



Performance Art and the Conflict in Northern Ireland

A Troubles Archive Essay
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"Another version of this text might easily have alluded to [...] Alastair MacLennan and to the vital emergence of performance art in Northern Ireland".¹ The text in question is the Troubles Archive essay on Visual Art, part of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland-commissioned essays on the cultural manifestations in and on the "Troubles". The current essay then is inevitably that "other version". The near omission from the canonical local art history typifies the fact that Performance Art is here thus far an under-represented history. This is despite Alastair MacLennan's prolific and internationally regarded practice and 40 years of teaching, attracting gifted students and guests, travelling and practicing locally.² Without performance art's personnel, Northern Ireland's cultural landscape would look very different – also outside the narrower confines of performance. The fact that we need "another version" of a history is, of course, symptomatic not just for this part of the world with its competing histories, but also an asset: performance expands and contests the canon. It does not wish to occupy it squarely or perpetuate the cult of the genius. MacLennan's crucial importance lies not in his authoritative voice, but (Zen-inspired) in showing, even cultivating doubt and weakness.

Multiple histories are a valuable tradition in Northern Irish art history and curating. The Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, has hosted a series of 'Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art'.³ Extending this initiative in a different format, it is showing an exhibition of Northern Irish performance art (August / September 2015). The performance artist Brian Connolly and I (Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes) are co-curating this exhibition. It will feature a range of the influential artists who either moved to Northern Ireland since the 1970s and stayed (MacLennan, Dan Shippides⁴, Sinead O'Donnell), or artists from Northern Ireland (André Stitt,⁵ Sandra Johnston,⁶ Sinead Breathnach-Cashel, Brian Connolly⁷ and other members of Bbeyond⁸), who studied, teach and work here.

¹ Declan Long, *Visual Art and the Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Troubles Archive Essay*. Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ed), Belfast: ACNI without year (2009), p.24.

² Currently Emeritus Professor in Fine Art at the Belfast School of Art, University of Ulster in Belfast. He is a major practitioner within global *performance* art. Since 1975 he has been based in Belfast and was a founder member of Belfast's Art and Research Exchange and Bbeyond. He is also a member of the European Performance Group 'Black Market International'. During the 1970s and 80s he created very long durational performances in Britain and America: up to 144 hours each, non-stop, usually neither eating nor sleeping throughout. The subject matter dealt with political, social and cultural malfunction. He travels extensively presenting 'actuations' (his term for performance/installations).
<http://www.vads.ac.uk/resources/AMW.html>

³ <http://goldenthreadgallery.co.uk/event/catalyst-arts-collective-histories-of-northern-irish-art-x/>

⁴ Dan Shippides is an established artist whose practice includes interactive sculpture, public intervention, video, photography, drawing, performance and text. He is currently course co-leader of the MFA at the University of Ulster.

⁵ André Stitt is a Belfast-born performance and interdisciplinary artist, whose provocative and politically challenging practice since 1976 gained him international reputation. He is currently Professor of Fine Art at Cardiff School of Art & Design, Cardiff Metropolitan University.

⁶ One of the foremost performance artists from Northern Ireland, she held a retrospective exhibition (at the Golden Thread Gallery 2012/13) and wrote a book (her edited PhD) entitled *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* about the relationships between legal systems of conflict resolution and the role that performance (art) plays / can play in such contested societies as Northern Ireland. <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/researchandconsultancy/refprofiles/sandrajohnston/>

⁷ Connolly developed a genre of performance art called 'Install-action' and has created a series of interactive Market Stall Performances. He has performed and exhibited in diverse contexts throughout Europe, America and China. He has also initiated and curated events and projects both nationally and internationally and has been involved with artist run organizations throughout Ireland including: Bbeyond, The Sculptors' Society of Ireland and Visual Artists Ireland. He established the Belfast International Festival of Performance Art in 2013.
<http://fineart.belfastschoolofart.com/staff/brian-connolly>

⁸ Bbeyond is a Belfast-based collective, committed to promoting the practice of performance art and artists in Northern Ireland and further afield. It hosts internationally renowned artists and encourages emerging artists to explore performance practice and enables those from all sectors of society to experience performance art.
<http://www.naughtongallery.org/sites/media/Media,291865,en.pdf>



ill. 1

More temporary but impactful presences were Joseph Beuys in 1974 (ill. 1), and Adrian Hall, who was teaching in Belfast in the crucial years, having come from London, where he had seen and assisted performance by Yoko Ono and others. Black Market International, and key members of the Polish, Irish, British and (other) continental European performance art scenes visited and returned over the past decades, initially mediated through Richard Demarco, Edinburgh.⁹ Particularly the networks across the Iron Curtain, where at the height of the Cold War other kinds of social and political difficulties were experienced, enabled Northern Irish performance artists to be informed about current thinking and practice, but also to drive it.

