visual art

A Troubles Archive Essay

Declan Long

About the Author

Declan Long is a lecturer at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin, where he is Course Director of the MA 'Art in the Contemporary World'. He writes regularly on contemporary art for Irish and international magazines and has had numerous essays published by major institutions. He has been commissioned to contribute texts for the publications accompanying Irish and Northern Irish exhibitions at the Venice Art Biennale in 2005, 2007 and 2009 as well as for Ireland's participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008. He is a board member of both the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, and Create, the National Development Agency for Collaborative Arts. He is also a visual art correspondent for *The Arts Show* on RTE Radio One and has frequently featured as a panellist on RTE Television's *The View*.

Visual art

'Our ghost-haunted land ...' [1]

Late in the afternoon of a still-wintry spring day in 2008, a funeral was staged at the Irish Museum of Modern Art for the recently departed artist Patrick Ireland. Chief mourner at this strange interment was, however, the surviving alter-ego of this singular figure: the artist's "creator", NewYork-based and Roscommon-born conceptual art pioneer Brian O'Doherty. Dressed head-to-toe in far-from-funereal white, a stocking mask partially obscuring his elderly face, O'Doherty led a small procession of family, friends and fellow artists towards a prepared burial plot overlooking the museum's ornate gardens. Here, with ritual solemnity, a plain pine coffin (containing little more than the ghost of an idea) was gently lowered into the opened ground. "Patrick Ireland" was dead and gone.

This was, without doubt, an occasion of very mixed moods and meanings: here was a theatrical display of public mourning that marked with sincerity the passing of a troubled persona rather than a person, announcing the long-delayed resolution of an artistic identity crisis. For the 'fiction' of Patrick Ireland had been brought into ambiguous being thirty-six years before in protest at certain unbearable facts. Outraged by the brutal killing of thirteen innocent people on Derry's Bloody Sunday in January 1972, O'Doherty had resolved to establish an alternate, stubbornly political personality, a distinctive other 'self' whose name would be clear-cut in its cultural associations, absolute in its national allegiance; a name, he believed, that would always connect his work, whatever the content or context, to the trauma of the 'Troubles'. O'Doherty would sign his art as 'Ireland', he decided, 'until such time as the British military presence is removed from Northern Ireland and all citizens are granted their civil rights.'[2] His commitment was of course controversial – seen by some as artistically suspect or politically misguided or merely as a ludicrous, inconsequential gesture – and yet it was also a long-lasting one, the life of Patrick Ireland extending well beyond expectation, beyond reasonable hope.

By 2008, however – a full ten years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Belfast – O'Doherty clearly had become convinced that the required duties of his patriotically focused counter-life were at an end. The contentious figure of 'Ireland' – this private individual transformed by public events, this 'generic' personification of art's political conscience – would belatedly be laid to rest. And so, at the end of a full formal burial ceremony, in an atmosphere that seemed at once celebratory and sorrowful, Brian O'Doherty stood at the edge of an open grave and finally removed his constricting mask. 'Thank you,' he called out to the large, attentive crowd, 'thank you for peace.'

Still today, there is much that could be commended about O'Doherty's conscientious alteration and expansion of his life and art in response to the terrible events of the early Troubles years; events which, it hardly needs saying, continue to cause intense controversy and suffering. Looking in from outside of Northern Ireland's contested terrain, O'Doherty chose not merely to address the ongoing agony of the place and its people in his work, to aesthetically or conceptually register the destructive effects of this society's inequalities and divisions – to, undertake, in other words, many of the expected tasks of the responding artist – but to propose a more high-risk investment, demonstrating that these trying times necessitated a radical revision of what, or who, 'the artist' ought to be. In striving to engage with a society torn in two – or shredded, rather, into any number of forgotten pieces – O'Doherty/Ireland seemed to suggest that the artist's consciousness would become correspondingly sundered. (And, 'amidst the general insanity', as a character asks in Pat Barker's First World War novel *The Ghost Road*, 'was

it fair to penalize a man merely because in conditions of extreme stress he tended to develop two separate personalities?'[3]) What was ventured by O'Doherty at this time, therefore, appears now as an especially charged moment in an important, enduring process. A process, that is, of re-imagining and re-*placing* art in relation to the life and death realities of the everyday world; a process that would, inevitably, present many profound difficulties – and some revelatory possibilities – throughout the three long decades of the modern Troubles.

