grahams visions is an ability to conjure up an oblique approach, considering the medium in its efforts to achieve a multi-levelled synthesis of cultural and formal meanings. He is one of a new generation of documentary/landscape photographers emerging from England, operating with an awareness of the ambiguous nature of the photographic image.

Grahams' most recent project "The Troubled Land," focuses on the social landscape of Northern Ireland. To gain the widest possible appreciation of the landscape which happens to be the Northern Irish countryside in the case of Graham, there must exist a full awareness of the complexities of current imagistic issues. For Graham, authenticity revolves around understanding the reportage tradition, not just in his Irish project but in all his work- a tradition which normally eschews formalism for content. A carefully manipulated content which eventually becomes, in the case of Ulster the now familiar stereotyped juxtaposition of the peacekeeping efforts of the British forces against the menacing populace. Given the narrower coverage of the 'troubles' in mainland Britain, it is this sense of incomprehension and perplexity confronting Graham when viewing for instance army manoeuvres in the midst of an

ordinary housing estate.

Graham fully admits a degree of naivety on his travels to Northern Ireland. However the full expressive power in "the troubled land" falls within the photograph's own ineptness on questioning both from the artist and audience point of view. Grahams priorities lay on experiencing the reality first hand and the ensuing learning process in terms of discovering and interpreting the different texture of normality in the 'North' for presentation to a largely non-Irish audience. What may seem or pass to be normal environments and landscapes are viewed first of all in terms of their similarity to perhaps the English countryside or the working-class housing estates in cities like Glasgow or Liverpool. Therefore to an Englishman the signs and symbols proclaiming deep division within the varied sectors of the community reveal a certain degree of culture shock. To an extent, the false impressions promoted through the media, rendering the conflict as very much a localised activity, masks the hidden reality of the divisions permeating every aspect of life throughout the province. Grahams' photographs in this sense make visible the evidence of the existing division strewn throughout the countryside whether it be a Unionist political poster pinned to a tree or the green/white/gold markings on kerbstones.

Grahams photographing of the Northern Irish countryside involves approaching the subject matter in a calm and ordered manner. As an Englishman, he is largely an outsider although his distanced view of life in Ulster is more a product of shrewdly choosing his images. An oblique approach acknowledges the complexities involved in making a visual comment not only on the realities of a situation like Ulster, but advances internationally in communications, continually defining space which ultimately determines its position on a much wider scale.

These more invisible forces tentatively situate the photographer amongst questions of reality and fiction in the medium he uses, the medium bias and truth versus propaganda. Grahams images, thus reveal events occurring alongside the areas of trouble within the overall context of the 'North.' Issues challenging the governing factors of the media become entrenched in his means of portraying life viewed under certain conventions. A view of Derry, for example (fig.2), photographed in clear, bright sunshine, picturing a panoramic layout of the surrounding countryside becomes a very suitable tourist board image only to be interrupted in the foreground by daubs of red, white and blue paint across the road surface. The use of colour is used to great effect, highlighting the significance of the associated colours across the sectarian divide. Although traditionally the colour used to depict the 'troubles' have been black and white, the reality has been centred around the three colour bands of green/white/gold and red/white/blue.



(Fig.2) "Paint on Road, Gobnascale estate, Derry 1985."
Paul Graham.

Paul Graham is one of a number of new generation photographers in terms of exploring a new medium, that of the colour photograph and also examining the social and political content of the work produced. The changing perception occurring during the last two decades marks a new approach to the expressiveness of the photographic image which new technology has allowed and its status as an art object. Just as the black and white image was discovered for its potential expressive power during the 1950's in America, the colour image, previously relegated to the family snap album, has taken on a new lease of life. The shift in perception from the expressiveness of Hamish Fultons landscape photographs to Grahams social comments are a mark of changing attitudes nationally in terms of awareness partly instigated through regional developments and increased information channelled through the communications network. In this light, Grahams' Northern Ireland project is gauged for its reaction received in England for the light it may throw on the relations that have been forged with the province in the past and most recently during the last two decades.