As far as performance art is concerned, Northern Ireland during the “Troubles” was not a “peripheral” location. This can be illustrated by the fact that when relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud), the social turn (Claire Bishop) and dialogical practice (Grant Kester) were discussed in art theory in the early 2000s, these tendencies appeared to be new elsewhere, but not in Northern Ireland. Here such strategies had been tested and honed since Beuys’ visit in 1974 and the establishment of the Art and Research Exchange (A.R.E.) a few years later.¹⁰ The A.R.E., co-founded by artists Chris Coppock, Belinda Loftus, Alastair MacLennan, and Rainer Pagel, understood performance widely and was welcomed by many, who felt that such a philosophically and theoretically driven organisation was needed at times when

⁹ Richard Demarco, Edinburgh, has been instrumental in forging connections between Central and Eastern European artists and “the Celtic world”, particularly by brining artists such as Tadeusz Kantor, Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramovic to Scotland (all of these together e.g. at Edinburgh Arts 1973) and knowledge of such seminal practices spread to (Northern) Ireland. Some, like Beuys, visited. <http://www.demarco-archive.ac.uk/>

¹⁰ Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Victoria Walters (eds.). *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond: Art, Culture and Politics*. Series: European Culture and Politics. Münster, Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, London: LIT 2011, introduction. Chris Coppock, “A.R.E. – Acronyms, Community Arts and Stiff Little Fingers”, *Vacuum*, 11, Belfast: Factotum, <http://www.thevacuum.org.uk/issues/issues0120/issue11/is11artartres.html>, accessed March 2015.



ill. 2

the Arts Council of Northern Ireland was ultra-conservative, avoiding to support artists who addressed the political situation. Out of such legacies grew the distinctive artists' self-organized culture of Belfast, centred around Catalyst Arts, together with the journal *CIRCA*, now defunct.

One can also (as yet another story) begin Northern Ireland's performance art history with Samuel Beckett's Northern Irish socialization (the Golden Thread Gallery exhibition proposes this), due to the fact that Beckett's analysis of the context of his youth, Northern Ireland's tribal society, sensitized him to the formations of and potential artistic responses to restrictive, orthodox environments and the disasters they cause, well before his active participation in the *résistance* during WWII.

One of performance art's strengths is its ability to inhabit the interstices, to remain fluid, flexible and mobile. Such strategies have enabled it to remain relatively autonomous and not co-opted by one side or the other in the local conflict. Its under-represented status seems to reveal more about the expectations of art and the local mechanisms of canonization than about the art form: it does not wish to claim to be the fixed, sanctioned story (of art) of one community or the other in Northern Ireland.

Performance Art has here been sustained through Catalyst Arts, arguably the main artist-run organisation in Belfast (co-founded by Sandra Johnston and other graduates and helped over the decades by the global networks of teachers like MacLennan). In 2013 it held the 20th anniversary edition of its FIX festival, the longest-running performance art biennial in the UK. "Performance art in and from Northern Ireland can be offered as that area of practice in which consistently over the last decades, ambitious, locally rooted and internationally visible artwork has been created".¹¹ Projects, such as *Available Resources* (Orchard Gallery, Derry 1991), *Exchange Resources* (Catalyst Arts, Belfast 1995 with Connolly, MacLennan and others) have periodically enlivened performance practice and brought locals together with international artists.¹²

¹¹ Karine Talec, *Performance Art in Northern Ireland: Re-Thinking the Links between Art, Politics and the Aesthetics*, unpublished essay, 2012, p.7.

¹² <http://www.catalystarts.org.uk/exchange-resource/> Bbeyond: <https://bbeyondperformanceartweb.wordpress.com/>



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Bbeyond was established in 2001: an artist-led organisation that has generated a wide range of international events within Northern Ireland (*In Place of Passing, Inbound, Open Relations 1 & 2* etc.). Bbeyond continues (since June 2008) to host a series of low-key monthly performance meetings in differing locations throughout Northern Ireland, which are open for anyone to perform together with the group (ill. 2). These “monthlies” have become an internationally noted and emulated method and attract guests. The performances are unrehearsed and improvised. This open platform has enabled individual artists to experiment with creative ways of coming together and to explore diverse collaborative and live performance art responses to context and place.¹³

A further reason why historical and theoretical consideration of Northern Irish performance art is under-developed is that it is challenging under any circumstances: performance art’s basic tenet is that it should be seen and experienced live, greatly reducing the number of people who could attempt the task. Performance Art may well “live on” in peoples’ memory, through its “relics” / sculptures / installations, but a text (or exhibition) that attempts to represent it (however deficiently) also needs to work with and through all manner of documentation, and of course include the multiple voices of its practitioners. That is true especially when the collective spirit and durational presence in local spaces and networks is to be represented, which characterises Northern Irish performance arguably more than that of other regions. The often collaborative, egalitarian, engaged and site-specific nature of performance art in Northern Ireland, it was felt, needed to be mirrored. Long quotations by relevant artists will, therefore, be used here.

¹³ Karine Talec, “Bbeyond and the Art of Participation”, Áine Phillips (ed.), *Performance Art in Ireland: A History*, LADA, London, 2015, pp.99-106.