For related reasons, then, something praiseworthy might be acknowledged in O'Doherty's recent decision to bring to an end the dramatic doubling of his identity. The impulse to initiate a further 'change of life' in recognition of new circumstances is surely a creditable one. Choosing to commit Patrick Ireland to the earth and to the past, O'Doherty not only gathered the parts of his divided self together, but very pointedly gathered a crowd: staging a welcoming public spectacle in such a way as to promise a retrieved sense of commonality, of open and respectful comingtogether, while also situating an art 'performance' – one vitally concerned with resolution and reconciliation – inside the trusted and familiar 'frame' of an ordinary ritual of commemoration. Yet many questions could – and should – still be asked about the the meaning and merit of such an artist-led event in the very complex, sensitive context of troubles 'aftermath'. Many other artists – those more profoundly immersed over many years in the debate about which 'images and symbols' would be, as Seamus Heaney once humbly enquired, 'adequate to our predicament'[4] – might justifiably worry about any premature presumption or expectation of 'closure'. Indeed, for certain artists, most notable among them the prominent film-maker and photographer Willie Doherty, it is the ghosts haunting the spaces of the progressive present that are of pressing interest. Acclaimed films by Doherty such as *Ghost Story* (2007) or *The Visitor* (2008) contemplate the fraught legacy of the Troubles by telling Gothic tales of unsettled spirits who wander at the city's edges or through its neglected inner zones, patrolling places with sinister associations or unhappy histories – the mysterious presence of these nameless revenants acting as a 'strange eruption to our state'[5]. Another of Doherty's recent films, one also afflicted by oppressive and unyielding anxiety, shows a lone female figure pacing a patch of narrow ground bordered on all sides by tall corrugated-iron fencing. There seems no way out, yet this pale, emaciated woman keeps walking wearily on. With grim irony, this looped, never-ending meditation on psychological imprisonment is entitled *Closure*.

In present-day Northern Ireland, there are obvious and good reasons why rapid *moving on* is a political priority. But it is all that can't be left behind, all that remains traumatically unresolved in private lives or in the collective history, that has tended to become the essential subject and shaping influence for art. (And also for some of the ways in which art is remembered: an ongoing exhibition series on 'collective histories of Northern Irish art', initiated by Belfast's Golden Thread Gallery in 2005, has sought, for instance, to quite deliberately embrace 'overlapping and sometimes contradictory versions of history'[6].) Willie Doherty has written of how his favoured artistic strategy of 'returning to the same places,' of tracking back, time after time, over well-trodden landscapes, is a quest for traces of 'that which is forgotten', for 'something that evades language'[7] – and he is not alone in venturing down these neglected pathways, numerous other artists lately choosing to journey through regions of the troubled past, puzzling over the enigmatic historical fragments found along the way, ultimately reminding us that there are always other perspectives than those dominating in the present moment, that there are other stories, yet to be told. Such forensic attention to the complexities of forgetting and remembering – a focus somewhat at odds with the 'eternal rest' hoped for in Brian O'Doherty's funeral for Patrick Ireland – is not only, of course, an important creative outcome of the Troubles' protracted ending. Rather, a corresponding interest in intensive, disconcerting or awkward processes of out-of-the-ordinary investigation has been a vital characteristic of the most penetrating and impactful art to have been formed (and in a crucial sense *de*-formed) in the general context of the conflict. There is, of course, an obvious danger in too casually 'characterising' the broad range of visual art made on and around Northern Ireland's 'narrow ground' during these bleak decades. But it's useful to place here an emphasis on a very probing 'type' of art – or an especially agitated and skeptical and sometimes satirical, *tendency* in art – that increasingly came into visibility during these years. This is a loose strain of art that was, in some ways, straining to be loosened from the pieties of the cultural establishment and the prejudices of the society; an art of committed questioning, that presented new problems for viewers rather than confirming given positions; an art that – to borrow a more general comment on contemporary art made by the American critic Peter Schjeldahl – offered 'mullish resistance to all reasonable or righteous explanations of how things are or should be'[8]. For another American commentator, Lucy Lippard – the influential writer and activist who in the mid-1980s curated an exhibition of Irish art entitled *Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind* – much of the art that 'responded' to civil unrest, social injustice and sectarian savagery in Ireland had often, however, offered its 'resistance' and posed its questions, with determined obliquity. 'The complexity of Irish political life', Lippard argued, was paralleled in the 'layered, contradictory images' created by artists – much of the art arising out of the Troubles was, she said, 'tantalizingly indirect'[9]. Indirectness, of course, is not indifference. And a refusal to promote one or other of the North's rival

propagandas through painting, sculpture, photography, film or other less traditional forms, was not (as advocates of a more unambiguous political art alleged) a refusal to respond. Indeed, to a significant extent, as Frank Ormsby has said of the era's poetry, there was 'a valuable, challenging examination of the whole nature of 'response'' – an interrogation of just what art might do in such a situation, and a testing out of what it might *become* – that 'neither stifled the cry of protest nor [froze] the spring of compassion.'[10] What remains vital to record is that this was a time of emergency and emergence for visual art: under the appalling pressure of the times, as Liam Kelly remembers, 'an articulate and responsible new generation' came to the fore; a 'searching' and 'discursive' art became a necessity[11]'...