CHAPTER II

The post 1969 situation in Northern Ireland has witnessed a barrage of media coverage, detailing and often distorting the troubled events since their outbreak in the late sixties. The process of living through two decades of photojournalism and television coverage has made aware the media's "capacity to massage the complex into simplistic formulae and its vulnerability to being hijacked for political ends." The political realities in the province ensure a more layered response to its internal problems, echoing a sense of resentment to the 'North' being annexed by the media. Not only is shrewdness inherent in the overall context of the province but is a common feature of life where politics dictate the nature of living in and responding to the environment.

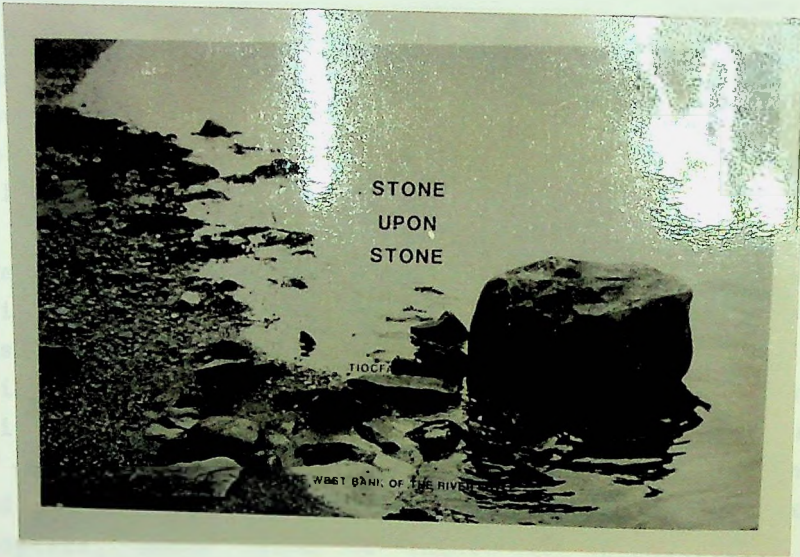
The events since 1969 have called into line realities, sectarian, political which although have always been present throughout history have only aroused serious concern in the recent past due to the bloody nature of the conflict brought to wide attention through the media. Evaluation of life as it has evolved during the disturbances is gradually finding true expression, mainly due to the emergence of the first generation, to be fully formed by the 'troubles.' To a large extent the older generation had already explored their own particular areas whether it was in the field of painting, literature, poetry and were therefore a little swamped by the sudden change the events of 1969 brought. The establishment created further difficulties due to its conservative outlook on the visual arts. The provincial art endorsed by the council, compounded the problem evading issues relating to its accountability to the community. There existed no outlet where a Northern artist could show his politically inclined art, a situation which has changed first through the formation of art

and Research Exchange during 1977, developing the artists' collective of Northern Ireland which in turn provided the momentum for diversification.

The art work emerging from this period reflect what is in a sense a new political freedom of expression. The problems facing artists concerned a suitable language, expressing their reality. An oblique approach prevails as an attempt to bridge divisions conscious that reinforcement of ideological attitudes either through agit-prop work using republican/loyalist imagery or the repressive methods employed by the media do not produce change. It is by using these methods as tools for personal discovery, transcending the reality that they perpetrate that an insight to the situation is revealed. One major force of the problem, as it now exists in the region has been the mass-media. A number of artists, as a consequence use photography as a central source but avoid any clearcut representational image, deeply aware of the photographs' capacity to bend the truth. In Willie Doherty's work, we find a documentation of life in Derry, but unlike the reportage received through the media, Derry becomes a specific place enabling Doherty to criticise the documentary/reportage tradition. Implicit in Willie Doherty's image is a denial of the validity of any photographers temporary stay in a particular region, implanting the idea of the artist residing in the region to create a valid statement. Examples range from American photographers associated particularly with the Vietnam era who have used the Northern Ireland situation to build a career to a long line of English photographers who have come to find what they have generally sought after. The anecdotal shots of abandoned Morris Minor cars along the West Coast of Ireland by Martin Parr or his more recent series portraying peasants along the same stretch of land sum up this more romantic approach.

