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The National College of Art and Design

Faculty of Fine Art

Painting Department

"Political Art
in Northern Ireland:
A Critique"

by

William Forster

Submitted
to the Faculty of History of Art and Complementary Studies
in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in Fine Art

March 1992

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INTRODUCTION

Personal Interest

Like many teenagers, despairing of the political and economic misery of everyday life, I 'got out' of the North as soon as the first opportunity presented itself. Since taking up studies at the N.C.A.D., I have become increasingly interested in the development of political art produced in the North, I have found myself compelled to reach for an understanding of the difficulties faced by artists, living and working in a society pervaded by sectarianism and violence and to seek a strategy which can respond in a dynamic way to this challenge.

Intentions

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first sets out to discuss briefly the background to the political conflict in Northern Ireland. This I have done by examining Nationalist and Unionist positions and locating areas of conflict.

The second chapter examines the response of artists to the conflict. I take a look at the work of John Kindness and Dermot Seymour, artists whose work is characterised by a layered and oblique aesthetic position. This I compare to a more activist response, seen in the work of Willie Doherty and Alistair MacLennan.

In the final chapter I take a look at the possibilities opened up by the activist tradition in the United States, and examine its relevance to the context of the North. In concluding, I suggest that the failure of a layered response to investigate satisfactorily possible causes of conflict can only be answered by a Brechtian activism, which requires the development of community-based activist art in order to challenge adequately violence and sectarianism in Northern Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

Personal Interest

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The second chapter examines the response of artists to the conflict. I take a look at the work of John Kinsella and Seamus Heaney, artists whose work is characterised by a layered and oblique aesthetic position. This I compare to a more activist response, seen in the work of Willie Doherty and Alistair MacLennan.

In the final chapter I take a look at the possibilities opened up by the activist tradition in the United States, and examine its relevance to the context of the North. In concluding, I suggest that the failure of a layered response to investigate satisfactorily possible causes of conflict can only be met by a Brechtian activism, which requires the development of community-based activist art in order to challenge adequately violence and sectarianism in Northern Ireland.

CHAPTER I

AN OUTLINE OF NATIONALIST AND UNIONIST POSITIONS

In this chapter I deal with the background to the conflict in Northern Ireland. For reasons of brevity this may appear to be only scratching the surface of ground covered in a mass of recently published material. Nevertheless my purpose here is to cite those issues, raised by the political and social context, in which artists find themselves and to which they could be expected to respond.

Irish Nationalism has been seen as synonymous with the view that Ireland and its people have been the subject of division and oppression in the interests of the British Crown; that the single solution to the present conflict is the immediate and total 'withdrawal' of British military and political involvement and the establishment of Ireland as a free, united and sovereign nation state. Critical contributions to a Nationalist position had concentrated for the most part on confirming the role of Britain as perpetrator of division and partition, attributed to a 'malignancy' for which centuries of British injustice in Ireland had been cited as evidence. The partition of Ireland has therefore been generally interpreted by Nationalists as a deliberate attempt by Britain to weaken Irish unity and stifle aspirations for a 32-County Irish Nation-State. This position however fails to take any consideration of a real obstacle to Irish unity, the problem of convincing a million Protestants, living mostly in the northern part of Ireland, that they should share Nationalist aspirations.

Donal Barrington, writing in the fifties in 'Uniting Ireland', had already begun to question the blame, 'misleadingly' attached to Britain, for the division of Ireland. He pointed to the refusal of Northern Protestants to accept an Irish identity as evidence of two competing and incompatible sides, indigenous to the island, who by their failure to secure a common national identity brought about the political partition of the island.(3) Barrington understood that Irish Nationalism was seen by Northern Protestants as a threat to the maintenance of their British-Protestant heritage. Unable to comprehend their choice of identity, Eamonn deValera could only resort to fantastic notions of enticing Protestants to leave their homes in Ireland and rehousing Irish expatriates in their place.(46,p131) DeValera's views may reflect a Nationalist preoccupation with territorial unity and natural boundaries found in much early Nationalist positions and echoed in the thoughts of his contemporary, Mussolini (see Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities'). However Gerry Adams (current President of Sinn Fein) repeats the traditionalist view that upon a British withdrawal, Unionists in Northern Ireland would come to accept an Irish heritage which is, he states, in a very real sense theirs.(46,p134)

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Traditional Nationalism is often defined as the position which holds

that the people of Ireland are two peoples, Protestant and Catholic, and that the Partition of Ireland was the logical and inevitable consequence of that division and that the cause of the present conflict is a Nationalist unwillingness to come to terms with this fact. The usual implication that opposition to a (Catholic) Irish national identity presupposes a British identification is however problematic and demands further examination. Evidence shows that a significant number of Protestants would share aspirations leading to the goal of independence for Ulster -or at least devolution- rather than to continued integration within the United Kingdom, whose national identity when voiced is decidedly more likely to be expressed as 'Ulster-ish' than British (44,pp67-70).

Bill Rolston, in his book Politics and Painting, traces a change of national identity among Protestants in the period following the prorogation of the Stormont Parliament, to a cultural decline paralleled by an ideological confusion (39,pp30-33). This point is illustrated in the dilemma facing Unionists of celebrating Protestant ascendancy on the twelfth of July after suffering the real loss of Unionist hegemony in Stormont by decree of the British Government. A questioning of 'British' identity became manifest in Loyalist murals, where the traditional portraits of 'King Billy' and Union flags rapidly became replaced by 'Red Hand of Ulster' symbols and Ulster flags.

It is on the basis of religious difference that Unionists lay the central weight of their argument for the maintenance of a Northern Irish State. They point to the Catholic Church's position of entrenched power in the Republic and its ability 'to dictate policy to the State on matters which the Church considers essential to the maintenance of its position'. (46,p151) They cite the dramatic decrease in Protestant numbers in the South as a result (allegedly) of Catholic Church policy on mixed marriages, education and health. Whilst Unionists can find evidence to justify some of their fears, they receive little or no sympathy abroad and only scant support in Britain. Charges of electoral malpractice, ('gerrymandering') official and unofficial discrimination against Catholics throughout the lifetime of the devolved, Unionist-dominated Government in Stormont have exposed vital weaknesses in the Unionist case. Evidence of discrimination may still be disputed by some. However an often-repeated and proudly-declared distrust of the Catholic minority (seen as having refused to swear its allegiance to the Northern Ireland State) reinforces suggestions of unionist preoccupations with triumphalism, state control and identifying Catholics as the 'enemy within'.

The intensity with which Protestants have resisted any notion of an Irish identity has not always resulted in a dramatic revision of the Nationalist position that 'the people of Ireland form one Nation'. In contrast to Adams, however, some contemporary Nationalist thinkers are pursuing an understanding of the

conflict, based upon an acceptance of the 'Two Nations' theory developed by the British and Irish Communist Organisation in the early 1970's. Desmond Fennell has articulated the problem as that of 'devising a State in which both these communities can share' (16,p117). Recognising the Protestants of Northern Ireland as 'part of another Nation' (17,p57) he promotes the idea of a federal decentralised Ireland where the people of Ulster could overcome differences arising from conflicting national identities.

The perception of an inevitable betrayal by Parliamentarians in Westminster has led some Unionists to look beyond a British identity to a position which promotes Ulster as the 'Last Bastion of Protestantism in Europe' and the Homeland of a true British cultural and political heritage. The populist machinations of Ian Paisley are typical of this position, one characterised by flag-waving parades, fundamentalist 'Bible' Protestantism and displays of paramilitary 'strength'. This position exposes the deep insecurity and vulnerability felt by many Northern Protestants whose perception is of an increasingly confident 'Catholic' Nationalism and an impending betrayal by those in power on the British mainland. Other proponents of an identification with Ulster actually see it as a means of crossing the community divide, whilst firmly rejecting any notion of 'Irishness'. (See McAuley's discussion of positions taken by the U.D.A. and its political organisation, the New Ulster Political Research Group)

Protestants regard their religious heritage as the chief reason for maintaining a British State in Ulster. Their fear of Nationalism is a fear of Catholicism, Catholic laws and Catholic ethics. Such fears would include a fear of religious discrimination at work, in housing and in education. However these remain secondary to the primary fear of a 'priest-ridden society'. Such fears have found expression in in other countries (Germany, Scandinavia etc) but it is in the intensity with which they are articulated that Northern Protestants, through their social, religious and political organisations, betray an abnormality of political culture predating Partition and the present conflict. Nationalist myths underline the pervading presence of violence and division in the political culture of the two sides. Visual manifestations of this are most strikingly to be seen in wall-murals which have sprung up in the course of the present conflict. (See articles written by Belinda Loftus and her book, Mirrors : William III and Mother Ireland).