Where are you coming from? Where are you going to? A fusillade of question marks'[12]

Since the modern Troubles began, there have been extraordinary transformations, both subtle and dramatic, in understandings of how art from Northern Ireland should 'know its place'. Such changes in the outlook of contemporary art scenes in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere partly began as after-effects – and specific manifestations – of the broader upheavals in artistic practice that were a controversial feature of the convulsive global culture of the 1960s. Around that time, the innovations of Pop art brought 'high' culture crash-landing into the low landscape of everyday consumer clutter, challenging expectations about what the proper subjects of 'fine art' should be. The English artist Richard Hamilton, who would later turn his attention to the divisive iconography of the Troubles (producing such hotly-debated works as *The Citizen* and *The Subject*, his transformed-documentary portraits of hunger strikers and marching Orangemen) argued that for the artist to retain 'much of his ancient purpose' he would almost certainly have to 'plunder the popular arts'.[13] While Claus Oldenburg, another Pop pioneer, famously sought to promote an art 'that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum'[14] (an argument that seems incidentally relevant as we recall how 'Art in Ulster' addressed, or in certain cases chose not to address, worsening social strife). Those working within the general *milieu* of Conceptualism also proposed new content for art, along with any number of new locations and processes. Some such artist-*provocateurs* sought to resist the commercial artworld's lust for luxury possessions by emphasizing 'idea' over object. Certain key figures chose to question the restrictive conventions and 'elitist' politics of galleries and museums, often arguing for an increased role for art in public spaces. Some dared to bring the artist's body aggressively to the fore in deliberately perplexing or confrontational performance scenarios. Others sought to exploit the potential of video and photography to superficially speak the language of the mass media while also speaking back with critical force. All such approaches announced jolting breaks from business-as-usual in art – and all, eventually, would become creatively dissenting strategies valued by artists working within, or looking towards, the Troubles.

Yet it is revealing to recall the real challenges faced by conceptually bold and aesthetically rule-breaking artists in Northern Ireland during those assaulting first years of the Troubles. From the perspective of the complacent present, it's surely not easy to sense just how much was at stake in the making of an out-of-place art at that time: looking back it seems that even slight fractures in the solid ground of Fine Art tradition could send shock-waves. Relative to previous decades, the custodians and influential champions of art today are largely unfazed by the presence of political content and agitative strategies in contemporary artists' work – perhaps tellingly so. But for many emerging artists in the north of Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the rarified forms of visual art favoured and validated by curators and collectors were absurdly inadequate to the desperate needs of the era. As Aidan Dunne has noted, powerful institutions such as the Northern Ireland Arts Council and the Belfast College of Art maintained resolute distance 'from the violent and occasionally horrific events happening just down the street' while advocating 'a formal interpretation of arts practice'.[15] In an essay surveying visual art in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1998, Martin Anglesea, Keeper of Fine Arts at the Ulster Museum, offers a retrospective glimpse of this chasm between art-world and real-world, noting in passing, for instance, how six months into his life as an arts professional in Belfast, he watched 'from the Gallery at the top of the Museum twenty-two palls of smoke rising all over the city on Bloody Friday'[16] – on this nightmare day, with nine dead and one hundred thirty others injured, what case could be made for such a culturally lofty vantage point? But Anglesea also makes a more general comment on the point-of-view of artists during this period of turmoil: any 'reflection of Ulster's political disorders', he remembers, 'was surprisingly sparse'.[17] Despite explosions and violence and the alarming, unreal presence of armed forces on city streets and country roads, many artists continued 'to paint Donegal and Antrim landscapes as if there were no Troubles at all'.[18] Perhaps inevitably, as Aidan Dunne identifies, it took a younger generation of artists and art students to see the tragic irony of 'immersion in a pastoral-modernist ideal of formalised landscape and figure painting while the world fell apart around you'.[19]

Landscapes, of course have never been innocent subjects in art – especially, perhaps, in Ireland, where images of the land come laden with historically accumulated connotations of dispossession and displacement. The loving

depictions of Ireland's Western edges in the work of the important early twentieth century Northern Irish painter Paul Henry, for instance, gain much of their lasting emotional charge from their implied politics: from their connection to widespread nostalgia for some 'other' Ireland – an imagined place set apart from the unpredictable, alienating modern world. The variously serene and swelling atmospheres of Henry's scenes – stirring views of Connemara mountains, stilled lakes in Donegal, exposed fields on Achill Island – emerge in tension with the historical forces that, for the most part, are held at bay beyond the frame. Figure painting too can hardly be accepted as a neutral 'academic' focus, a formal exercise free from politics: throughout the history of art the very practice of singling out individuals for special attention has been rich in problems and possibilities. What could be more vexing for an artist – indeed for anyone – than asking what each of us sees, or chooses to see, when we look at others? Faced, however, with a mounting tide of media imagery (often drastically one-sided) and a proliferation of fiercely sectarian iconography (often rooted in romantic visions of the past) a new wave of artists in the north of Ireland, recognized a need to breach the decorum of art's settled categories, rethinking 'figure and ground' in terms of the destabilizing pressures of the era.