The strategy adopted by Doherty is informed by the experience of living through the reportage of Northern Ireland. Similarly he uses 35mm film although enlarged on a greater scale presenting a cool analysis of the often banal subject matter chosen. Doherty comments on the inadequacy of the single photographic image and hence uses text in conjunction with the images. The space set up between the verbal and visual allows metaphor to heighten expression. In his piece "This we will maintain-our day will come," (fig.3) the text resonates like a chant symbolising the dogma of the two traditions. It also represents a diverging from the singular object to more of an installation type piece, the two images facing each other, so that the spectator literally stands "across the divide." Both use images of the River Foyle which is of itself a division within the city, the West Bank being traditionally nationalist whilst the East Bank having mostly loyalist affiliations. Doherty concerns himself with the futility associated with land values and the boundaries it creates. What is presented in this installation piece is two views of the river representing the conflict between two states of mind. The photographs represent fact, highlighting the sparse features of the West Bank in opposition to the more abundant nature of the East Bank, a seemingly valueless comparison since the river is merely mud and stones. The historical battlecries "our day will come/we will maintain," reinforce the ideological positions which in a literal and figurative manner serve to divide the community.

Doherty's photographs become metaphorical pieces coolly utilising emblematic properties to criticise simplistic attitudes to the 'North.' His images diverge from similar analysis by outside sources, challenging all forms of incursion by establishing his association with the area. They invoke discussion as to the inadequacy of any outside comment

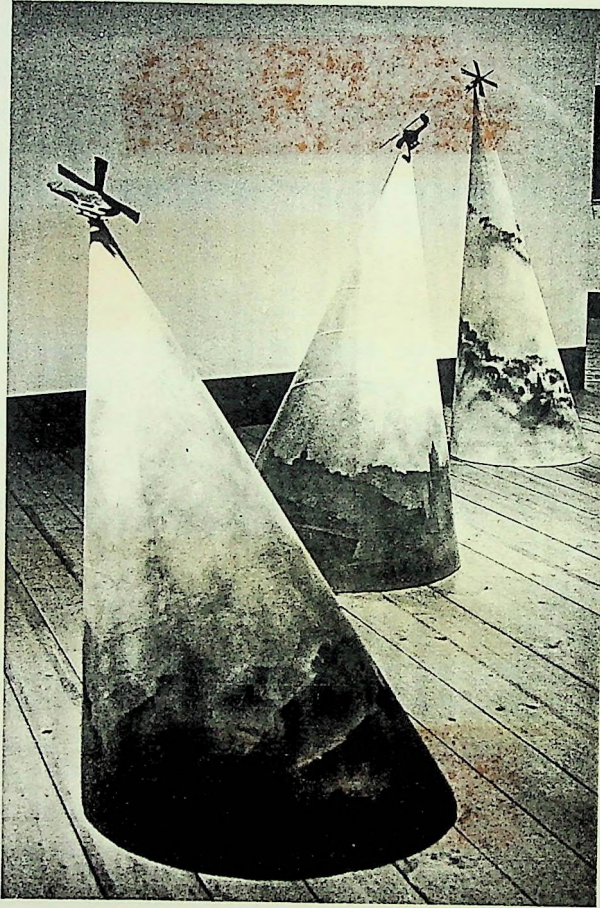


(Fig.3) "Stone Upon Stone," Derry 1986 (124"x185")
Willie Doherty.

resisting the network of surveillance which has pervaded the country during recent times. Likewise, another local artist, Locky Morris concentrates on similar themes, forging an identity with the locality. Although he is a sculptor, Morris also makes reference to the media influence, with particular emphasis on the picturesque landscapes of 'beautiful' Derry. His work raises issues relating to the politics of repression and of surveillance. Experience again of living through the post 1969 situation has become the basis for his expression.