Tony Buckley has done much research into the Orange Order and other secret societies. In his essay, 'The Chosen Few', he details the significance of ritual, symbolism and an identification with the 'People of Israel' central to many Orange and 'Black' societies(8). Both orders share the tenets of upholding the Protestant Ascendancy and maintaining the political Union with Britain. Such organisations therefore act as powerful umbrella groups for uniting disparate Protestant denominations, though they

identity, based upon an attachment to the 'Protestant' identity developed by the British and Irish Communist Organisation in the early 1970's. Desmond Keenan has attributed the 'Protestant' identity of 'Protestant' to a State in which both these groups are 'Protestant'. Recognising the 'Protestant' of Northern Ireland as 'part of another Nation' (1975, p. 117), he promotes the idea of 'Protestant' Ireland where the people of both sides would overcome differences arising from conflicting 'Protestant' identities.

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are generally stronger in rural areas and among the lower economic groups.

Trappings of Freemasonry and brightly painted banners are the outward appearance of such groups. Yet what distinguishes them from other 'harmless' association and clubs is the unseen, but not always unheard conviction that Catholics are 'heathens' inhabiting 'our promised land' and that they are aiding those whose intention it is to annihilate the Protestant people. They believe that God will maintain 'His people' as long as they defend their 'Bastion of Protestantism ... in this Province' (See Impartial Reporter (sic), 21.11.1991).

Unionists are in the main the descendants of a huge immigrant/settler community, who received land from the British Crown formerly inhabited by an indigenous Catholic population. Though time has long since erased any reasonable claim to personal ownership, a collective sense of loss is felt by Nationalists. The redistribution of wealth, power and status into the hands of Protestants has bequeathed the following generations with a society festering in the myths of conflict, division and violence.

It may be naive to suggest that politicians, out of a sense of public spirit, begin to demolish the myths created by their own side and join together in presenting to the people of Northern Ireland an analysis of the current situation, from which a 'way out' of the conflict could be constructed. Politicians are notorious for their close attention to the mouths of gift horses! It is my belief that artists can contribute, through reflection, analysis and the construction or deconstruction of myths, a critique of the society in which they work. In the particular context of Northern Ireland the question of artistic integrity amidst claims of 'taking sides' is heightened on the one hand, by the nature of division between the two communities and on the other, by the corresponding requirement to make a critical contribution.

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CHAPTER II

AN ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL ART IN THE COURSE OF THE CONFLICT

Joseph McWilliams, introducing a series of articles on the theme of visual arts in areas of conflict, made the following observation,

Visual imagery is a very potent force and there must be few places where its potency is more strongly felt than here in wall-painting, flag-waving Northern Ireland. The censorship of the Art for Society Exhibition at the Ulster Museum, the regular forays into art criticism made by local government representatives all testify that the plastic arts still have power, and this power might well reach into recesses of the Ulster mind inaccessible to language. (34,p4)

The official decision to cancel the 'Art for Society' exhibition at the Ulster Museum was made on the grounds of the Museum's 'duty as a public body to be nonpolitical' (Belfast Newsletter, 10,11,78). In fact it followed political objections raised by a supervisor at the Museum (and Unionist Councillor) Billy Dickson. As self-styled guardian of Unionist ideals he appeared unwilling to entertain open discussion of the conflict through the media of art - even when presented in a nonpartisan manner. The fear of appearing to be political has haunted many artists in the North whose integrity as artists could be seen to be compromised by the merest hint of 'taking sides'. McWilliams understood such fears had led to fourteen years lack of articulation of issues raised by the conflict. Published in May/June 1982, McWilliams' article sought to address a situation in the North of Ireland in which little political work had been produced and less was being exhibited. The opening of the Fenderesky Gallery and the impact of the Belfast based publication Circa, an art magazine which has drawn attention to, and promoted critical discussion of art produced in Ireland, may have helped greatly in generating an acceptance of political art.

This chapter deals with the aesthetic arguments which follow from differences in the method and intention of artists involved in the creation of political art in Northern Ireland. I will centre the discussion on two areas of work, the first of which I refer to as the 'Layered Response'. 'Layered' and 'oblique' refer to qualities Brian McAvera, in his book Art, Politics and Ireland, sees as central to the aesthetic of a legitimate political art, which seeks to analyse yet not to confront. McAvera sees a layered response as a chosen retention of ambiguity, offering open-ended accessibility to the work which the artist hopes will challenge the simplification and distortion of political rhetoric. Such ambiguity is not however to be seen as a desire for 'obfuscation' (30,p36).

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The second area focuses on the work of two artists whose art tends toward an activist position, either because the artist presents the subject as confrontational matter (Willie Doherty) or, because his deliberate use of public space in some performance work, confronts an audience extraneous to the gallery (Alistair MacLennan).

The Layered Response

'Artists', McAvera writes, 'know in their guts that the reinforcement of entrenched ideological attitudes does not produce change in this country'.(30,p30) He believes that artists are seeking to bridge division, not to perpetuate it, and are not interested in making 'agit-prop' statements (his description of the wall-murals) nor in producing any kind of propaganda.

McAvera presents a lengthy and richly-supported argument for an (Irish) art which examines its relationship to politics and cultural identity. In quote after quote, however, he struggles to restrict the agenda of such work, stopping temporarily to present a retort to the views expressed by Belfast gallerist Fenderesky. Fenderesky raises doubts about the accuracy of using the term 'political art' to describe the work of many Northern Irish artists. He believes that the kind of work promoted by McAvera and others should be more correctly understood as 'social commentary without political engagement'.(30,p18) This, he maintains, is in contrast to political art which implies political action. Political artists, Fenderesky believes, are trying to introduce change. McAvera fails to answer this point satisfactorily and attempts instead to steer the discussion on a course where (Fenderesky's) 'fundamental misunderstandings' of Irish society are brought into view. McAvera's defence relies on a 'sensibility' which is born, he would claim, in a society where visual artists have avoided real questioning of the status quo.(30,p21) The destruction of visual artifacts as a result of the Penal Laws may have restricted the articulation of political meaning to the aural tradition. However to imply that political art, once caught within the aesthetic limitation of obliqueness, is impelled to remain shackled by a tradition of indigenously-designed fetters hardly counters Fenderesky's claim that such work remains merely a reflection upon bigotry and violence and as such has nothing to do with politics.

Fenderesky would reject the notion that art should be 'subordinated' to political activity, yet he does appear to have touched upon the main weakness of much political art in the North - the failure to confront political and cultural issues with anything like the degree of confrontation seen in the avantgardes of Weimar Germany or revolutionary Russia, or in the work of contemporary feminist artists and activists in America. The failure to confront political issues is, according to McAvera, due to the fact that 'confrontation' necessarily requires one to take sides, but where is McAvera's evidence of this? As we will

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Paisley on safari trail

The Rev Ian Paisley has just started a 10-day African safari which will take him 2,000 miles from Cameroon in the West to Kenya on the other side of the continent.

Accompanied by Rev David McIlveen from the Sandown Road church in East Belfast, Mr Paisley, the moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church, will address the assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

While in Kenya he will also visit Scarva nurse Margaret Russell, one of his church missionaries.

As soon as Mr Paisley arrives in London on Friday 22, he will go to the House of Commons to vote in David Alton's controversial abortion bill.