For the gestation process of this essay, it proved fortuitous that a number of developments are coinciding: histories of (Northern) Irish performance art are slowly being gathered and studied.¹⁴ Áine Philipps recently published the first monograph on Irish performance art,¹⁵ including contributions by André Stitt and Karine Talec to represent developments in the North. Stitt, together with his teachers Alastair MacLennan and Adrian Hall make up Triple AAA and performed in this formation for a week in Belfast in September 2013 (ill. 3). Hall's return to Belfast (from Australia) for this collaboration gave the opportunity to invite a number of other performance artists for a round-table discussion on the history and development of Northern Irish performance art. Brian Connolly chaired it. As this conversation was already planned to provide material for this essay, it serves well to let the voices of practitioners and witnesses to performance works from the 1970s to today enter this account, turning this text into a collaborative effort.¹⁶

Those present – apart from the Triple AAA members and the chair were Tony Hill,¹⁷ James King, Rainer Pagel, Sandra Johnston and an audience of young artists. Brian Connolly's initial question was to do with their initial contact with performance art. It implies the artists' motivations to engage in this field and conjured responses about the relationship between performance art in this part of the world and the "Troubles", thus making it relevant in the current context.

Before we hear these practitioners' and teachers' voices, however, it should be noted that this indirectness of questioning and that of many of the responses is a necessary approach, reflecting the fact that "representation" of anything – let alone the "Troubles" – is a problematic issue, as has been noted and explored more than once in the Troubles Archive essays. We will return to this point and also further elaborate on a number of leitmotifs of these remarks: the collective quality of the practice, its institutional context in the Art School (successively named Polytechnic / University of Ulster / Ulster University),¹⁸ its discursive elements, the nature of the relationship to the "Troubles", and its thus far inadequate historicisation and theorisation already noted. Northern Irish performance art will emerge as both a barometer and a tool of analysis of the societal state of affairs in the region, revealing – if that is not too ambivalent a formulation – a positive, symbiotic relationship with the context of the "Troubles" and (despite or because of the indirectness) what one can call active peace-building credentials.

¹⁴ The Golden Thread Gallery's planned exhibition has been mentioned. The Research Graduate School of the University of Ulster's Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment advertised a PhD topic (under Brian Connolly) to research local performance art practice, and Karine Talec was chosen to pursue this funded project. PhDs with performance(-related) practice were already completed in 2006 by Julie-Louise Bacon, Amanda Coogan in 2012 and in the same year by Sandra Johnston. The latter was published in 2014: Sandra Johnston, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt: An Investigation of Doubt, Risk and Testimony Through Performance Art Processes in Relation to Systems of Legal Justice*. Series: European Studies in Culture and Policy. Berlin, Münster, Vienna, Zurich, London: LIT 2014. CIRCA, co-founded in the early 1980s by Alastair MacLennan, considered performance art every now and then in short articles and reviews (by Slavka Sverakova, Hilary Robinson and some others), but sustained academic attention has only recently turned to this field, e.g. in the shape of Paula Blair's published PhD, as well as Paula Blair, "Reframings: Art and the Moving Image", *mej Media Education Journal*, vol 51 (Summer 2010), pp. 13-18. Sources are difficult to access, as Alastair MacLennan's archives are (temporarily) held at Locus+, in Newcastle and while Bbeyond and other artist-led initiatives keep records and documentation, administrative, financial and spatial continuity has never been such that one could speak of an effort to archive, in order to create adequate holdings for future scholarly or artistic attention.

¹⁵ Áine Phillips (ed.) *Performance Art in Ireland: A History*, LADA, London, 2015.

¹⁶ Any unacknowledged quotations in this essay are from this conversation.

¹⁷ Tony Hill was born in North England in 1949. He studied in Düsseldorf with Joseph Beuys for a year and has been living and working in Belfast since 1975. He was a teacher at the University of Ulster School of Art and Design from September 1975 until June 2012.

¹⁸ Liam Kelly's history of the institution devotes little space to performance: Liam Kelly, *The School of Art and Design*, Belfast: Ormeau Bath Gallery 2009, and Slavka Sverakova, *The Visual Force: Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art*, Belfast: Golden Thread Gallery 2009.

Alastair MacLennan:

I feel very fortunate that I came here in 1975 because there was a kind of atmosphere within the art school at the time. Tutors David Ledsham and Adrian Hall had a very dexterous and pluralistic way of thinking, which allowed for all kinds of possibilities with the work produced. It made a very fruitful arena within which you could then begin to develop performance works. We were working on group projects as well, not just individual projects. It was very stimulating.

David Ledsham:

The art school was a very safe place where people could come in from all kinds of backgrounds and just try things out, and hold on to some sense of tradition but set up whatever kind of experimental edge you could manage – and live work lent itself to that.

Sandra Johnston:

Inside the doors of the institution, there was so much that was permissible that it gave us – it gave me certainly – a sense of courage and a sense of permission that we could take risks and we could manipulate and work with the dreams that were in our minds. I think growing up I was very straightjacketed by society and by the sectarianism. [...] So I think for me the sense of permission was what I took from being at art college.