Unlike Doherty, Locky Morris builds and constructs using materials such as paper; wood; lollipop sticks; postcard images. His sculpture pieces crafted from this throw-away material recreate a certain childhood fascination with spotlights whose beams pierce the night-time sky. The cones made of rolled-up paper, symbolising the searchlights are reminders of the extensive intrusion carried out the helicopters, whose beams of light are intimidatory factors bringing private life into the public domain. The innocence of childhood indicated by the building blocks and lollipop sticks is translated into a frightening picture of adult experience.

His sculpture "Town, Country and People," (Fig.4), is a variation on this theme. In this particular piece the cones become not merely extensions from the helicopters but some form of other worldly device encapsulating everything in its path.



(Fig.4) "Town, Country and People" (1985, Mixed Media)
Locky Morris.

What is presented is a form of apocalypse as the cones depict a winding procession of people who seem to be making their way up to the top of the hill. The imprinted images of the rural and urban landscape recall the picture postcard views of the Derry Skyline as it revolves to the base of the cone implying a sense of captivity at the hands of the British forces.

The means of construction and the approach of making these sculptures is an essential element in the reading of each of the pieces. The delicate nature of the material used represents a different approach to the making of art and the overall status of the artist, relative to the community. Expanding this viewpoint brings to attention an assessment of the art object and its inherent responsibilities towards the community. Morris is not interested in trying to preserve precious objects, but concerned more with the process involved as an effort to stimulate and build a culture. Very often the sense of culture powerlessness parallels the powerlessness in the real world making working people passive in the face of government harassment. All cultural practice in some way represents a definable politics, ignorance of which allows art to be manipulated by the dominant culture. For Morris to produce independantly is of necessity to democratise rather than isolate the work, otherwise you are partaking in a culture of oppression. Making sculpture is seen as an ordinary, everyday social activity involving a process of questioning and defining. The work is political in the interests of producing new knowledge and renewed awareness of oppression.

Both artists are in the process of attempting to express their own reality. Willie Doherty adopts a cool approach to communicate the anxiety of living in a place where tensions run high created by the multiple boundaries imposed on the city

through history and the current bombardment through the mass-media. Morris works in a less oblique manner, representing a more visual experience of the forces of oppression that have been a vivid reality in the 'north' since the eruption of trouble. The most essential element of his expression involved the process of working in the midst of the community. Accepting the lack of innocence in their work acknowledges the existence of another tradition equally fraught with an anxiety and siege mentality. The main distinction is a geographical one where the River Foyle which divides the city has featured historically as a strategic force securing Britain's Welfare and has provided a microcosm for the State of Northern Ireland.

During 1981-82 a project was initiated to present art for presentation in spontaneous and situations outside the gallery. The school was drawn up by Julian McGonagle, (at that time exhibitions director at the ICA in London) in collaboration with Roger Cook of the newly formed Arrangal Trust.

The project began with the commissioning of New York artists Lee Levine to produce a set of images designed specially for bill board display in and around London. After their stay in London the billboard images were to travel to Derry and then later to Dublin.

Their arrival in Derry was not an uncontroversial due to the reference made to the conflict in the North, although the

CHAPTER III

In its attempt to branch the insularity of the Derry region into the international mainstream of cintemporary art, the Orchard Gallary have found it imperative to secure artists working in a manner complementary to the divisions religiously and politically within the city and the province as a whole. The major reality forming the Irish conflict is embedded in the world arena of the media and press. The media and communications being one of the essential realities in the world today inevitably finds itself the subject and concern of art and artists attempting to express and communicate a reality. Historically pop art in America signalled an awareness of the powers of the mass media in Western Society as it emerged during the 1950's and 60's. A path was made for concientious artists to tackle and embrace this new reality. There dually appeared in the 20's a huge proliferation of photo based works whose essential aims were to use this technology as a tool of vision.

During 1985-'86 a project was intitiated to present art for presentation in locations and situations outside the gallery. The scheme was drawn up by Declan McGonagle, (at that time exhibitions director at the ICA in London) in collaboration with Roger Took of the newly formed Artangel Trust.