Gazing today at the range of figures populating work by artists who openly 'took on' the Troubles, it is wrenching, and at the same time, sadly, not at all surprising, to see the extent to which the human form was made to forcibly bear these unbearable pressures. For one undeniable aspect of the bodies of work associated with the Troubles is an emphasis on 'bodies in trouble': so many pictured figures are fragmented or freakish, physically contorted or visually 'vulnerable'. The Dublin-born painter Jack Pakenham, for instance – an artist often cited as one of the first to properly attempt a processing of the Troubles' raw, destructive material – had long addressed the human figure in his expressionistic art, but in the early 1970s his *dramatis personae* took on more grotesque forms. Shocked into a more starkly pictorial mode of painting, Packenham began to imagine surreal, discomfiting visions of places and people at an edge to reality – visions that somehow still 'reflected', in a distorted form, the sharp edges of this broken society. His *Belfast Series* of 1975 (although a Southerner, Packenham had been based in the North for much of his adult life) famously attempted to capture something of the strange and oppressive conditions of life in the city in the bleak years following such grave historical passages as the introduction of internment without trial, the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement, the consolidation of the Provisional IRA's presence and the intensifying 'influence' of Loyalist paramilitaries. Belfast was captured in Pakenham's art, however, not through any literal, direct response to public issues, but rather, first of all, through the painterly construction of visually and psychologically off-kilter spaces – perspectively skewed settings, at once crudely familiar from everyday urban life and wholly unfamiliar in their cartoon extremity – and, secondly, through the introduction of a curious, recurring figure that would continue to haunt and harass this artist's imagination for many years to come: a ghoulish, garish ventriloquist's dummy, a 'comic' character clearly suggestive of deep tragedy. As Brian McAvera has written, this doll motif could refer to 'victim or oppressor, child or adult, innocence or guilt, and it could demonstrate the essential similarities of seemingly opposite stances.'[20] Ventriloquism as theme potentially alluded to the manipulation of innocent individuals by often dangerous political presences, but, as McAvera adds, Pakenham's 'dummy' also implicitly argued that 'the oppressors themselves' became 'victims of their own loquacity or propaganda.'[21]

Other figures in Pakenham's work seem similarly drained of life, diminished by circumstances. These are the products of a damaged society, but also of an often despairing vision: his deathly theatrical cast of masked or ashen-faced characters are (as Robert Hughes has said of Max Beckmann) 'long on pathos and aggression, short on grace'[22]. In the work of numerous other artists who contemplated the impact of the Troubles through a concentration on the human figure, similarly stricken individuals make frequent, unnerving appearances. At various stages from the early 1970s onwards, diverse views of terrorised (or terrorising) citizens, executed in multiple art forms with varying levels of expressive intensity, hinted at a barely imaginable depth of private suffering, while also placing an angry emphasis on the constraining structures of the public world. We might recall here the anxious, frightening images of lone female figures made by Catherine McWilliams in the early years of the Troubles: paintings which arose out of the artist's experience of working in a Catholic girls school in North Belfast during a period of ongoing rioting and relentless police raids in the area. Crucially, as Liam Kelly notes 'the space that she depicts around these forlorn figures does all the work': these pale, distressed young women are 'entrapped' by their environment, 'rather than simply being in it.' They have, Kelly concludes, 'little control or choice over their circumstances.'[23] Similar tensions are evident in the lurid urban caricatures of Brendan Ellis, whose protagonists also often struggle against the restricting spaces they occupy; or, again, in the later-emerging paintings of Rita Duffy, whose frenzied allegorical scenes of aggressive social interaction, of hideously heightened human drama, have been among the most locally prominent art images of the Troubles. Many of the figures in Duffy's work are almost monstrous in their physical exaggeration – their bodies look bloated or stretched, their features are unnaturally pronounced, their expressions strained. There is a deliberate excess of action, of

information, in her paintings; and as with Packenham, this is a form of pained painterly articulation that is always in lurching italics, urgently striving to represent a world at breaking point, while also, perhaps, acknowledging the incapacity of art to adequately 'address' the society's trauma. To borrow again from Hughes on Beckmann, the 'repertory of figures' in such paintings 'seem literally imprisoned by the limits of the canvas'.[24] Self-conscious grotesquery might then be understood as one essential outcome of art's self-examination during the Troubles — and an inevitable result of the warped 'realities' of the society. The figures found in Northern Ireland's art of the 1970s and 1980s often seem formed from a merging of horror and comedy (albeit of a bible-black variety), artists pitching us into uncertain territory between genre extremes as they reflected on – and rejected – social extremes. Sternly resisting the imposed identities and values dominating North and South of the border, artists such as Marie Barrett, Graham Gingles, Gerry Gleason and Una Walker, at different times and to different degrees, produced ambiguous, willfully unrefined forms of sculpture, painting and drawing, that were by turns macabre and absurd in their attention to the frailty – and unlikely resilience – of the human body under terrible conditions. Barrett's scrawled, *faux-naif* character studies of scrawny, stripped human creatures lost in a world of scrambled symbols, messages and meanings seem, in retrospect, especially tormented late-Troubles examples of this corporeal fixation.