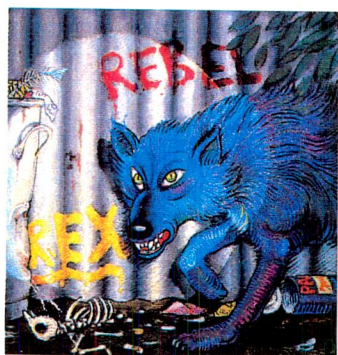
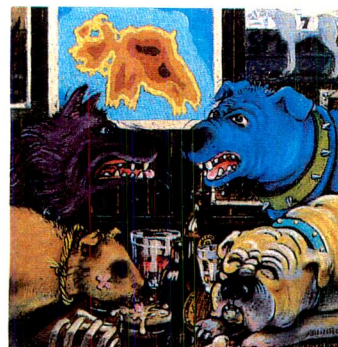
And on his return to Northern Ireland he could be arrested along with 26 other people who refused to pay fines.

NEWS print



2. "Paisley on Safari-Envelope", by John Kindness, 1988

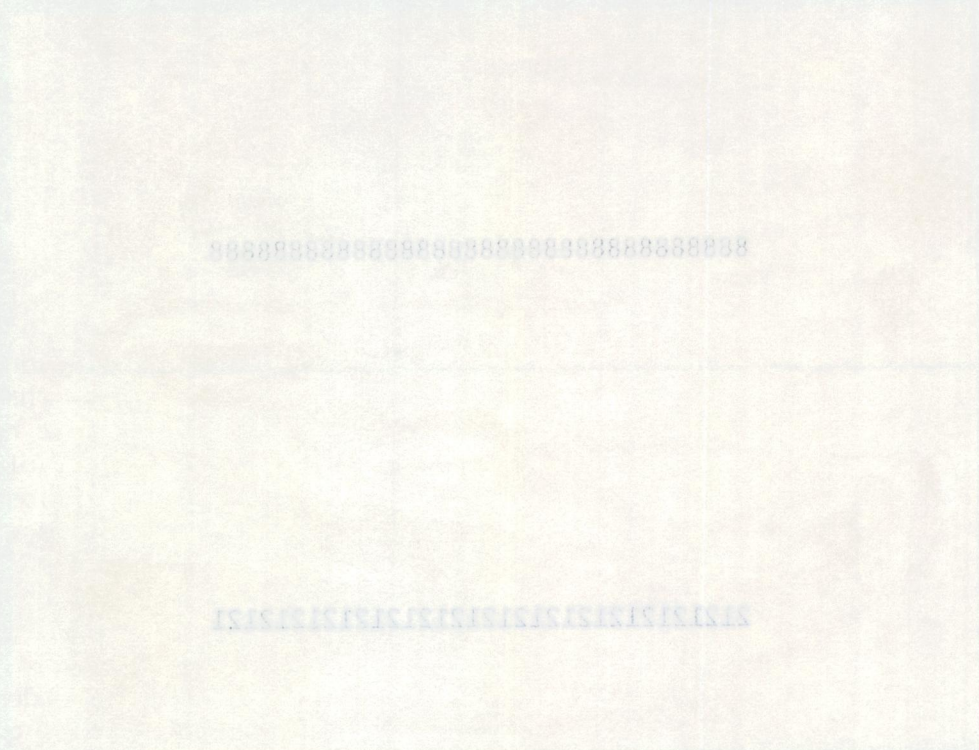
A Publicity Envelope from the Newsprint Project



3. Examples of some of the 'Dogs and Monkeys' Series by John Kindness, 1985.



3. Examples of some of the 'Dogs and Monkeys' Series
by John Kindness, 198.



A Publicity Envelope from the Newspaper Project
2. "Paisley on Safari-Envelope", by John Kindness, 1988

see later Willie Doherty, who defends his Nationalist aspirations, still manages to engage in a critique of that Nationalism. Within McAvera's position there is however no room for an activist aesthetic even in the pursuit of a challenge to sectarianism.

John Kindness is a multi-media artist who shares McAvera's views on this matter (25,p25) yet he flirts with activist methods through the display of his work in places normally reserved for advertising and public information. He 'gets away with it' due to his ability to make ridiculous some of the everyday 'shared' experiences in humorous caricatures. It could be argued that he is in fact making a satirically-based propaganda for the unity of the two communities. Humour is a personal attribute common to most on both sides of the divide. It does not always travel well however and becomes problematic in so far as subject-matter tends to become limited. Humour transforms known values but becomes redundant on reaching unfamiliar territory, where it can actually lead to very misleading notions. Kindness thus exposes his inability, at a critical stage, to deal with ground bounded by deep psychological attitudes and the political culture of given communities.

Two examples of Kindness' work illustrate the above point. His 'Dogs and Monkeys' series may seem a 'fresh' and 'irreverent commentary' on the North (22) but is it, in McAvera's terms, providing an analysis of the cause of the conflict?(30,p36) Does the 'Paisley on Safari Envelope' achieve anything more than celebrate the exotic or extrovert image Paisley already enjoys in most media portrayals? If not, what is the relevance of such work? The portrayal of Paisley as some kind of witchdoctor actually relies on a belittling of other cultures and beliefs in order to appear funny - or if it is a serious attempt at comparison, it might be seen as conferring honour and respect on Paisley's leadership. Kindness offers us a release from inter-community strife using formulae which tend to conceal truth rather than lay open new paths of investigation or new avenues of understanding.

Artists that McAvera associates with a 'Layered' response include many whose work has evolved from influences as disparate as expressionism, surrealism and social realism. All would claim a personal commitment to comment on the conflict; however, few take the viewer further in understanding its possible causes, and none have succeeded in engaging ordinary people within the cultural debate. To illustrate these points I will take a look at the work of Dermot Seymour.

In his early work, Seymour appeared to have transformed the social realities of Belfast, 'learnt, known and recognized; and acknowledged through complicated behavior' into pictorial form.(7,p16) David Brett points out that 'naturalistic and representational painting as such is quite inadequate to deal with social reality' (7,p16). Here he is referring to the dangers of



Naturalism which substitutes narrative for reality, laying open the door to the propagandist 'socialist realist' art of the Stalin era. The artist must therefore find a means to depict that which is unseen yet which is known, that which is behind appearance. To this end Seymour uses text to build up a narrative - a background - a context to that which is presented in a representational manner. Seymour attempts to portray people caught within the nets of their own heritage, trapped by their own emblems, by their own political culture. Christopher Coppock focuses on this element of Seymour's work as central to its effect:

The emblems which reinforce the cultural divide are given a significance in his pictorial composition which mimic the real significance that the emblems play in the Ulster Seymour portrays. (13,p21)

The work Coppock describes here was by far Seymour's most convincing. Seymour seems to have rejected the opportunity to develop or explore further possibilities for a Realist strategy, relying instead on a kind of surrealist approach. John Hutchinson, in his essay for the exhibition catalogue 'On the Balcony of the Nation', describes Seymour's work as a subjective vision alongside an alternative view of objective reality' (23).

Seymour has begun to rely upon an animal symbolism which, whilst suggesting an open rural preoccupation with animal husbandry, fails to come to terms with the deeper and hidden realities of secret societies, their origin and their relationship to the ownership of land. He merely quotes everyday physical manifestations of division through the inclusion of flags impaled upon a landscape forming the background for his animals. Allusion to the 'siege mentality' is hardly original. Like the cartographers of the Commission set up to define the line upon which the Border should run, he is looking in the wrong place if it is indeed his intention to go beyond superficial manifestations of division and dig deeper into the psychological and cultural roots of the conflict. The question which appears to be begged here is how far Seymour, a Belfast man, has really come to terms with the intricacies of rural Ulster. His earlier work, based in the city, appears to have been more successful in terms of analysing the conflict.

Seymour's oeuvre is gallery-specific and therefore unlikely to engage more than a small section of the public. Any serious consideration of realist strategies must question this limitation. Seymour's direction away from Realism may be indicative of an influence on Northern Irish artists of the kind of modernist positions forwarded by Theodor Adorno.