The project began with the commissioning of New York artist Les Levine to produce a set of images designed specially for bill board display in and around London. After their stay in London the billboard images were to travel to Derry and then later to Dublin.

Their arrival in Derry were set to arouse controversy due to the references made to the conflict in the North, although the

outcome was much quieter than the confusion that met with the London advertising authority.

The designs comprise of life size figures, composed from photographs Levine has personally taken on location in the North of Ireland. The figures are presented screen printed in a basic range of strong colours with a predominant mix of red, blue, orange and green, carrying a number of impossible exhortations to analyse the situation in purely religious terms. Levine, in conjunction with the images, introduces text in the familiar two word format, a feature of his work since his early beginnings in the conceptual movement of the 60's. The 'Blame God' series involves forming an imperative verb, associated in some way with the situation in the province - Starve, Kill, Bomb etc with a second word, in every case being God.

The siting of the exhibition in Derry gives the work specific meanings and relationships with the environment in which the work is placed and from which it draws its inspiration. The essential proponents of the 'Blame God' series derive from the morals associated within the advertising world. No Longer does advertising associate itself with the subject of religion, namely because the machinery is geared towards selling things rather than presenting ideas. Levines designs operate on an intellectual level, addressing not only issues concerning religion but the idea of God inherent in other cultures, a worldwide preoccupation reflecting the nature of humanity. An opposition between deferring God views implicit in the work provide the background with which to judge and comment not only the idea of the Irish conflict being a religious war but also British propaganda claim that the war really is about religion.

The exact relation, the billboards have with the immediate environment become blurred when considering the work

particularly in terms of portraying the conflict specifically on religious grounds. There is a sense of intrusion, in so far as a certain generalisation prevails, perhaps explained as a result of the North being a place assaulted by the media. Levine's roots in the conceptual movement propose a viewpoint which would advocate expression through the technological processes that form our reality. As an artist Levine emphasises the ideas that art can examine anything in the world and is a means to permit people to engage in new attitudes. The Derry exhibition operates on a level which seeks to align the Northern conflict within an international arena, communicating the senseless bondages which seem unnecessarily to divide the community.

Levine doubts the whole subject of content in art, in relation to social and political problems. The questions he ponders dwell on the validity of political and social matters as a medium for art or should the artist be limited to aesthetic values for his expression. The reality that emerged during the post Cambodian invasion in America proved the inadequacy of formalist art on moral principles. Instead, this period witnessed a gathering of artists of anti-content origin, suddenly engaging in political causes, assailing the morality of the capitalist system to which they were originally bound. The nature of the responsibilities of the artists to communicate real issues are found to be uncontrollably intermingled with politics. The late capitalist era assimilates creation with knowledge assuring its progressive stance with absolute prominence in world affairs. In such a state art is seldom seen as adversarial, tending to be absorbed as another consumer good.

The operation of Levine's art in the political context of Derry feeds off the very boundaries that contain the situation. Life



(Fig.5) "Attack God," (billboard, Camden Town 1985)
Les Levine.

seems to continue oblivious of outside reaction, a reflection perhaps of the artwork being derivative of shifts in the artworld during the seventies, conceptualism forging ahead providing a new awakening to a reality which was very much tied up with political issues concerning the American people and now with hindsight a victim of the progressive attitudes to control to some extent the feelings and nature of mans destiny. Post-modern thought breeds the notion of the earth becoming a single community, an approximation with the real truth lying within the potentialities of respective technologies of transportation and communication. Beyond that, it must be said telluric humanity does not form a single community and never will.

The nature of the "troubles" would appear not to be so much defined by the media but an internal conflict rooted in tradition and history, governed by the powers who promote a state of plurism, suggesting a culture stalemate, an assured status quo, even a political screen. "The media" and propaganda machine, tools between two warring factions, become facts to be lived with, accepted for all their potentially explosive nature in the midst of a fixation with nuclear arms. The content of media images breaks through in Levines concerns with the propagandist and controlling systems inherent in the use of images for persuasion, a reminder of the reality in late capitalist society.