During the 1980s, of course, the subject of 'the body' gained additional, agonizing weight in Northern Ireland for numerous, pressing reasons. Almost without fail, the nightly television news bulletins delivered fresh reports of dead or beaten bodies straight into living rooms across the region. Equally unignorable, as Liam Kelly reminds us, were the accumulating images and experiences of marches and public demonstrations: high visibility examples of 'the body on the move, the demanding corps'.[25] Just as influential, perhaps – and more acutely so for artists working in the Irish Republic – were the enduring social effects of authoritarian religious perspectives on the body; and the bullying governance of the physical through church and state doctrine was one source of unending outrage for many aesthetically and politically dissenting artists (among this number we might count 'neo-expressionist' Southern painters such as Patrick Graham and Brian Maguire). But arguably another set of seen and imagined body images had more specific relevance to the art of the Troubles. The IRA Hunger Strikes of 1981 gripped the divided society of Northern Ireland (and the wider, watching world) as strategies of grievous self-harm undertaken by protesting prisoners reached their dreadful culmination: the starving, solitary body becoming the central instrument in a drastic, last-ditch political plan. Even now the astonishing, slow-motion surreality of these sad events makes for barely believable 'History' – ten men dying in the Maze prison over seven suspenseful months as Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government maintained its high handed mantra: 'Crime is crime is crime'[26]. Given the grotesque outlandishness of such actual events, how could artists hope to respond? What products of the artist's imagination would have the capacity to distinguish between the accumulating, competing falsehoods and cruel truths of this public drama? And to what extent (to borrow again from Seamus Heaney) could the 'subtleties and tolerances' of art act as a riposte to 'the coarseness and intolerance' that characterised public life at that pivotal moment?[27] Richard Hamilton's infamous Hunger Strike painting *The Citizen* – shown at London's Tate Gallery in the keyed-up wake of this situation – was, accordingly, an incendiary intervention. Here was an artwork that had at its source a television clip of the earlier 'blanket' Protests at the Maze prison (the featured figure is IRA prisoner Hugh Rooney) but the image also could be iconographically contextualised by the public and private trauma associated with the deaths of the Hunger Strikers, and so too associatively connected to the more prominent Republican figurehead Bobby Sands who had been the first to die in the Hunger Strikes and who was, at the time of his passing, an elected member of the British Parliament. Despite the provenance of its primary content in the mainstream media, Hamilton's work was recognisably 'religious' in its ultimate execution. This was a documentary image re-configured as a contemporary version of a two-part altarpiece, with the bearded, long-haired figure of this Citizen prisoner immediately registering as a Christ-like presence. Hamilton's aim in so explicitly evoking martyrdom, he said, was to create 'a strange image of human dignity in the midst of self-created squalor'.[28] Significantly, nevertheless, he was also determined to 'produce an ambivalence rather than glorify the activities of the IRA.'[29] For some critics, including Brian McAvera, this position was reprehensibly naive. Hamilton, it was argued, failed to acknowledge the local potency of such images of Christian self sacrifice, especially when they were put to use as motifs within the paramilitary wall murals that had proliferated across Northern Ireland's towns and cities during the Troubles. *The Citizen*, McAvera suggested, was an image 'perfectly attuned' to such a propagandist use and setting.[30] Yet looking back at the work today, its ambivalence, and its distance from propaganda, somehow seem more pronounced. For there is an intriguing coolness and caution to the gaze of this grand-scale painting: maybe more than ever, it now seems an analytical, rather than wholly empathetic engagement with this subject. As Jonathan Jones argued in a review of a 2008 Hamilton retrospective, *The Citizen* is a painting quite evidently concerned with the ambiguities of self-representation: 'the Romantic figure...stands so self-consciously' in this portrait: the evocation of Christ is already there – it's not just an emotional response by Hamilton. Rather, Jones says, 'Hamilton stresses the false notes in the pose, invites a cold analysis of the politics of martyrdom.'[31]