Rainer Pagel:

[As performers] we had the link. I don't know if people realize that so much because we were in this completely insular thing here in Northern Ireland, really cut off from the rest of the world: you had some people, Robert McDowell, Belinda Loftus and folks like that, who had the links with other places. I met Robert in Hamburg when he was studying there and he picked me up here again, and suddenly we had in Northern Ireland the workshop of the Free International University of Interdisciplinary Research. And suddenly there were fourteen of us (and James you were part of that as well) going over to the Documenta, 1977, to Beuys' *FIU Migration Workshop*. Suddenly being here was so much more congenial to help you to get out there [into the international art world] and I've lived on that for the rest of my life. Because of the political situation, the fact that you had no political structure here that allowed you to do the normal stuff that was going on in England, where you go through your local councilors and the political institution. You couldn't do that here, because it was equal with sectarianism, so in my time, which I would proudly describe as majoring in Social Sculpture [Beuys' term], I was doing youth work and community work. We were the trailblazers, we told central Europe (Poland especially in my case) how to organize community development and youth work, because we had the immediate access to the Secretary of State: we jumped over all the local boyos here, because all they could do was bury people and [...] open leisure centres. So all this was happening in this place: it was so fantastic. And to this day I believe that Northern Ireland has something to offer, because as an individual you can make a difference in this place. We are so small not more than a million people, but that's still possible and very often you have the eyes of the world on us positively (and negatively) and can go out and influence.

Adrian Hall:

You have to define things for yourself through your own experiences of being. Donald Judd, a minimalist, cut down the theory to one phrase: 'All art has to be is interesting'. That can be very cynically taken or it can be very profoundly taken. That moment of being 'interesting' is when a connection is made with the person outside. It might be instantaneous and revelatory or it could be a moment, which pops up in six months or a year's time. The thing that intrigues me enormously is the fact that you can slip a sliver, a splinter into somebody's consciousness and let it work its way through their experiences. In a while they might just see a little change in the way they see or feel things.

The special challenges and opportunities that being based in Northern Ireland gave to artists are apparent. The empowering directness of impact, enabled by the warring factions and the small scale of the "microcosm" Belfast (or even smaller: the art community and art college) are experienced as positive. Alastair MacLennan also describes Northern Ireland as a microcosm in which one could see the results of one's actions.¹⁹ From these pronouncements of the teachers and their students one gets a strong sense

¹⁹ In conversation with C-M LH during preparations 2011-13 of a "REF Impact Case Study" on performance art in Northern Ireland, subsequently not used by the University of Ulster.



ill. 4

of community, an inclusive, interdisciplinary and empowering one: nearly an avant-gardist feeling that one was working with the right people for the right aims at a difficult time. Joseph Beuys is mentioned. Others elaborate on his visits here in 1974 and follow-up invitations to Kassel (*Documenta 6*) 1977 and New York (Beuys' Guggenheim retrospective) 1979.²⁰ Belfast's self-organised artists' studios and related infrastructure (CIRCA) are the organisational results of these links. Beuys paid for the first rent of the A.R.E.'s premises.

Funding was less forthcoming from the Arts Council, which was more interested in the neo-expressionist tradition, using a formalist (broadly Greenbergian) theoretical tradition as its intellectual basis, which sought to exclude content, time and viewers. Performance artists (in their focus on content, time and viewers) were indebted to conceptual traditions, wishing to emancipate audiences in light of their exclusions in the outside world: one inhabited different intellectual realms and infrastructures.²¹ The Arts Council's attention and interest to include performance in the Troubles Archive came late. This seemingly partly owes to the fact that few (larger) grant applications have over the decades crossed officers' desks. Beyond's funding since the early 2000s is miniscule compared to other art forms about which Troubles Archive essays had been written. Alastair MacLennan rarely ever asked for or received any such funding. He travelled to performance art events the world over in a fashion comparable to academics attending conferences. Indeed, performance artists frequently behave like and work as researchers furthering their interest in perception, communication, (theoretical) discourse and networking.

²⁰ Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Victoria Walters (eds.). *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond: Art, Culture and Politics*. Series: European Culture and Politics. Münster, Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, London: LIT 2011. On Beuys and Ireland also: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, *James Joyce als Inspirationsquelle für Joseph Beuys*. Olms Hildesheim, Zurich, New York 2001. As well as Liam Kelly, *The School of Art and Design*, pp.11-13.

²¹ For an acting out of this clash see: Daniel Jewesbury, "I Wouldn't Have Started From Here", or the end of 'the History of Northern Irish Art', *Third Text*, 76, vol. 19, no 5 (September 2005), pp.525-534.

Performance history was then in its infancy everywhere and could also not be developed specifically in Northern Ireland, due to the near absence of art history in its universities (half-hearted attempts by both were abandoned in the mid-2000s). Largely for “Troubles”-related reasons, there is hardly any commercial art infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Thus, it did not necessarily matter whether the work one created could be sold or not – and the practice of buying performances is even now a relatively new one anywhere. Instead, employment and project funding came from occasional work at one of the local art spaces, or through EEC/EU Peace initiatives and social work channels, such as community art. Rainer Pagel’s statement clarifies that (Beuys’) Social Sculpture ethos lent itself to combining sculptural practice with work in the social / community work field.

