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Women's Troubles: Abject Femininity in Willie Doherty's *Same Difference* and *Closure*

Abstract: The work of internationally acclaimed lens-based artist Willie Doherty proposes rich and nuanced understandings of the agency and participation of women in the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In a large number of visual and cultural representations of the ethno-nationalist violence of the Troubles, the conflict is often gendered as masculine, with women featuring primarily as victims and innocent bystanders. This essay examines Doherty's *Same Difference* (1990) and *Closure* (2005), two key works that incorporate a female subject. It considers these works in relation to the concept of "abject femininity", a non-normative femininity that is at odds with dominant representations of women as passive, nurturing care-givers or victims of conflict. This essay argues that the non-normative femininities in *Same Difference* and *Closure* offer opportunities to complicate understandings of women's public and private roles in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: gender, Northern Ireland, contemporary art, abject femininity.

Résumé: Le travail de Willie Doherty, artiste vidéaste et photographe de renommée internationale, évoque de manière riche et nuancée la participation des femmes dans les Troubles en Irlande du Nord. Dans un grand nombre de représentations visuelles et culturelles de la violence ethno-nationaliste des Troubles, les femmes représentent principalement des victimes et des passants innocents. Cet essai examine deux vidéos de Doherty, *Same Difference* (1990) et *Closure* (2005), deux œuvres fondamentales qui intègrent un sujet féminin. L'analyse convoque le concept de «féminité abjecte», une féminité non normative en contradiction avec les représentations dominantes des femmes en tant que passives, soignantes ou victimes de conflits. Cet essai soutient que les féminités non normatives présentées dans *Same Difference* et *Closure* permettent une compréhension plus nuancée et complexe des rôles publics et privés des femmes en Irlande du Nord.

Mots clés: genre, Irlande du Nord, art contemporain, féminité abjecte.

Introduction

Willie Doherty (b. 1959, Derry) is a critically acclaimed artist whose lens-based practice spanning nearly forty years explores the political and socio-cultural aspects of place, specific to Northern Ireland and more broadly through different frames of reference. Doherty's early works were large-scale photographs of landscapes overlaid with signifying text that compared entrenched sectarian perspectives. His later photographs and video works examine trauma and the legacy of conflict as embedded in place, often from ambivalent perspectives. A number of his artworks incorporate male subjects, critiquing representations of hegemonic masculinities

that reinforce allegiances to specific cultural identities¹. In contrast, the female subject appears very infrequently, only prominently in four different works². On the female subject, Doherty has remarked:

It's not that I'm interested in creating a female character any more than a male character. My use of the voice-over is just a foil to get something said, rather than creating a character within a novel or a movie. So I play along with the conventions of both, but ultimately the work comes back to this idea of place and these are means to explore something about a particular place³.

Given that in an Irish context, the representation of femininity has historically and symbolically been visualised as both nation and landscape, it is worth considering what a female subject may reveal about the construction of identity in Northern Ireland. This essay analyses two of Doherty's time-based works, *Same Difference* (1990) and *Closure* (2005), interrogating the representation of gender. Spanning the space of fifteen years, these works are from two seemingly different periods in recent Northern Irish history, during the Troubles, eight years before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the other seven years "post-conflict". It is argued that these works deliberately employ "abject femininity", a type of femininity that directly contradicts normative femininities most commonly associated with women in Northern Ireland. Using abject femininity as a point of departure, Willie Doherty's artwork offers opportunities to examine understandings of women's public and private roles, which in turn complicates and suggests more nuanced readings of femininity in Northern Ireland.

Identity and femininity in Northern Ireland

The construction of identity in Northern Ireland is grounded in several complex cultural and political claims to histories, nationalisms, ethnicities and languages⁴. It can be argued that gender is inextricably bound up in each of these contestations and therefore gender is crucial to an understanding of the formulation of cultural identities⁵. Women in Northern Ireland, as in other places, have often been confined