In relation to such a 'cold analysis' of the actions and imagery of the Hunger Strikes, it is worth recognising, in passing, the considerable achievement of the 2008 film *Hunger*: the controversial first foray into feature-length cinema – and into 'the matter of Ireland' – by the acclaimed British visual artist Steve McQueen. This treatment of the late life and early death of Bobby Sands is an unusually raw take on this forbidding topic, McQueen choosing to pare back the story to bare human essentials. Overt sentiment is avoided. Dialogue is minimal. Instead, our attention is largely directed towards micro-details of the degrading prison experience. The wretched reality of this protracted protest, and the final disintegration of Sands's body, are brought home to viewers with unsparing, visceral force. For the most part, *Hunger* refuses to cajole us emotionally in the conventional ways that mainstream narrative cinema tends to: it is a jarring account, rather than an openly judgmental one, leaving the meaning and morality of the depicted events open to interpretation. In this regard perhaps, the film's clinical method corresponds usefully to the approaches of those artists who, in some respects like Richard Hamilton, had sought during the Troubles to create determinedly double-edged documents that would urge insistent, independent questioning of how the media – and the movies – shape our view of historical events. One (relatively direct) early example of such a tendency might be *Evening Papers (Ulster)*, a 1974 drawing by the celebrated English artist Rita Donagh, which shows the body of a Troubles victim covered with a shroud of news broadsheets. The thematic concern here with the 'coverage' of the conflict would be further nuanced by Donagh in numerous later works concerned with politics in Northern Ireland – many of which mused on links between identity, place and power through use of the charged symbolic language of mapping. But these issues of being and belonging, of figure and ground, would also undergo further, fascinating elaboration in the work of a profoundly important trio of artists who chose to place the power of the camera at the centre of their artmaking. Victor Sloan, Willie Doherty and Paul Seawright (from Dungannon, Derry and Belfast respectively) are exemplary figures in the emergence of that 'searching' and 'discursive' art valuably chronicled by Liam Kelly – and all three have shared an interest in studiously subverting the common-sense trust in the truthtelling capacity of the camera, rejecting the possibility of an un-biased view through the lens. For Seawright, the task of establishing an appropriately complex practice as 'fine art' photographer in the context of the conflict, necessitated entering into a dialogue with photojournalism – among the most prominent and problematic forms of visual communication relating to the ever newsworthy Troubles. (And this is, of course, another notable instance of art's ongoing need to 're-place' itself, to question where it was coming from, during these years). Seawright's early work, therefore, responded to photo-reportage but broke with its implied rules and exposed its hidden prejudices, favouring self consciously personal modes of response, or other, surprising and disconcertingly ambiguous forms of subjective looking, over any presumption of objective fact-finding. His landmark series *Sectarian Murders* from 1988, for instance, pictured lonely places on the fringes of Belfast where over a decade previously dead bodies had been found, with each image accompanied by a terse, factual excerpt from a long-forgotten news report (a typical example: 'The murdered man's body was found lying at the Giants Ring beauty spot, once used for pagan rituals. It has become a regular location for sectarian murder.'). In these anxious return visits to crime scenes, however, the seeming neutrality of the words only served to accentuate the anti-journalistic atmosphere of the images – the curious, apparently surreptitious point of view of the camera in each case suggesting that this loitering observer may be a less than trustworthy presence. The reporting journalist; the responding artist; the more 'removed' gallery viewer: all seem somehow implicated and under suspicion in these unsettling surveys of uncanny landscapes. Such psychological uncertainty has continued to be a feature of Seawright's compelling photographic cartography – his aesthetic mapping of divided and devastated territory, in Ireland and beyond – over his subsequent, highly successful twenty year career.

In the case of Victor Sloan, uncertain subjective responses, and corruptions of the photograph's claim to 'transparency' have also been significant. A key innovation of his work has been the addition of new layers of idiosyncratic and chaotic 'expression' to the surface of the image, the artist scoring and re-shading the negative in a manner that frustrates our view, forcing us to attend to the distressed surface of the print as well as to the nominal subject of the photograph. Scenes from the multiple parallel worlds of Northern Irish life (his diverse subjects have included circus performances, historical re-enactments, Orange marches) are made strange, or stranger still, therefore, through the intrusive, transformative insertion of gestural swirls and harsh, despoiling scrapes. Such mark-making 'gets in the way' of our presumed clear view into the photographic *mise-en-scéne* – as if in gazing out a window we were to suddenly see only the weathered imperfections of the intervening pane of glass, rather than the world beyond. Instead of an objective, easily comprehensible photographic document, we get, as Aidan Dunne has written, a type of image that will not 'let us be': 'a difficult, uncomfortable image that we cannot easily assimilate.' Sloan's form of artistic 'interference', is, in relation to the wider transmission of Troubles imagery – through television and newspaper networks, local and international – a fascinating form of glitch in the system.

In such work, communication seems to be made more complex: art offers no straightforward, reassuring 'message'. These interests – these difficulties and deep challenges – are echoed and extended in the art of Willie Doherty:

an artist who, more than anyone during the Troubles years or in the decade since, has made the specific local confusions regarding representation, place and identity in Northern Ireland, matters of global relevance and resonance. Doherty's early work had evidently learned much from the use and abuse of photography in 1970s conceptual art. The interplay of text and image that brought great intellectual tension to the art of Richard Long or Hamish Fulton seems to have offered an initial model that was adapted and developed by Doherty as he began what would be an extended, exacting analysis of the ways in which images of people and places become layered with political meanings. A further crucial strategy, pursued at first in photography and then later in a series of remarkable film works, involved a tense juxtaposing of images – a pairing up of identical or near-identical, or sometimes radically contrasting, views – that undermined any easy contemplation of a single, pleasure-giving art image. In certain cases this technique involved consideration of the ways in which the media might, through the most seemingly innocuous linguistic emphases, act as judge and jury. The 1991 slide-show installation *Same Difference*, for instance, featured two indistinguishable snapshots of IRA suspect Donna Maguire, which were then overlaid with incompatible characterisations: 'murderer' might be seen projected on one photograph, while 'volunteer' was imprinted on the other; where 'pitiless' appeared, 'misguided' was pitted against it. More and more goading labels, varying in their ostensible 'extremity' would steadily appear: Doherty's installation pulling the meaning of the image, and the minds of viewers, in two demanding directions at once.