Alastair MacLennan:

There was very little in the way of an official kind of art gallery supportive of adventurous work at all, so Art and Research Exchange [was created]. Four or five people were running this. It was the only place for a few years where you’d see really experimental stuff. You had exhibitions from, if you want to use the term, paramilitaries from both sides; art work they were doing in jails and prisons that other galleries wouldn’t touch with a bargepole. And experimental performance works, and international stuff, too. We also had a very good visiting artists budget, bringing in sculptors and all kinds of artists doing inventive work.

David Ledsham:

Quite early on in the 1970s what was being instilled in people was that need to be self-sufficient, mediate their own way in the art world and set up groups and organisations that did grow into things like Queen Street Studios and the Crescent Arts Centre.

Self-sufficiency or autonomy of artists whose conceptual and/or performance practice is difficult if not impossible to be sold (and fees are infrequently paid) require institutional employment for key personnel who can sustain the infrastructure outside of that same institution: MacLennan had mentioned the university’s visiting artists’ budget. The Art School functioned as a place embedded in the local fabric, but also as a place apart, a “cross-community” meeting point, where people from elsewhere – with their own motives for helping with peace-building and democratisation – mixed with locals whose feeling of belonging to their conformity-seeking environment was often already unstable, or would soon be challenged as a necessary step in one’s epistemological maturation towards the behaviours of analysis and art production. Experiencing violence made the art school community of teachers and students only rely on each other more strongly (ill. 4).

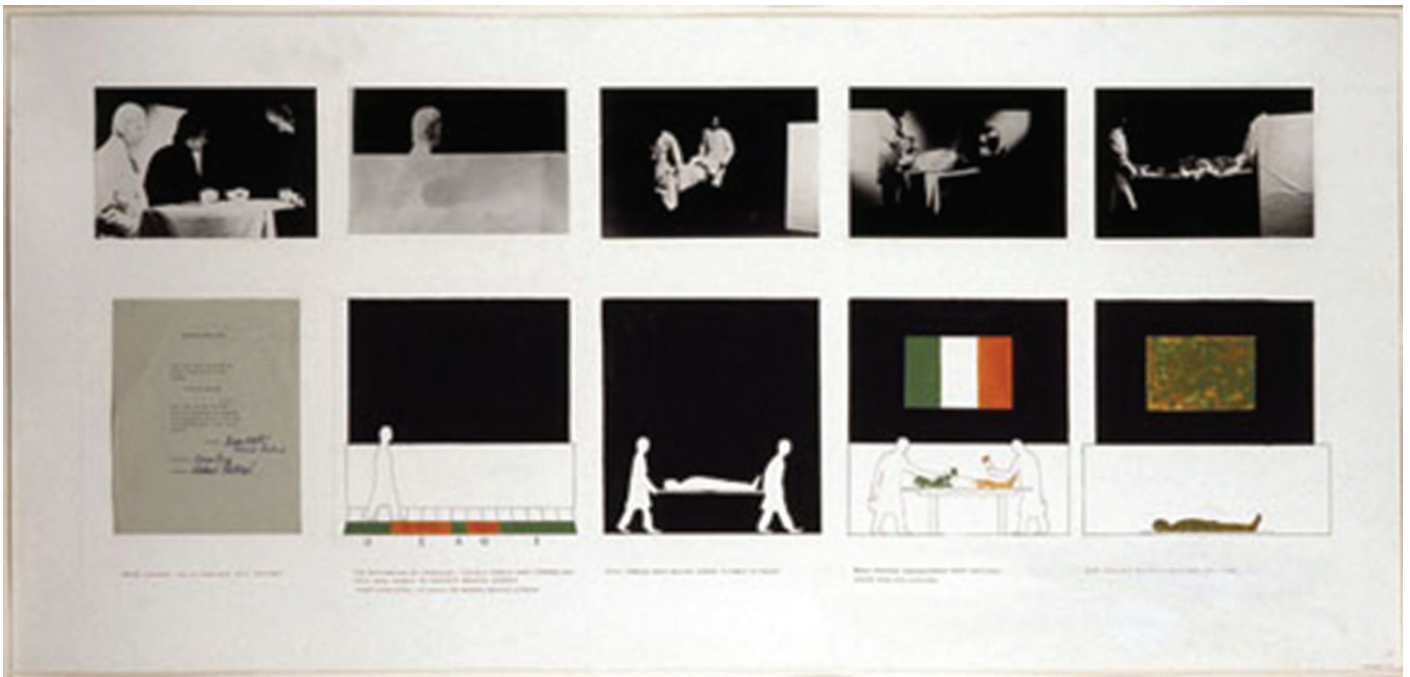
Alastair MacLennan:

I remember how during tutorials you would hear an explosion outside and the windows would rattle. You would hear the droning of the helicopters. You weren’t just dealing with aesthetics and the white walled art space. What was taking place in the environment was so present and prevalent.