The predominance of conceptualism in western art has secured the use of the new mediums, photography, video performance for any further adequate means of expression in the twentieth century. Painting has been made redundant, even the recent revival of expressionist painting appearing as Victor Burgin says "a symptom of anxiety generated by the feminist politics of the 1970's.¹" The contribution feminism made to the avant

garde/modernist arts of the seventies are manifest in the new techniques introduced through mediums like performance and video, creating a pluralist age blending with the male fabric of modern art. The mobilization of art is paralleled with the general dominance of American modernism. The reality is located within a technological and corporate world view which increasingly define radical possibilities. Against this background, the work of American artist Leon Golub, breaks the surface of late modernist intricacies. In an interview Golub claims that it is "this situation of totalized possibility that makes art difficult to connect to the informations being continuously processed.²"

Despite continued use during the sixties and seventies of the new specialised mediums of photography, video, performance, Golub doggedly persued a style of painting completely outside mainstream American art. Convinced by his art having its place in art history, attacking brutality and violence in American society, existential realities which are embedded in an advanced technological society, Leon Golub forces the spectator to face the situations he reinacts on the canvas inducing a helplessness within the viewer mixed with the autonomous state of art today that is concerned with perfectability.

His presence at the Orchard gallery in Derry during 1987 was a highly contentous exhibition dealing with themes of interrogation and brutality, sensitive issues affecting the current cycle of 'troubles' in the North. The political imagery, dealing with Imperialism of the capitalist system, borne out of American culture and politics, attempts to record certain things about power and stress governed by the automatic

controls we live in. Golub uses a technique of pairing down the painted surface of the canvas to reveal a heavily worked flat surface, coldly coloured and depersonalised. The large scale of the paintings produce the effect of dramatising what the artist describes as the "agencies and agent of late imperialist America."³ His exhibiting at the Orchard implicates not only the viewer as participants in the acts of violence portrayed, but emphasises the existence of the region within the system, the paintings condone. His images of mercenaries, contras place in view a world of structures and ideological constructs that determine the modern capitalist state.

Golub's painting survives in the midst of the vast enclave of new media through incorporating a technique which borrows images from the mass media thus partaking in the language of mass culture today. The political imagery dealt with in his canvases avoids the social realist tradition which although offered us in the past a reflection of the human condition and a general recognition of our unfreedom, did not enter into the knowledge of its laws. The lessons of modernism brought into clear political view that meaning in art can only be found and generated in transformational practise. It is with his revulsion of the American involvement in the Vietnam war that Golub brings these lessons to bear, undermining not only the contradictions to be found in the capitalist system but also a sense of powerlessness in affecting these events offering in a sense no way out. His use of mercenaries and victims imply we are all working in a state that condones these tortures supporting that in fact everyone of us to some extent is a mercenary or victim.

Declan McGonagle, by staging an exhibition of Golub's work in Derry, has reinforced this mood. The condemnation of violence



(Fig.6) "Mercenaries II" (1979, Acrylic on canvas)
Leon Golub

echoes realities entranced in the Northern Ireland situation. All wars are about power and wealth. Internal conflicts are situated in this larger context of power, wherein part of the solution must rest. The canvasses urge us to acknowledge the conditions under which each one of us accept as normality. The extent to which this message is represented rests with the acceptance of a certain ambiguity between Golubs' intention and the backlog of modernist knowledge which inhibits a straight forward one-to-one explanation. It is through acceptance, especially of the state of the art in post-modern (fluctuation) that Golub presents not only the predicament the artist faces but the audience he seeks to address. To be able to come to terms with Golubs expression, the viewer must give way to the forces that shape the outworld today. Allowance for the battle between canvas and its struggle for free expression in the grip of late capitalism, provides a richer appreciation of the artist's attempts to present a true representation of the world which becomes a concern of everyone. The major breakthrough of the Orchard exhibition is this enormous concern of issues of not only affecting particular regions but an inherent part of what has become a global culture. Golubs' paintings as located in the Orchard gallery express the inadequacy of pressing a particular viewpoint, that is so often, as in the past represented as totally American, with abstract expression proving the point which sought to have control of itself, to create an American painting which would have universal concerns along with their own political realities.