Such disorientating duality has been a persistent, always engrossing dimension of Doherty's work. His dogged investigations into those problems of 'figure and ground' that are urgently pertinent (but not exclusive) to art's engagement with the Northern Ireland conflict repeatedly prompt us to shift our own ground, to ceaselessly question our chosen, or imposed, position. Indeed, Doherty's split screen, double-vision perspectives may also, perhaps, call to mind Paul Muldoon's question in a poem about a curious moment of photographic duplication, that is also, of course, an exact articulation of the unresolved conundrum of Ireland/Northern Ireland: 'Two places at once was it, or one place twice?'[32]

'Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction …'[33]

Any critical survey of a field as variegated as the visual art of the Troubles will, quite obviously, be just as selective, just as 'partial', as any photographic snapshot. On setting out to cover such ground, there seems so much that is essential to the story. And yet, too quickly, there is much else that for one fleeting reason or another, begins to tempt us in unexpected directions, leading us onto roads less travelled, or down historical dead-ends, or even towards vertiginous, precarious vantage points that offer tantalising views of other terrains, too vast to explore. This lack of any strictly defined and held-to route may, however, be an ultimately liberating means of negotiating the treacherous terrain of Troubles art (and even this hackneyed, too-far extended 'territory' metaphor may yet prove useful). I am reminded here of how in the work of Dermot Seymour, one of the most consistently and weirdly impressive artists to have exhibited extensively during the Troubles, the landscapes of Irish history are presented as spaces of collapse and collision: unstable terrains where many disparate elements in the iconography of conflict are loosely linked together according to an unpredictable and convoluted logic. This is, perhaps, as good a model – or excuse – as any, in composing, and now concluding, a commentary that can cover only a very small amount of the considerable range of art that has, with varying degrees of sophistication, been forged in relation to the Troubles. Another version of this text might easily have alluded to artists or projects unfairly excluded here: to Philip Napier, for instance, who has alongside artists mentioned earlier, made powerful, memorable work that references the tragic, troubling figure of Bobby Sands – and work that more generally has broken ground in raising questions about art's social role; or to Alastair MacLennan and to the vital emergence of performance art in Northern Ireland – and this part of the lost alternate essay would have made respectful reference to the innovations of the Art and Research Exchange group, that path-breaking forum for dissent and innovation in the arts, of which MacLennan was a founding figure back in 1978. The role of other organisations ought also to have merited decent mention: the influence of Derry's Orchard Gallery under the Stewardship of Declan McGonagle is undeniable, as is the steady impact of *Circa* magazine, or the later contribution (and ambitious, open-minded attitude) of Catalyst Arts in Belfast. But inevitably and endlessly of course, this list goes on…

One fact that may be worth noting as we ponder these difficulties of selecting and arranging, is that a considerable range of recent art from, or about, Northern Ireland has seemed set on exploring such tricky archival questions. Against the grain of the officially upbeat post-Agreement era, artists from different generations – among them Una Walker, Aisling O'Beirn, John Duncan, Ursula Burke, Daniel Jewesbury and Katrina Moorehead – have felt the need to idiosyncratically assemble and scrutinise stubborn or surprising remnants of the awkward past. Fragmentary 'memories' are accumulated. Diverse visual records are re-evaluated. Subjective points of view – however inexact, inconclusive or out-of-the-ordinary – are respected. Yet the abundance of proliferating imagery and raw data seems, in such work, impossible to process. We are left to wonder if any new perspectives on Northern Ireland's