Tony Hill:

The context was so emotionally and politically charged. There were riots every day. People were beaten up, shot. It was brutal on a human level. I saw performance art as an interesting way of addressing this drama everybody was living in, while trying not to take sides. [...] You saw this transformation taking place where people who came in as painters thawed out a little bit. The first thing that Willie [Doherty] ever did, he made a red high heeled shoe as a painter and you thought ‘whoa’ and the rest is history. You saw that transformation taking place in a great deal of people and it was down to the way that art schools were run or not run in the seventies, and also the atmosphere in Belfast was that you couldn’t stand in a corner and paint when all hell was breaking loose outside.

Making performance art “about” the “Troubles” did not involve illustration or direct representation, but creating work in “very coded ways” (Hill), using “the body as a signal” (MacLennan), as well as drawing on notions of poetics, transformation and empathy. This indirectness and “coding” can be said to be a reaction against the certainties encountered in both communities and the spectacle of violence and politics in the Northern Irish context. It has been argued elsewhere that Northern Irish performance art has its strengths in exposing vulnerability and embracing failure, as Samuel Beckett had pioneered it in



ill. 5

his (performance) work.²² The writer had spent his youth in boarding school in Enniskillen and worked in Belfast for a year as a teacher. The argument about lowering the spectacle in the face of a “politesque” or delirious environment, as well as the importance of cultivating sensitivity and human responses in a place as troubled as the North does not need to be repeated here, but (as an aside) one can expand on it in relation to the more pronounced or late capitalism that characterises the post-“Troubles” era: “To a degree unprecedented in any other social system, capitalism both feeds on and reproduces the moods of populations. Without delirium and confidence, capital could not function.”²³ Northern Irish (durational) performance attempts (within boundaries of course) not to engage in or perpetuate the spectacle-dependency of public life. Making much happen with a group of people and few resources is also an ethical preference: a stance against atomization and the wastefulness so prevalent in (Northern Irish) paramilitary activity and public spending alike.

Performance art in particular arose from the ethos of an art college (specifically MacLennan’s / Hill’s MFA), whose continuation into the artistic but also societal landscape of Northern Ireland brought the self-organised initiatives that have been sustained and renewed with every subsequent generation of alumni since the late 1970s.²⁴ The extension into public space of what was practiced in the college were MacLennan’s Wednesday afternoon performances. That part of the week was set aside for students’ sport activities and clubs. The teacher, therefore, had a set time to be visible, to have “impact”. Impact his performances did have:

²² Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, “Sandra Johnston: Doubt, Gesture, Love and the Paradoxes of (Political) Art in Northern Ireland”. Sandra Johnston. *Beyond Reasonable Doubt: An Investigation of Doubt, Risk and Testimony Through Performance Art Processes in Relation to Systems of Legal Justice*. Series: European Studies in Culture and Policy. Berlin, Münster, Vienna, Zurich, London: LIT 2014, pp.3-42.

²³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester: Zero Books 2009, p.35.

²⁴ Catalyst Arts still largely functions as an alumni initiative of the Art School. In return, the fact that the ethos was one of empowering, non-authoritarian teaching methods and personal encouragement, led to the MFA (one of the UK’s first) being sought after despite (sometimes even because of) the difficult but enabling environment. It proved to be credible for attracting major funding for research and practice on the theme of contested spaces (the Interface Research Centre). In later years, the PhD programme in Art and Design similarly attracted critical thinkers and performers, seeking to sustain in turn those who had come earlier (for their MFAs and work in Catalyst) through critical debate.



ill. 6

Brian Connolly:

My own first experience of performance art when I was a student: I was walking across the tunnel at the Conor Hall on my daily route through the college and I suddenly came across Alastair MacLennan seated on a chair with a balaclava over his head and he'd laid the corridor out in a series of chairs like a bus. He was the only figure sitting in a space. I was brought up short at the sense of this figure in space. The jolt to my reality changed my perception of people, audience, sculptural object, space and also the political situation in Belfast at the time.

MacLennan's Wednesday performances sometimes involved crossing the nearest traffic light junction *ad infinitum* – or mirroring to society human weakness and fragility: naked. To the orchestrated media outrage the employer added the threat of dismissal. This relationship with the management of the Art School / University has always been fragile, depending on individuals to let colleagues be relatively autonomous, first guessing then knowing – since the introduction of the RAE and the REF audits – that this cryptic practice is considered excellent (elsewhere) and thus lucrative for the institution.²⁵

A form of direct response to instances of the "Troubles", however, does exist. Brian O'Doherty's *Name Change* performance responded specifically to Bloody Sunday, 1972 (ill. 5).²⁶ André Stitt's *Conviction*, 2000 (ill. 6), where he walked on his knees through Belfast, tarred and feathered, is a clear echoing of what he had seen being perpetrated by paramilitaries (in extension of a Medieval practice, they had tarred and feathered women and tied them to lamp-posts for going out with Catholics). Alastair MacLennan's *Target*, 1977 (ill.: cover), also directly addresses those who shot the random "other" when walking across

²⁵ Recent theoretical developments, Jacques Rancière's work in particular (*the Emancipated Spectator*), theoretically motivate the strength and longevity of indirect or oblique efficacy as opposed to direct critique that can be co-opted and will thus rather strengthen the status quo. The REF in its insistence on direct impact and the UK universities' lack of courage or knowledge to redefine impact constitutes in Northern Ireland a legacy of the "Troubles" where one could know better, but power preservation instincts and institutional risk-adversity combine to form a self-sabotaging mix that also largely disables those who have created shared spaces in the only way possible: humbly, durationally, one by one, with international networks and intellectual underpinning. This mode of thinking, however, is now alien in UK universities, despite the urgent need to decommission bankrupt per-2008 economic and epistemological models.