Adorno attempted to insulate art from the social phenomena of popular culture and mass technology which he believed would inevitably destroy it. Adorno's fear of the 'total system' is the fear of an all-pervasive cultural straightjacket, a systematic

saturation of kitsch and popular culture through the media terminals of modern information technology. He developed this position from an earlier rejection of technologically reproduced 'multiples' as a debasement of the unique essence of the original work of art. His support of Avantgardism and defence of 'high art' sought to rally artists behind the creation of aesthetic value and authenticity. He saw that even the most radical work could become devalued through its transformation into a cultural commodity and that the only refuge for the development of a genuinely political art lay in 'the classical stage of high modernism' (6,p209).

A very different position to that of Adorno is taken in the theatre work and theoretical writings of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht began his involvement with theatre at a time when the crisis of Weimar Germany led to the erosion of (idealist) Expressionism. New approaches, such as Dada, began to develop with radically different aesthetic positions. With Erwin Piscator, whose use of film and still-projections broke down some of the limitations of purely lyrical expression, Brecht began to move away from the shock anarchic tactics of Dada to develop techniques more strongly influenced by Marxist discipline and technological advance. Together they began constructing forms for an Epic theatre, which was to be a response on stage to the political strife of the German Nation offstage, a work of 'art in situation'. Brecht as the precursor of a movement which emphasised the 'cognitive function of realism', began to see in technology possibilities of linking aesthetic and cognitive concerns. This is seen in his 'Lehrstuecke' - plays written specifically for a limited (class-conscious) audience, though performed to a larger audience both before and since his death.

Brecht dismissed notions of formalism for its own sake and developed an aesthetic of performance which is in unison with his conception of production. As Frederic Jameson puts it, Brecht's is an attitude toward social institutions and the material world which is 'active, curious, experimental, subversive -in a word, scientific' (6,p205) There will of course be limitations to the adoption of a Brechtian perspective in particular contexts. McAvera's belief that a sensibility not to question the status quo is still relevant, in the context of visual art produced in Northern Ireland, forces him to reject a Brechtian position. However some artists have begun to question this view and their work reflects a wish to confront the issues. The following sections examine the extent of such contributions.

Other Responses I

One of the ironies of the world's broadcasting media is that, despite an ever-more pervasive and persuasive coverage of events, little is actually reported about great masses of the world's population. Correspondingly great documentation exists about relatively small communities. Trisha Ziff points to the stereotypical nature of these photographic images. The perpetrator



6. "Stone upon Stone" by Willie Doherty, Black and White photographs with coloured text, 1986, Both 122 x 183 cm



and victim of violence in Northern Ireland alongside those depicted as the defenders of the State, are presented in a style unlikely to be perceived by outsiders as images of daily life; they have become images with which the viewer cannot readily identify.(47,p99) This media-created context substitutes real knowledge and experience of the situation with a deliberate sensationalism characteristic of the 'News Event'. The media thus undermines social realities, leaving the subjects of its report vulnerable to public misrepresentation and misunderstanding.

David Butler traces the development, among broadcasters of a consensus on media reportage of the conflict and shows how reporting 'lines' changed from those of 'warring tribes' and 'even-handed British arbitration' at the start of the conflict to those of 'terrorism as cause', predominant since the late 70's.(9,pp109-110)

Willie Doherty is one of a few artists in Northern Ireland who have attempted to make a clear response to media imagery. His most recent work, 'Same Difference', responds to current restrictions in reporting, resulting from the media ban on certain individuals and political parties (eg Sinn Fein) deemed to be supporters of terrorism. Doherty is one of very few artists willing or able to begin speaking the 'unspeakable'. This is because he consciously challenges the superficiality of much media coverage of the conflict with his ability to transform a personal knowledge of the area, geographical and political, into visual presentation. His is a radical field of vision formed by a conspicuous and deliberate rejection of Expressionist foci. There are no agonised victims, no flag-waving or gun-toting perpetrators. His work has no place either for a sentimental republicanism, often manifested in wall-murals on the gable ends of housing estates in his native Derry. There is no place either for avoidance of those issues which he sees as central to the conflict.

On first glance one is exposed to the immediacy of Doherty's finished work, despite the fact that it generally leaves room for second readings. 'Stone upon stone', one of Doherty's earlier works, combines two 183cm x 122cm black and white prints with coloured text. Designed to face each other one is subtitled 'the west bank of the river Foyle', the other 'the east bank of the river Foyle'. They reflect each other's similarities yet also their differences. The large text of 'Stone upon stone' is common to both, but is supplemented, contextualised and redefined on 'the west bank' by the words, 'Tiocfaidh ar la' (translated: 'Our day will come') in green lettering and on 'the east bank' by the words, 'This we will maintain' in blue lettering. Those familiar with the political iconography cannot fail to read the text as the aspirations of Nationalism and Unionism respectively, yet the work does more than cite political identities. The photographs are views taken of the stone and pebble-covered banks of a flowing river which encourages a reading of timeless survival. We are presented with broader consequences in the implied possession of



7. "Golden Sunsets: Waiting" by Willie Doherty, Colour photograph with text, 1986, 122 x 183 cm.



stones, or the gathering of stones. The stones, piling up on both sides, appear to refer to an investment or celebration of differences by both sides, or do they? Doherty is keen to encourage such discussion. In reply to Declan McGonigal he says of his work:

There isn't one definite way of reading the work. The construction of text and image is open-ended, they don't make absolute statements, so the fact that someone doesn't have a local knowledge hopefully doesn't close down another way into the work. (36)

Doherty presents a problem here as there are some obvious restrictions to the way in which the work can be read. Any ambiguity of meaning could however be understood as a facilitating element which Doherty hopes will enable discussion of his work to 'filter down' to a non gallery-going public, thus becoming a source of influence among the community as a whole. It has also to be recognised that he doesn't shy away from accusations that his work retains some semblance of partisan views. Replying to a question I raised concerning the 'Stone upon stone' piece, he acknowledged the presence of more than a simple material or cultural aspect to the work. Within the work exists a kind of 'subtext' which he believes is his position within it. He thinks that it is possible to retain this subtext though the structure of the work often appears to give the viewer a choice. (19)

His admission to being 'a product of some of those specific aspirations' (he is referring to the Nationalist aspirations with which he was brought up) is defended by pointing out that he 'has to live here' and 'share those aspirations'. (19) This is a clear admission to 'taking sides' but while allowing himself to be identified with the Nationalist side, his work allows for real questioning of nationalist attitudes.

Aspects of colonialism in Ireland and its continuing presence are addressed in such works as 'The Walls', 'Fog: Ice: Last Hours of Daylight' and 'Strategy: Sever - Strategy: Isolate'. The viewer is often presented with bland, grey everyday images, deprived of action, yet when combined with Doherty's text they become incendiaries in the realm of ideas. Here is social realism unparalleled by the 'Layered Response' artists, yet which retains some of those layered qualities. Doherty's text informs; simultaneously it questions.

'Golden Sunsets: Waiting' was one of Doherty's first colour works. In it he sets the legendary 'Free Derry' gable wall against a huge sunset which appears to saturate this symbol of resistance. The romantic idealism of a perfect sunset entices the voyeur with the guile of the old Gaelic aural tradition yet he reminds us that we are still waiting. Can it be that 'our day' is no closer to coming? Doherty appears to question sentimentality as a necessary or desirable quality in Nationalist political culture. He presents

no easy answers. His success is in presenting the viewer with enough information to encourage a questioning response. This strategy is one with which many activists would sympathise, but how far does it go in terms of seeking to address a wider audience?