The post-modern situation has enabled a shift of emphasis from the international to the local where there is a conscious effort on the part of the artist to realise the artificiality of the medium he works with. The actions that Golub paints are incipient in so far as they could take place under any society. Political violence and political interrogation can happen

anywhere. The policy of the Orchard gallery to provide an outlet for expression from international sources has assured a recognition on behalf of the community of its location within a greater and more powerful force. The static figures in Golubs' paintings illustrate the non-effectiveness of art as an absolute expression of our times. The trace expression lies within a full acknowledgement of these restricting circumstances whose resolving powers must operate within the guidelines laid down by advanced corporate bodies. The extension of Golubs' work from its natural environment to the Orchard space represents the governing forces which implicate a dominant culture exceeding its own natural boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Viewing the context of Derry from an international perspective has been the Orchard's main priority in its' attempt to loosen barriers preventing social and cultural progress in the city. Many exhibitions in the Orchard's past reflect the trend for conceptual/process based art embodying the new mediums of video, performance, photography. This particular art form, emerging from the pluralist era, originating in America during the late 1960's, early 1970's marked the demise of modernism. Modern heroic art belonged to the past. The new wave of conceptual artists produced work of a more personal, autobiographical and social nature. Progression in the visual arts was celebrated through the making of technology into a tool of vision. New gallery spaces became available, contributing to the new social developments witnessed by the greater awareness displayed towards feminism and civil rights for the Black Community.

The contemporary artist is being brought ever closer to the centre of technological society in the hope of legitimising progress towards utopia. Marxist theory contradicts this notion of a natural harmony, viewing ideologies in general as neither rational nor objective but socially conditioned. The message induced through advances in technology is the change of scale or pace introduced into human affairs. Historically, mass-society contrasts greatly with that of the past few centuries. Differences today result in more people receiving opinions than are able effectively to express them. The public have become a conglomeration of individuals who have to express their beliefs and ideas through the mass-media. Control is with the authorities reducing hope that analysis of its effects socially can only be started. Although vitally important to the world today, manipulation by television, photography etc.

is often ignored. Examples of the effects of the mass-media on human behaviour takes into consideration differences in human nature and the compensations made for it by the media in question. Dominance by the mass-media is the result of such human association.

The reality of the Orchard gallery has helped to establish opportunities previously non-existent. Quite often those realities are defined as naturally occurring events, the product of this or that social evil. There is now nothing remarkable about the assertion that the media are to blame for all manners of distortion and misunderstanding. We are now supposedly the victims of its fabulous powers, imposing on us not only ideas, emotions, but entire ways of seeing and understanding. They have become statements of fact in critical essays, in need of no assessment or recourse for examination. As it has become engrained in education, the more difficult it becomes to dislodge. Association with capitalism makes it easily attributable to capitalist ideals. Ready condemnation of the media in fact confers a status on it which recognises no particular affiliation. Refusal in acknowledging what else may inhibit solidarity has promoted alienation and space for others to digest as is happening under the present government in Britain.

Community art has developed in Britain as in Northern Ireland in response to art, seen as a peripheral and elitist activity. The need has been to rectify the denial to the means and products of artistic expression to the majority of the population. The Orchard gallery have been carefree that a hierarchical view does not dominate, accepting key facilities centralised in Belfast using regional funds, does not serve the whole region. The position of the Orchard, since its' inception in 1978 has inspired attempts by the arts' council to

locate the gallery in Derry as a useful means to decentralise some of their funding. Instead, the gallery established links with other institutions and organisations within Ireland and abroad, whilst maintaining links with the arts council of Northern Ireland. The Orchard has avoided playing a subsidiary role to the gallery in Belfast, reassuring the need to keep the space in Derry as a local initiative with local feeling.