²⁶ Long, *Visual Art*, p.4.

interfaces or on the "Murder Mile" (Antrim Road). There is communality between these three artistic responses: the performer identifies with the victims, places himself in the arena of contestation, shows solidarity with those targeted and, through "turning the other cheek" in brave humility, but also quiet moral superiority, hopes to provoke and strengthen a remainder of human instinct in those who witness the performance.²⁷ The work thus directly, performatively enters the arena and through repetition or confrontation hopes to change the thinking on the part of the individuals encountered, possibly reaching eventually, one by one, victims and / or (past) perpetrators. It should be clear that even such "direct" reference to the "Troubles" lacks any expressive pathos, short-sighted, co-optable critique or the aestheticization of politics or violence so often seen in other media.

Positive impact of performances through such "repetitions" or conjuring of crisis moments could also be felt by the (traumatised) performers themselves:

Sandra Johnston:

Performance art was a kind of self-help or self-therapy and it was directly influenced by the Troubles. It was a physical reaction of the nervous system, of not being able to cope with the daily reality and trying to find some very private and very quiet ways to consolidate some sanity. So a lot of my first works would happen on motorways, beaches, skips and derelict sites. Very hidden places are actually places that give me a sense of strength, a sense of wellness, agency and purpose. When I came into performance art, I didn't want it to be public in any way or to make a spectacle of myself. I was really a private, shy sort of person, so performance horrified me for quite a long time, and maybe still does. An on-going problem I have with it, within it, is that if you begin by creating work out of a response to trauma, how do you go forward and consciously not re-traumatise yourself, because the history imbedded inside you keeps turning over. There's no such thing for me as an innocent performance, a simple performance, a throwaway performance. For me each is precious. They are not works, they are a trajectory. They are a continuum.

Setting oneself up as target, practicing durationally, quietly and together, however, also occupies space and claims it as public. Northern Irish performance, particularly through Bbeyond's monthlies (ill. 2), thus tests "shared space", "researching" through the responses of viewers (including those guarding ever more privatised, surveyed and rule-governed space) the path travelled since the "Troubles", as well as the state of current society. Performance is, therefore, revealing and not "comfortable" art to be solely enjoyed. That is inherent in its own history and specific possibilities.

Performance art was developed in the mid-1960s, when the distance to WWII was growing and the initial focus on survival and pronounced mechanism of escapism were waning. This coincided with the Auschwitz trials, when the horrors of the holocaust entered consciousness in more pronounced ways.²⁸ The majority of autobiographies of survivors, academic attention and sustained public debate were still some time (even decades) away. In the current memory studies boom and commodification of (holocaust) memory it is not always easy to remember that trauma and memory require time, that words (at least initially) fail and images are also inadequate to represent (at least directly). Performance art then came first in making a sustained attempt at addressing the War's trauma, at embodying the failures and anxieties.

It seems evident that in Northern Ireland a similar dynamic was or is at play: during the mediatised spectacle of the "Troubles", documentary photography had an important role to show a different picture, to tell "the truth" that had then only entered the photographic paper, not necessarily the consciousness of the people. Northern Irish photography has now become a hegemonic, commodified, a status-quo preserving practice.²⁹

²⁷ André Stitt had in his youth encountered Joseph Beuys and anecdotally threw a stone at him. This led to his "conversion" experience.

²⁸ Gene Ray, "Mourning and Cosmopolitics: With and Beyond Beuys", Lerm Hayes, Walters (eds), pp.22-48.

²⁹ See e.g. Hito Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty", Re-visiones # One, 2011, <http://re-visiones.net/spip.php?article37>, accessed July 2015.



ill. 7

Performance art on the other hand has worked as both embodied and intellectual analytical tool, as a barometer and community-forging practice, in order to look back and into the future, thereby (it is hoped) helping to enable that future in a non-triumphant way. Its individual or collective (monthly) presence and (necessarily paradoxical) indirect efficacy are still not comfortable for many, still contrasts to the numbness that continues to prevail, in order for people to “master” past and present.

Adrian Hall:

The action of doing is an action of thinking and self-revelation and our revelation. And that means for me that it's the “ART” word in general, which is paramount, that the process should be a process and a branch of philosophy.