Doherty's work appears restrained within the limitations of the gallery space. His preoccupation with the gallery appears to have led to a retention of some qualities more consistent with the 'Layered' approach, despite the basic 'activist' thrust of his work. His reluctance to make a radical change in the course of his work by stepping outside and confronting the general public could therefore be seen as a weakness. In his few attempts to reach a wider audience, Doherty has adopted the same presentational style seen in his gallery works. This begs the question of whether he has really come to terms with the specific problems attached to Billboard work, strategies which artists like Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson have developed more successfully(15). This point is all the more pertinent because he admits to disappointment regarding the response of the public to his billboard work, describing the result as 'nothing happens'.(19)

Despite his rejection of presumptions that billboard work gets closer to people on the street, Doherty intends to continue work in the public arena - an acknowledgement of its desirability as a form of intervention rather than any deep conviction of its effectiveness. Those who would reject such ventures or those who cast doubt on the validity of a confrontational public art claiming that it aids the propagandist, he says, are dealing in 'presumptions that artists are saintlike individuals who are in the middle, who don't offend anybody and who don't take a position'. In Doherty's world there are things that the artist 'just has to say' and 'there is no civilised conference where you can.....begin to speak the unspeakable', with the possible exception of art.(19)

Other Responses II

Replying to a question which raised the absence up until 1982 of any overt political or social reference in his performances, Alistair MacLennan stated:

Where conflict is, is a good place in which to resolve issues, as much as one is able to within one's art and life for oneself and hopefully for those whom one meets and touches.

He continued,

It's easy to use political issues, social issues, issues of any sort when one's not in the situation one's working from. It's different from actually being in that situation and trying to effect change in as direct a manner as



8. "Twenty Four Hours" by Alistair MacLennan, Performance in the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 1981.



Alistair MacLennan, a Scottish-born artist has lived and worked in Belfast since 1975. His political and social concerns cover an area less specific than those with which Willie Doherty is dealing. His view that life and art are inseparable elements is guided by a holistic philosophy, which he expresses as being a position in which the artist conveys a certain attitude, without resort to a cut-off world of esoterics. MacLennan's work constantly redresses limitations to artistic expression. His understanding of the situation has required a response that can be seen as activist in the spirit of Brecht's didactic theatre.

Not surprisingly, such work is fraught with problems: problems of association and linkage with the physical surroundings, problems of coding the work, problems of addressing issues, and problems of censorship. Whilst such concerns are not specific to MacLennan, nor even to performance art in general, they take on an added importance within the political context of Northern Ireland because his work is political and because the artist is actually living and working in that situation.

'Twenty-Four Hours', one of his performance works, brings out much of the confrontational possibilities of MacLennan's work. It also draws out adequately some of its limitations. The performance was actually made in Dublin's Project Art Centre, therefore outside the specific terms of reference of Northern Ireland. However, it remains valid as part of this thesis because it took place during the period of the hunger strikes in the H-Blocks. The hunger strikes had charged the political atmosphere of the whole of Ireland and even Britain. In many European and American cities the issue of the hunger strikes had even led to large demonstrations. MacLennan's performance was a response to this event.

The performance began at midnight when, presenting himself unclothed, he began painting parts of his body. His head and face he painted white, his lower legs and feet black. He painted a black vertical line from his neck down to his crotch and painted his arms red. His pubic area he saturated with black paint. On the ground lay the remains of filleted fish, which had been placed at regular intervals, about one pace apart up and down the length of the room. At the head of the fleshless fish lay a small mound of black powder which began to 'bleed' into a streamlet of water emanating from a corner of the performance space. Having completed painting himself, he began to pace slowly up and down the room with a plastic bag full of water hanging from his neck and dangling about his knees. He had intended to continue this action for the full 24 hours, however a biting chill demanded he compromise and wear some clothes for the remainder of the performance.

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and has specified that the work which Willie...
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open doorway, may be considered a mistake, not only because it allowed the performance area to become cold, but because it deprived all but the most interested of any sight of the action. Nevertheless the close resemblance of a naked painted man to a hunger striker may have been enough, had he performed outside the gallery, to encourage those with little sympathy for either hunger striker, artist or audience to seek its censorship. MacLennan through the use of a gallery location thus avoided probable censorship.

MacLennan prefers to allow a reading of his work to remain open-ended as it can develop its own connotations, in the eyes of the viewer, which go further than the artist may intend (20). There are however parallels to be drawn by his references to anonymity (nakedness), butchery (fleshless fish) and universality (endless rows and lines). He wrote later of the performance, 'the subject dealt actively, not passively with manifesting varying conditions and kinds of freedom while simultaneously conveying external circumstances of physical and psychological stress and confinement' (33). The timing of the performance, fifty days into the hunger strike, ensured that a reading of the work would take the suffering of a hunger-striker into account, yet the symbolism used suggests wider issues. It points to the internationality of confinement and the universality of butchery. John Sharkey in his review of the performance, criticises MacLennan's choice of venue. 'Being on show in an art gallery yet sealing oneself off from a public response is perhaps an internal retreat from both the accepted performance mode and the normality of violence in the North'. (40) This reading of the performance appears prejudicial for it takes no account of MacLennan's street-works, where the artist challenges the public with issues ranging from consumerism to violence and division. Sharkey misses the point of the gallery-specific context of this performance. It follows that allusion to internationality and to anonymity, could not easily be achieved on the paving stones of Dame Street, even less in the context of a northern city.

A more fruitful criticism of MacLennan's work may be found in his reluctance to be drawn into specifics concerning the 'overt' or 'covert' nature of his live work. 'One can be political in art without waving slogans' he says, yet continues:

If an artist uses political content, is really serious about it, and above all wants the work to be politically effective, he or she should seriously consider altering the whole context of operation from the art world to the public arena of hard core politics to avoid falling in between two stools, i.e. producing work which on the one hand may well be aesthetically inadequate, and on the other, preaching to the converted'. (42, p8)

MacLennan answers this dilemma in attempting to be political without sloganizing. Issues of ethics, ethnicity and ecology,

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which he seeks to address cannot, he believes, be resolved adequately by artists who 'have a message for the people'. 'One does not want to patronise', he says, pointing to a deeply-felt danger(20). MacLennan's street-works are based on a strategy which the artist believes allows him to stand or move as a sign. Work which necessitates the use of 'politically correct' sloganeering is, he believes, often 'very dry'. In acting as a sign he hopes to preserve a didactic aesthetic which suggests ideas to, rather than imposes ideas on, his audience.

Summary

Mike Catto, reviewing the 'Irish Art of the Eighties' exhibition, wrote:

The artist is a pluralist, a commentator or interpreter upon events, situations and consequences rather than the activist seeking to force change through the immediate charge along a single pathway from abyssal black to perfect white (10,p49)

This position echoes McAvera's fear of an activist manifesto, yet evades the weakness of much current 'political' art in Northern Ireland, which is still unable to overcome banality with innovation and which has yet to find ways in which to express that which has not been articulated. Political artists throughout the world have formed responses which have sometimes led to 'taking sides' but which enquire, examine and uncover social realities. Willie Doherty's identification with Nationalist aspirations undermines the position of McAvera and Catto. Doherty's use of language has begun to clear much of the taboo concerning an articulation of the 'unspeakable', thereby enabling him to cast doubts on the 'imagined' truths. Alistair MacLennan's work has required the pulling down of curtains art traditionally has used to define its beginning and its end. He opens up the common denominator of human existence to art making, the radical stage of Belfast's streets.

Both Doherty and MacLennan seem reluctant to develop an activist position which goes further than that for which they are presently known. Doherty's most recent work, 'Same Difference' suggests a departure from the format of his earlier works but this may have arisen because his central focus is concerned with media censorship, therefore requiring a corresponding change of presentation.

In the work of the Layered Response artists a fudging of the issue occurs due to the relationship of their aesthetic position and form, where the primacy of a non-confrontational aesthetic dictates limitations to the form of the work and overrides any consideration that might have been given to investigation and analysis. The activist position reverses these priorities, where the artist, having identified the issue -what Les Levine terms the

medium of the work- places concerns of analysis to the top of the agenda and only then considers the form that the work should take.

Doherty and MacLennan have begun to break the mould of a non-questioning attitude. However, an evaluation of their achievements has to view their work within the overall perspective of wider activist possibilities. This raises the question of how an activist art can be 'activated' in the context of Northern Ireland.

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9. "Casual Passer by I met at 11.00 am," Paris, by Braco Dimitrijevic, Installation of photograph on Parisian street, 1971.