The opportunity has been made to redress the divisions which have become the reality in Ireland. The real issue is not subvert the barriers erected by state bodies but to erode the myths professed through the media. Although myths can displace the historical and fabricated quality of things social, it must also be accepted that myth-making is endemic to the Irish. Myths can reveal essential truths about human beings and their societies. They can also seem that we have nothing to do with the course of history; it just happens or is made by others. What is recommended is new attitudes to assess the social place of the arts. The real issue involves how artists make their practice an integral part of a specific society. This humanist socialist position implies that art can be redemptive, capable of transforming life. Artists can continue to think of themselves as capable of exerting an influence on events, while also seeing those events as themselves partly determined.

In this respect reaction to the particular type of conservatism imposed since 1979 in Britain is growing. The marginalisation incurred denies whole sections of the community access to power. The delayed reaction in Ireland is partly due to the drama of the N.Ireland situation getting in the way and its subsequent celebration through the media. The atmosphere is leading towards a dispensing with unitary thinking. The ideologies of nationalism and post-partition unionism are witnessing a collapse.

It would appear somewhat ironic then that post-modernism has helped to develop the traditions of European art, fertilising a socialist modernism, in relation to anything that is happening in America, forming a situation where concentration is on regionalism yet avoiding the pitfall of provincialism and pluralism.

- (1) Essay by Victor Burgin, "The end of art theory".
- (2) Essay from Victor Burgin's article in "end of art theory".
- (3) Essay by post-modernist, self-consciously culture, "Looking around the clock" - the artist.
- (4) Marshall McLuhan commenting on the post-modernist's place in society - "Understanding Media" - W. Mc Luhan.
- (5) Lucy Lippard on activist art - "Get the Message" - Lippard.
- (6) Essay by Douglas in conversation with G. Oppen. Class no. 28.

CHAPTER I

- (1) Essay from "Deepfire" British Futurism (The aesthetic dimension - Herbert Marcuse).
- (2) "Deepfire", British Futurism & notes from the text of the electric light.

CHAPTER II

- (1) Essay by B. Mc Graw: "Significance in Structures art".

CHAPTER III

- (1) Victor Burgin, "The end of art theory".
- (2) "Unhappy / still people" by the artist, American.
- (3) By the artist, "The Power and Vulnerability of the art of Love and Life", essay by Neil Smith and John Duggan.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- (1) extract from Victor Burgins essays in "end of art theory".
- (2) extract from Victor Burgins essays in "end of art theory".
- (3) Lacan on post-modernism and consumer culture,
"Rocking around the clock" - Ann Kaplan.
- (4) Marshall Mc Luhan commenting on the mass-media's place in
society - "Understanding Media" - M. Mc Luhan.
- (5) Lucy Lippard on activist art - "Get the Message" -Lippard.
- (6) Declan Mc Gonagle in conversation with C. Coppock. Circa
no. 29

CHAPTER I

- (1) extract from "Campfire" Hamish Fulton (The aesthetic
dimension : Herbert Marcuse).
- (2) "Campfire", Hamish Fulton : notes from the land of the
electric light.

CHAPTER II

- (1) essay by B. Mc Evera : "Directions in Directions out".

CHAPTER III

- (1) Victor Burgin, "the end of art theory".
- (2) " Utopia / anti Utopia " by the artist, Artforum.
- (3) By the artist, "on Power and Vulnerability : the art
of Leon Golub", essay by Ned Rizkin and Lynn Gumpart.

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Fulton. Hamish "Roads and Paths".
Fulton. Hamish "Campfire".
Graham. Paul "The troubled land".
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CATALOGUES

"Blame God" Les Levine.

(Billboard projects in association with the artangel trust
and the orchard gallery, Derry.)

"Directions In, Directions Out".

(An investigation into a selection of artists whose work has
been formed by the post 1969 situation in N. Ireland).