Performance art in Northern Ireland has (again) foregrounded its discursive nature through artists' writing that is tackling how performance relates to the systems of legal justice. Sandra Johnston's book *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (also her PhD) and the related exhibition, *Shadow of a Doubt* (ill. 7), are a prominent example.³⁰ Northern Irish performance art is thus finally finding and creating relevant histories through strengthened historical, theoretical and performative writing in and on the field internationally. In these histories, however, Northern Ireland is now no longer automatically included, although it continues to be seen in international performance festivals.

Northern Irish performance is changing, of course, but its strength so far still seems to lie in durational work that foregrounds the failing body in humility, pointing to stories of violence and abuse. This is so, because the trauma of such violence and abuse is still present in Northern Irish society. There are still many individuals to be confronted with their humanity and that of others, still shared spaces to be created and to be held collectively, still numbness to be overcome.³¹ Northern Irish performance art addresses the individual's need to remember – in body and mind, alone and with others. It still does not “represent” the “Troubles” and yet responds to peoples' experience in particularly substantial ways. And the necessity to do that won't disappear any time soon.

³⁰ Johnston, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*. The exhibition took place at the Golden Thread Gallery, December 2012 / January 2013.

³¹ In January 2014 Alastair MacLennan and I (C-M LH) were invited by PoliticsPlus to hold a workshop for the elected members and party support staff of the Northern Irish Assembly. I had curated an exhibition to show the politicians two artworks (by Royden Rabinowitch) that could be approached via the meanings of their shape, material and arrangement. Autonomous artwork was employed ("instrumentalised") to try out a different kind of thinking. In order to set the scene, I relied on MacLennan to further the individuals' embodied sense of the here and now. This worked beautifully, but only very few party support staff attended. There is merit in the public presence of e.g. the *Monthlies*. Overcoming numbness and galleries as the site where this can be achieved through art is not as yet a widespread wish or insight. Projects that attempt to introduce such thinking (Alastair MacLennan's interest in and practice of Zen is central here) are still considered as "uncomfortable" or challenging and often actively resisted. One may no longer receive death threats for wishing to introduce sensitivity, as MacLennan had for his work during the "Troubles", but my exhibition for the politicians was first cancelled by the Ulster Museum at two weeks' notice. Neither it nor the Arts Council wished to receive the valuable work as a donation and the politicians knew what their priority was on the workshop evening: not to go to the gallery. The overall project became a performance, a practice that is known as experimental institutionalism, now embraced by institutions in most Western countries. The VanAbbe Museum, Eindhoven's and the Ramallah Art Academy's *Picasso In Palestine* project from 2011 is an example.

Illustrations

Cover: Alastair MacLennan, *Target*, 1977, courtesy the artist.

- 1 Joseph Beuys at Smithfield, Belfast, 1974. Photograph: Caroline Tisdall, in: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys We Go This Way*, London: Violette Editions 1998, p.45. Courtesy Caroline Tisdall.
- 2 Beyond *Monthly*, Belfast, 2015, https://www.google.nl/h?q=beyond+performance+belfast&biw=1152&bih=763&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ei=sfGbVZnHBoKqUZyckaAL&ved=0CAYQAUoAQ#tbn=isch&q=beyond+belfast&imgsrc=yz_DffaIN9XIHM%3A, accessed July 2015, courtesy the artists.
- 3 Triple AAA at FIX, 2013, <http://www.Andréstitt.com/triple-aaa-fix-international-project-a-week-long-akshun-at-catalyst-arts-belfast/>, courtesy the artists.
- 4 *The Glass Box Project*, curated by Brian Connolly at the Belfast campus, university of Ulster, June 2009. https://www.google.nl/search?q=glass+box+performance,+belfast&biw=1152&bih=763&tbn=isch&imgil=T8D9XhJe3JJ9UM%253A%253BXDN0rlZPqp7VTM%253Bhttps%25253A%25252F%25252Fmessiahofmodernart.wordpress.com%25252Fthe-glass-box-project%25252F&source=iu&pf=m&fir=T8D9XhJe3JJ9UM%253A%252CXDN0rlZPqp7VTM%252C&usg=__lkNd3GwL4QTYLLqjhvi6WpZSO1w%3D&ved=0CDwQyjc&ei=y_ObVa-jDomuUc6zg5AL#imgsrc=T8D9XhJe3JJ9UM%3A&usg=__lkNd3GwL4QTYLLqjhvi6WpZSO1w%3D, accessed July 2015, courtesy the curator.
- 5 Brian O'Doherty, *Name Change Performance*, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 1972, http://www.imma.ie/en/page_170640.htm, accessed July 2015, courtesy the artist.
- 6 André Stitt, *Conviction*, 2000, <https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10369/3715/4/stitt%20conviction6.jpg>, accessed July 2015, courtesy the artist.
- 7 Sandra Johnston, installation shot *Shadow of a Doubt*, Golden Thread Gallery, 2012/13: *Rank and File*, 2012, single screen video work using film footage that documents the British Queen undertaking her first state duties in 1952. The installation involved nine plastic chairs salvaged from the Maze prison. The durational performance on the opening day was entitled *Measure*, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

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