CHAPTER III

AN ACTIVIST RESPONSE

This chapter takes as its basis the views formulated by Lucy Lippard, after her visit to Northern Ireland in April 1984, in which the concept of a community artist is given much importance. Though a term not entirely unheard of in Northern Irish art, its meaning there is quite different than that given it by the Arts Council. Its centrality in the development of an activist art in the Northern Ireland context can be assumed to be part of Lippard's position, but how can it begin to become a viable and valid project within the limitations of a society dominated by sectarianism and violence?

Lippard begins her assessment of art in the North with an admission of surprise at the distinct lack of activist work. 'The complexity of Irish political life appears to be paralleled by the layered, contradictory images that I have often found tantalizingly indirect' (28,p11). Freely accepting a limited knowledge of the situation, Lippard takes on board much of the argument put forward by local artists and theorists. Her attempt to wade through the depth of positions within the indigenous artistic discourse made incisive commentary on the work of Northern artists impossible. However she did point to a few areas of art production which she believed had been important in the development of an activist art in the United States and in New York City in particular. Two such areas stand out as being of particular relevance to this discussion; the position of photography as a means of production and the concept of the community artist.

Expressing her astonishment at the lack of any significant photographic work in Northern Irish art, she writes:

The absence of this direct witness to community and political struggles within the art milieu may have affected the development of an activist art, since photography is a major component of social-change culture elsewhere in the world.(28,p11)

An example of the kind of work Lippard may have had in mind can be seen in the large photographic pieces made by Braco Dimitrijevic. Dimitrijevic is attempting to change a passive public response to that of a questioning public attitude.

I consider our environment not to be a physical space, but a cultural heritage. Thus I try to appropriate the forms of monumentalization in a certain place in order to change people's attitude to them. In some European countries, the large photo-portrait was used to celebrate political leaders. I remember clearly the reactions of people in 1971, when I installed, after hours, three large

portraits of randomly selected persons in the main square in Zagreb. When people saw these portraits in the morning they thought there had been an overnight change of government. They automatically excluded the idea that anyone other than politicians or movie stars could be elevated there. (35,p42)

Dimitrijevic's interventionist position appears to resolve an issue still problematic in Doherty's public work to date. His ability to challenge myth results from an understanding of how such myths are born. In reworking locations from which myth is popularly received he brings about its deconstruction. Lippard's acknowledgement of the importance of photographic imagery is consistent with a generally Brechtian position, not primarily in its experimentation with new forms, but in its attempt at democratisation of the production of media.

Democratisation and the activist perspective of production within the community brings us to the second issue, that of the role of the community artist. Working primarily outside the artworld with grassroots groups, the community artist may 'vary in degrees of politicization' but will work naturally in groups, 'most often as muralists, performers, teachers or artists in residence' to promote a community art which can either reflect, stimulate participation in a local situation, criticize and/or mobilize for change. (28,p14) Lippard tells us that the community artist is however not to be seen in competition with the 'political artist'. There are important distinctions which arise from a personal choice. Community artists by working with and among selected groups and communities are socially 'involved'. Political artists are those who through their comment and analysis are socially 'concerned'. Lippard sees both as mutually valuable, thus implying a compatibility of the two positions. This position presents a radical and challenging direction for activist artists in the North.

Citing Suzanne Lacy's feminist artpieces, Lippard stresses an activist preoccupation with the intended audience and context; how the work reaches the audience and why. Lacy's work involved one year of organization and workshop activity. In addition to documentation of the work, Lacy encouraged the continuation of 'community networks' following the performance. 'Tactics or strategies of communication and distribution enter into the creative process as do activities usually considered separate from it' (28,p15). This is the kind of radical development which goes far beyond the public involvement MacLennan and Doherty have so far made.

An activist art must consider how it constructs relationships of production and reception with the community in which its creation takes place. Failure will leave it vulnerable to decay into formalist preoccupations. What this means in the context of the North is that the need for the construction of a cultural

...of ... in the ...
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... they ...
... They ...
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... (32, p. 42)

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activism, developed within the communities, must not lose sight of its commitment to confront the issues raised by the situation. Detractors of an activist art will point to this as evidence that an activist art is unworkable. 'There is no activist tradition here in Northern Ireland' they will claim. However, this is not entirely true and it seems to me to be an unfortunate but convenient opt-out to presume that community artists would be forced to take the position of those responsible for the Nationalist and Unionist wall-murals.

There are many social groups with whom activists could create fertile ground for a community art; women's groups, unemployed workers' groups, environmentalists and inter-community organisations come readily to mind. None of these groups are incapable of becoming potential transformers of political culture. All contribute, albeit passively, to the maintenance of Nationalist and Unionist myths, yet remain the very victims of the dominance of such myths.

It remains of interest, however, to discuss whether an activist art can be developed within religiously segregated communities. The presence of Nationalist and Unionist wall-murals in many city areas has led to much debate concerning their content, form, authorage, intention and function. They may be viewed as purely sectarian propaganda, but as Lippard points out, they do represent a kind of activist art 'minus the fine arts tradition component'. This leads her to question a simple dismissal of such work on the grounds of a rejection of rhetoric and sectarianism. Is there an activist perspective which could involve work within a segregated community, which at the same time is capable of resisting adoption by unwelcome allies?

Racism, prevalent in many New York neighbourhoods, hasn't stopped activists taking it up as an issue within the community. Jerry Kearns' work takes him to many ethnic communities in New York where he has become involved in photographic documentation and organisation of group exhibitions. A parallel of working with Protestants in the predominantly working class area of the Shankill Road or Catholics in Ballymurphy may seem rather more daunting, yet it is here where identities are formed from the stuff of Unionist and Nationalist traditions. It is also here that artists will have to begin the task of building a community art within the cultural life of the people.

Lippard reminds us that activist art must, above all, be relevant to the community within which it is created. 'Much activist art is collaborative or participatory and its meaning is directly derived from its use value to a particular community'. If activists fail, they run the risk of being rejected by the community. 'Paint us a beach!' or 'People want to get away from industrial work and things associated with daily living!' are the kind of responses which form one extreme of rejection. (27, p82) Another extreme can be seen in the response of a teenage girl to the makers of a

activists, developed within the community, must not lose sight of the commitment to control the finances raised by the situation. The fact that an activist will not be involved in the work of the community is a workable situation. However, this is a Northern Island. It is not an unfortunate fact that it seems to me to be an unfortunate fact that the community activists are not in a position to take the position of those responsible for the Nationalist and Unionist walls.

There are many social groups with whom activists could work. There is a group for a community art; women's group; workers' group; environmentalists; and inter-community organizations come readily to mind. None of these groups are incapable of becoming potential transformers of political culture. All contribute, albeit passively, to the maintenance of the Nationalist and Unionist walls, yet remain the very victims of the dominance of such walls.

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dragon mural in the Unity Walk area of Belfast, 'Is this supposed to brighten the place up? Who are you trying to kid - sure we live in shit'.(45,p10) The activist soon discovers that proverbial situation described by some in the North as that of being caught between a rock and a hard place.

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10. Examples of wall murals in the streets of Belfast, 1991.

CONCLUSION

In the first chapter I set out to cover issues central to the cause of the conflict, to which artists in Northern Ireland could be expected to respond. The positions put forward by Nationalists and Unionists alike have tended to code the conflict in a language accessible only to themselves. They tend to portray the conflict not as the tangled involvements of cause and effect, reaction and response, but as simplified chapters of a mythological history. The establishment in 1921 of the State of Northern Ireland has led to an increased sense of marginalisation by both communities for differing, but related, reasons and has resulted in inevitable conflict, yet it would be a mistake to believe that political structures alone have brought about the present conflict. For over two hundred years, Protestants and Catholics in the north of Ireland have celebrated myths and encouraged division and violence between their geographically interspersed communities. This has led to the development of competing and contradictory national identities.