'narrow ground' of long-running conflict – if any new submissions to the 'archive' – bring us at all closer to the ultimate truth of 'That Which Was' or if (as in the Glenn Patterson novel of that name) we are forced further into the historical unknown[34]. The Czech writer Milan Kundera has reasoned that 'man is separated from the past (even from the past only a few seconds old) by two forces that go instantly to work and cooperate: the force of forgetting (which erases) and the force of memory (which transforms).' What lies beyond 'the slender margin of the incontestable' Kundera says, is an infinite realm: 'the realm of the approximate, the invented, the deformed, the simplistic, the exaggerated, the misinformed, an infinite realm of non-truths that copulate, multiply like rats, and become immortal.'[35] A fascination with this curious, strained relationship between the 'approximate' and 'the 'incontestable' – and with the ghostly traces of what may be lost or erased in media accounts of change and regeneration in Northern Ireland – has motivated many artists working through the lasting effects of the Troubles. Certainly, we might think again here of Willie Doherty – and indeed 'thinking again' is something like a defining principle for this most studiously serial, self-consciously repetitive of artists – some of whose recent work has catalogued decay and dereliction in largely ignored, ghettoised regions of Northern Ireland's cities.[36] But I am also reminded of another committed amateur image-historian – the Glasgow-based, Dublin-born artist Duncan Campbell who has in a somewhat different way, played with the possibilities of a visual 'record' of life in the North of Ireland. Campbell's acclaimed films are wayward documentary 'fictions', deftly assembled from sundry scraps of found footage. *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003) and *Bernadette* (2008), for example, respectively draw on grassroots archival materials (sourced from the well-stocked but undervalued storehouses of community photography groups) and from the more mainstream public cache of media clips and cuttings relating to recent decades in Northern Ireland – Campbell rifling through the leftovers of abandoned news stories in order to discover different ways to 're-collect' this turbulent history. These films are obviously grounded in the representation of real events, real places and real people: *Bernadette*, most notably, is a beguiling, personal 'edit' of the life of Bernadette Devlin, the 'electrifying', provocative and rarely conforming young activist who seized the public stage during the awful onset of the Troubles. But Campbell hints at other possible or less identifiable 'realities' through his poetic re-patterning of these fast-fading pictures. By drawing on multifarious, marginal details of Troubles-era lives and landscapes, this cautious and inquisitive artist seems to anxiously emphasize the inevitability of *conflicting accounts* rather than proposing an account of 'conflict'. Instead of an historical 'ending', there is the hard, persistent work of historical amending.

For any of us choosing to look back at the disparate art made – and, as has already been indicated, also strategically 'unmade'– throughout the Troubles, a related combination of curiosity and confusion seems a likely outcome. Like the dazed narrator of *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles*, faced with a furious montage of imagery, we might well find ourselves asking an essential, exasperated question: *How can I hope to deal with such complexity?*

Declan Long

End Notes

1. John Hewitt, quoted in Susan McKay, *Bear in Mind These Dead* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p.11

2. Brian O'Doherty, statement accompanying the *Name Change* performance at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 29th November 1972

3 Pat Barker, *The Ghost Road* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.16

4 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p.34

5 This punning description of disturbed mental and politial states is a response to the appearance of the Ghost in Act one, Scene one, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

6 Peter Richards, from the curatorial statement accompanying the Golden Thread Gallery exhibition series Collective *Histories of Northern Irish Art*.

7 Willie Doherty, 'Some Notes on Problems and Possibilities', in Fiona Bradley (ed.) *Willie Doherty: Buried* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009), p.155

8 Peter Schjeldahl, *Let's See: Writings on Art from the New Yorker* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), p.11

9 Lucy Lippard in *Circa*, no.17, July 1984, p.11

10   Frank Ormsby, 'Preface' to Ormsby (ed.) *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), p.xvii

11   Liam Kelly, *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in the North of Ireland* (Cork: Gandon Editions: 1996), pp.9-11

12   Ciaran Carson, 'Belfast Confetti' in *The Irish For No* (Loughrew: Gallery Press, 1987)

13   Richard Hamilton, 'For the Finest Art, Try Pop' in *Art in Theory 1900-2000* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 743

14   Claus Oldenburg, 'from *Documents from the Store*' in *Art in Theory 1900-2000* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 744

15   Aidan Dunne, 'Back to the Future: A Context for Irish Art of the 1980s' in *A New Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1990), p. 22

16   Martyn Anglesea, 'The Visual Arts' in Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds (eds.) *Stepping Stones: The Arts in Ulster 1971-2001* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), p.103

17   Anglesea, p.104

18   Anglesea, pp.104-5

19   Dunne, p. 22

20   Brian McAvera, *Art, Politics and Ireland* (Dublin: Open Air, 1990), p.57

21   McAvera, p.57

22   Robert Hughes, 'Max Beckmann' in *Nothing If Not Critical* (London: Harvill, 1999), p.168

23   Kelly, p.77

24   Hughes p. 168

25   Kelly, p.121

26   From a press conference statement by Margaret Thatcher on Tuesday 21 April 1981: 'We are not prepared to consider special category status for certain groups of people serving sentences for crime. Crime is crime is crime, it is not political.' See *http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/hstrike/chronology.htm.* (Retrieved on 20-04-09).

27   From Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland', Pete Laver memorial lecture delivered at Grasmere 2nd August 1984. (Published by Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1984)

28   Quoted in Tate Collection accompanying notes for Hamilton's *The Citizen: http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/View Work?workid=5832&tabview=work.* (Retreived 20th April, 2009).

29   Quoted in McAvera, p. 115

30   McAvera, p. 114

31   Jonathan Jones, 'Jesus in Jail', *The Guardian*,Wednesday 20th August, 2008.

32   Paul Muldoon, 'Twice' in The Annals of Chile (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 12.

33   Leontia Flynn, 'Belfast' in *Drives* (London: Cape Poetry, 2008), p.2

34   Glenn Patterson, *That Which Was* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004)

35   Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), pp.148-9

36   See for instance the 2004-2005 photographic series, *Apparatus*.