Anthony D. Smith defines a Nation as 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (41, p14). Political strife, it can be argued, continues because of an historical inability by both sides to resolve a conflict seen therefore as that between two Nations, despite the geographical melange of the two communities. Ian Adamson, in his attempts to recreate a common ancestry and an historical linkage for 'Ulster' people with the Cruthin (or Picts), can be seen as providing Protestants with a heritage and culture, which identifies with a specific and an indigenous (Ulster) national identity. This is not to say that Protestants would not wish to remain British, but to underline a gradual change of national identity precipitated by the loss of Stormont at the hands of the British Government, and later as a result of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Smith contrasts the nature of the nation to that of the state. He defines the state as those public institutions which exercise a 'monopoly of coercion in a given territory' (41, p14). Ironically, 'coercion' is defined in the 1938 reprint of The Concise Oxford Dictionary as 'Controlling of voluntary agent or action by force; government by force, esp. of Ireland by suspension of ordinary liberties...' Todd and Ruane point to a Unionist hegemony at Stormont as the inevitable consequence and sole purpose of the creation of a Northern Ireland State. They conclude that political structures have led to the present conflict (43, p39). The problem which lies at the heart of the conflict is however one which is older than the State of Northern Ireland, and one which remains despite endless constitutional changes and amendments.

Nationalism has sought to present Ireland as a geographical and political entity, and the Irish as one family. Unionists see

CONCLUSION

In the past, the Irish have been regarded as the cause of the conflict, to which various Irish nationalist positions have been put forward by nationalists. The positions put forward by nationalists have been regarded as the cause of the conflict in a language accessible only to themselves. They tend to portray the conflict not as the tangled involvement of cause and effect, reaction and response, but as simplified chapters of a mythological history. The establishment in 1921 of the State of Northern Ireland has led to an increased sense of marginalisation by both communities for differing, but related, reasons and has resulted in inevitable conflict, yet it would be a mistake to believe that political structures alone have brought about the present conflict. For over two hundred years, Protestants and Catholics in the north of Ireland have celebrated myths and encouraged division and violence between their geographically intermingled communities. This has led to the development of competing and contradictory national identities.

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Nationalism has sought to present Ireland as a geographical and political entity, and the Irish as one family. The result has

themselves related to a very different family, one which rejects Catholicism, one whose homeland extends across the Irish Sea. The proposal then that conflict in Northern Ireland can be resolved along the lines of a nation state (whether Irish, Ulster-ish or British) implies the negation of aspirations (and the possible coercion) of those who would identify with a different nation. The search for a solution must therefore reject the concept of the nation state and take one of two possible directions out. The first option worth considering would be the construction of a state where both national identities are held legitimate and where political power is shared. Arend Lijphard outlines one such process in his discussion of 'Consociation' (38, pp166-186). A second option could be found in the longer term project of determining the precise nature of the nations to which people in Northern Ireland aspire and in seeking to reconstruct a national identity acceptable to all.

An artistic response to this challenge can be one which seeks to uncover, through analysis and investigation, new ground for discussion, confronting the issues and engaging the widest possible section of the public in its activities; or it can, through preference or prejudice, seek to respond in an elliptical or oblique form, thus ensuring its absolute independence and distance from the zones of engagement. There is of course a multitude of positions in between, reflected in the positions of some contemporary artists. All will, no doubt, contribute to some future documentation of artistic responses to the conflict but which, as I discovered within the greater part of work characterised by the 'layered approach', will do little or nothing to analyse or confront the issues central to the present conflict.

It is my thesis that the positive contribution made by an activist art - its questioning attitude and its commitment to investigate and confront the issue - require a corresponding development of public involvement in the production of art. The development of community-based art projects becomes a priority in the activist agenda. Such projects should not be confined to the making of non-sectarian murals, nor to community workshops in art production, however badly needed in the present context, but they should encourage a visual articulation of ideas concerning the social and cultural realities of life in Northern Ireland.

If the work of Nationalist and Unionist muralists is to remain the only kind of community-based art, it follows that the future for avantgarde artists who will follow from MacLennan and Doherty remains firmly tied to the security and seclusion of art galleries. The journey out, to Northern Ireland's political ghettos, may present too perilous a prospect for all but the heavily committed, but until its detractors begin to provide anything like a reasonable level of analysis and understanding of the conflict in their own work, the pursual of an activist position will remain valid.

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APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW WITH ALISTAIR MACLENNAN

By Liam Forster

FORSTER: What do you see in the actual materials used?

MACLENNAN: A range of materials are used, some materials are used in different works in different configurations, for instance using bread, one is aware of using food, also consumerism, the kind of bread as well, the sliced white and the ironies involved but also thinking in terms of their religious connotations within Christianity, the bread and wine together, but trying to use a material that everyone at least understands and is very much part of a common usage, trying to utilise things and objects that are not necessarily raised in people's minds as having to do first and foremost with the art world but with basic living.

FORSTER: Are you using materials in the way Joseph Beuys might have done? Do they hold a spiritual dimension?

MACLENNAN: There is that, but I think it is always tricky when you take a statement by an artist like Beuys who tended to infer - even stated at one point - that a particular object represented such and such. I feel that on the one hand it can be useful, but it can also be dangerous because if a member of the public feels that his or her feelings, interpretations are therefore invalidated because he or she got it wrong in relation to the artist's intentions in terms of really honing down on the meaning of the particular material. I would tend to want it not to be so limited because the work, the material itself, when it's manifested out there, has its own connotations beyond one's intent and one has to reorganise that. It is like a child, it has a certain independence as well as dependence... in relation to the artist's intention.

FORSTER: To what extent is location important as an element or prop?

MACLENNAN: It is important, one tries to do work in linkage with physical situations and also certain meaning associations with the context in which one is working...the street is a real common denominator, it's where people go isn't it?

FORSTER: There are critics however, Brian McAvera for instance, who are reluctant to sing the praises of those who make work 'on the streets' because he feels that there is a problem there. You might end up being seen as taking sides...

MACLENNAN: It doesn't have to be that way. It depends on how one codes the work. This might be a problem Brian McAvera has himself.

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He's involved in theatre and some people in theatre have a hard time with visually oriented work that has certain theatrics about it, which is taking in some respects more direct lines.

FORSTER: What are the kind of issues you seek to address in your work?

MACLENNAN: Bounds of living, dying and transformation. I'm very interested in the transforming parts of it, issues of ethics, ethnicity and ecology... having said that I'm not going to try to purposely address all of these in every work. You might do a work where only one of these is dealt with even elyptically. Another piece of work is definitely trying to deal with one, two or three in a more head-on way. I think it is a bit like a blunt instrument if one has to constantly try to hit all the points all the time. There can be a danger in being 'politically correct' in every work. It can make for very dry and boring stuff. It can so easily slip into sloganeering on the one hand. On the other one doesn't want to be simply liberally indulging oneself in esoterics, that is so vaporously vague to people on the street as well as to art-lovers that they can't quite grasp what one is about. Also one doesn't want to patronise, that's another danger, artists feeling they have a message for the public, often it's patronising. It's trying to be real and genuine in the work, sometimes politics with a small 'p' can be as effective, or more effective than politics with a large 'p'.

FORSTER: What would you say to people who feel that art has no role to play in socio-political matters?

MACLENNAN: It is true that the visual arts are not, in a live dynamic sense, given any credibility. Just by doing what one is doing, not trying to cut oneself off into the world of esoterics although one is involved in it obviously, but where one happens to be, live, people you meet in the street and so on. You try to convey a certain attitude. The view that the butterfly flaps its wings somewhere in the universe and it effects elsewhere. There's energy and you can't kill energy and if it's positive energy it will manifest. I'd like for art to be a far more obviously overtly effecting role in the world, but if people are not prepared to hear what it is that I'm doing, you try, you can find a range of ways of conveying your values.

FORSTER: Do you feel that censorship has changed the direction or presentation of your work, making that which you are trying to say more acceptable?

MACLENNAN: One doesn't go out of one's way to get work censored, because it is frustrating when it happens although I can imagine some artists might want that to use some publicity to highlight some thoughts. That could be used as a strategy. It's not one I employ because I want to do the work and being stopped is a frustration. You examine how you present, what you present. I

...and in the end, I think, the most important thing is to be honest about the way you feel about the work. It's not always easy, but it's worth it.

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don't want to get into situations where I feel I have to compromise the form of the work in order to get something across, though I am aware that water can change its form from ice to steam and still not lose its essence. If an artist can modify the form of the work, not the principles that underline it, to adapt to given situations, then that can seem like a wise strategy. One has to be very careful though that one doesn't, even imperceptably, compromise the principles, there's a real danger there. It is important to sometimes break out of that slumbered existence and to do something that says, "Hey, this is the situation" even to know you're going to get stopped. Sometimes one has to shock, because our sleep is so deep. One doesn't want to shock but it is like an alarm clock. It's like "wake up", but there is a tendency to switch off and not to get up (laughs).

FORSTER: For what reasons do you think your work has sometimes been censored? What kind of threat do you pose? Is it done for political reasons or out of a kind of cultural ignorance?

MACLENNAN: Both, it could also be because of complaints by particular people who get apprehensive about something that is uncoded: "What is that? A looper or something?". It could be a range of reasons. I think it is important to do work where one stands or moves as a sign. Doing works on streets can have that effect if they are well chosen and sufficiently attuned. If one gets stopped, well that shouldn't stop you from doing the work. It may beg the question whether one could utilise more modified forms so that the work could get through OK, but with less effect, or doesn't register as well.

FORSTER: In a sense there appears to be a lesson to be learnt, a parable to be understood, an allusion to something that can be followed on, in your work...?

MACLENNAN: Yes there is that.

FORSTER: Do you intend to continue working in Northern Ireland and how do you see your work developing?

MACLENNAN: I want to keep doing the live works because its ...its where your neck and body are on the line...its where you put your words to the test. I want to do some work on the streets as well as other stuff. I also want to do installations, live works with installations, but I also want to open up a range of other possibilities. I'm interested in doing photo-based work as well... but the live work is the closest to the body and mind existing in space and time in relation to others and it's the closest in that sense to communication between people direct without it being mediated through other technologies or art-processes. The most essential thing is human beings' interrelation, so the live action and communication is for me the most important.

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FORSTER: Do you intend to continue working in Northern Ireland and
how do you see your work developing?

MACLENNAN: I want to keep doing the live works because it's... it's
where your neck and body are on the line... it's where you put your
words to the test. I want to do some work on the streets as well
as other stuff. I also want to do installations, live works with
installations, but I also want to open up a range of other
possibilities. I'm interested in doing photo-based work as well.
but the live work is the closest to the body and mind existing in
space and time in relation to others and it's the closest in that
sense to communication between people direct without it being
mediated through other technologies or art-processes. The work
essential thing is human beings' interaction, so the live work
and communication is for me the most important.

APPENDIX II

SEMINAR WITH WILLIE DOHERTY

DOHERTY: (...) There is a kind of amnesia of sorts over the colonial past of this country. It's unresolved business for both North and South. The language (...) is in a sense also something that is unresolved. You could say that the language is or was constructed for a political purpose to subjugate the people here so there is a very definite political intention in constructing the Irish as being essentially barbaric or crazy or beyond the pale, which is where that kind of expression comes from, which is based on historical fact. The problem is that these historical facts have been wiped over, so the problem becomes one of a series of imagined truths, untruths...essentially unresolved business that we're in the process of resolving.

FORSTER: A couple of years ago you admitted to being unable to understand the Unionist position, yet in your recent work you appear ready to examine such views. Does this represent a new development in your work?

DOHERTY: The work, "Stone upon Stone", with the two sides of the river, has been interpreted as being about we're all the same, where in fact it is a recognition of difference, as in the expression "same difference" where actually we mean the same man is different (...). We're in the same position where we can see both things at the same time and understand both things at one and the same time. I understand the Unionist position (...). I've had some bad reactions by some people in the North who say that my work doesn't make any space for a loyalist viewpoint. What I've said is that although I don't come from that tradition, I can to some extent empathise with them in the dilemma that unionism faces because of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and that betrayal which I believe is genuinely and deeply felt (...). The difference is, at the end of the day, greater than the similarity. My aspirations are not to maintain the union between Britain and Ireland, therefore there is only so far that I can go in understanding their position.

FORSTER: Your work "Stone upon Stone" appears to emphasise the relationship between material ownership and political identity as central to the problem in the North, yet your work also hints at problems central to cultural politics...

DOHERTY: Yes, increasingly the work is in the realm of language (...) but it's more complicated than that. I think that there is a kind of subtext within the work which is my position within it, I think it is possible to be there although the structure of the work often appears to give a choice.

STUDENT: How do you feel about making more public work at home, in Derry for instance?

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DOHERTY: (...) There is a kind of universality of some sort in the colonial past of this country. It's unresolved business for both North and South. The landscape (...) is in a sense also something that is unresolved. You could say that the landscape is in some sense constructed for a political purpose to subjugate the people. There is a very definite political intention in constructing the Irish as being essentially barbaric or crazy or beyond the law, which is where that kind of expression comes from, which is based on historical fact. The problem is that these historical facts have been wiped over, so the problem becomes one of a series of imagined truths, untruths... essentially unresolved things that we're in the process of resolving.

FORSTER: A couple of years ago you admitted to being unable to understand the Unionist position, yet in your recent work you appear ready to examine such views. Does this represent a new development in your work?

DOHERTY: The work "Stone upon Stone", with the two sides of the river, has been interpreted as being about we're all the same, where in fact it is a recognition of difference, as in the expression "same difference" where actually we mean the same but in different (...). We're in the same position where we can see both things at the same time and understand both things at once and the same time. I understand the Unionist position (...). I've had some bad reactions by some people in the North who say that my work doesn't make any space for a loyalist viewpoint. What I've said is that although I don't come from that tradition, I can be some extent empathise with them in the dilemma that underlies their because of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and that betrayal which I believe is genuinely and deeply felt (...). The difference is, at the end of the day, greater than the similarity. My aspirations are not to maintain the union between Britain and Ireland, therefore there is only so far that I can go in understanding their position.

FORSTER: Your work "Stone upon Stone" appears to emphasise the relationship between material ownership and political identity as central to the problem in the North, yet your work also hints at problems central to cultural politics...

DOHERTY: Yes, increasingly the work is in the realm of landscape (...) but it's more complicated than that. I think that there is a kind of subtext within the work which is my position within it. I think it is possible to be there although the structure of the work often appears to give a choice.

STUDENT: How do you feel about making more public work of landscape, in poetry for instance?

DOHERTY: I would like to do some more work publicly, though I don't really know that in itself you are gaining a wider audience. The fact that it is on the street doesn't increase the meaning of the work or the number of people who can actually read it. One of the advantages of working in galleries is that you're working within a framework that is about that kind of reading, where often on the street it is not about that kind of reading. It's about passing something quickly and that is the level of that kind of working. It doesn't follow that you're going to be more easily understood (....) it's been my experience that I have put up some billboards. You can't wait for the reaction - and nothing happens (....) I don't have ambitions for the work, in terms of making some kind of change or of being that kind of force. I think what I can do is contribute to some kind of discussion and maybe that's all. I know that some people think that working in galleries is a sell-out or that there are ideological difficulties in working there. I don't have that kind of problem. For me it is a space, it's a particular kind of context that you can use. If I hadn't used the gallery context I would have remained invisible.

FORSTER: What about the argument that being on the street is closer to people, who are seldom confronted by the artist yet who are involved directly, through their everyday existence, in the fighting?

DOHERTY: I think that is a presumption and I don't know that it is the case. What you say is true that only a small percentage are involved in artistic debate. It's not my job to get people to come to galleries but what I said about things filtering down is an interesting process. The long-term cultural impact of your work can filter down in all kinds of ways. Advertising and cinema respond to what artists do, there is a knock-on effect. Working in galleries doesn't actively divorce you from the masses for this reason and is therefore a valid contribution (....) the answer to what you were saying about my kind of relationship to Unionism is that to some extent what I'm interested in, in this work, is to begin to say the unspeakable. There is no civilised conference where you can say these words.

FORSTER: All the same, there are some who would see your work as giving fodder to the propagandists...

DOHERTY: Presumptions that artists are saintlike individuals who are in the middle, who don't offend anybody and who don't take a position (...) that's not the world I live in and there are things that you just have to say.

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