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1. Kate Antosik-Parsons, "Masculinity in Crisis: The Construction of Irish Masculinities in Willie Doherty's *Non Specific Threat*", in *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture*, Caroline Magennis, Raymond Mullen (eds.), Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011, p. 103-118.
 2. *Same Difference* (1990), *Tell Me What You Want* (1996), *Closure* (2005), *Ancient Ground* (2011).
 3. Fiona Barber, "Ghost Stories: An Interview with Willie Doherty", *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2009, p. 197-198.
 4. For a detailed overview of the different cultural, religious and political dynamics constituting the population of Northern Ireland during the Troubles see *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation*, Joseph Ruane, Jennifer Todd (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 49-78.
 5. Feminist and queer scholars working in Irish Studies are particularly indebted to the foundational work of Gerardine Meaney, Patricia Coughlan, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford and Cheryl Herr for their scholarship on the relationship between gender and Irish cultural identities. For

to the private sphere. Until recently the visibility of women's participation in Northern Irish society has been restricted to activities that were often viewed as an extension of their domestic responsibilities, activities such as childrearing, charity or church work and community development⁶. In other words, these traditionally gendered roles did not challenge perceptions about the public/private divide. It was typically Catholic women who were most often associated with the grassroots activism and community organisation agitating to redress political and social inequalities in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. Even as late as the 1990s, feminists emphasised the exclusionary gendering of formal politics in Northern Ireland and called for greater participation of women in the political process⁷.

In visual culture, it has been well established that Irish nationalists and unionists have often appropriated visual representations of femininity for different ideological purposes⁸. As such, the representation of women remains an important site of investigation and ongoing critique for artists and academics working across the disciplines of art history, visual culture, media and film studies. Within the mural tradition, allegorical depictions of women, frequently aligned with nationalist ideologies, often employed the symbolic figure of the Virgin Mary or members of the all-women organisation *Cumann na mBan*⁹. On the whole, imagery of

critical readings on Irish masculinities, see Caroline Magennis, *Sons of Ulster: Masculinities in the Contemporary Northern Irish Novel*, Oxford, P. Lang, 2010; Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2011; Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Debbie Ging, *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

6. Linda Racioppi, Katherine O'Sullivan, "Engendering Democratic Transition from Conflict: Women's Inclusion in Northern Ireland's Peace Process", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2006, p. 191.
7. Eilish Rooney, "Excluded Voices", *Fortnight*, no. 332, October 1994, p. 28. Exclusion from the political process can also be considered in terms of the dominant historiography of the Easter Rising and the erasure of women's participation. Mary McAuliffe, Liz Gillis, Eadaoin Ní Chléirigh, Marja Almqvist, "Forgetting and Remembering – Uncovering Women's Histories at Richmond Barracks: A Public History Project", *Studies in Arts and Humanities Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, p. 17-32. Senia Pašeta describes that Irish women were excluded from political and civic life post-civil war as traditional women's roles became reinscribed (Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 268-269). Furthermore, Dieter Reinisch details at the start of the Troubles how women performed active but not decisive roles which saw them subordinated within modern republicanism (Dieter Reinisch, "Women's Agency and Political Violence: Irish Republican Women and the Formation of the Provisional IRA, 1967-70", *Irish Political Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2019, p. 420-443).
8. See Belinda Loftus, *Mirrors: William III & Mother Ireland*, Dundrum, Picture Press, 1990; and Bill Rolston, "Women on the Walls: Representations of Women in Political Murals in Northern Ireland", *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2018, p. 365-389.
9. For discussion of the Madonna/Mother Ireland trope in Irish visual art, see Kate Antosik-Parsons, "Bodily Remembrances: The Performance of Memory in Recent Works by Amanda Coogan", *Artefact: The Journal of the Irish Association of Art Historians*, no. 3, 2009, p. 12; Paula Murphy, "Madonna and Maiden, Mistress and Mother: Woman as Symbol of Ireland and Spirit of the Nation", in *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland*, James Christen Steward (ed.), London, Merrell Holberton, 1998, p. 90-101; Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Ireland's Art, Ireland's History: Representing Ireland, 1845 to Present*, Omaha, Creighton University Press, 2007.

loyalist women appears much less frequently¹⁰. In critiquing the representations of Northern Irish women in films and British television dramas, Jennifer Cornell notes that female characters are more likely to be depicted as victims of the Troubles or advocates of nonviolent protest rather than active participants in violence. This reiterates the assumption that the majority of female political participation during the Troubles was largely confined to peacemaking or domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, Cornell argues:

It is not surprising, then, that when they do resort to violence, women have predominated among those who cannot be held responsible for their actions. It is also consistent with popular constructions of the female as the more subjective and emotive sex that the relative innocence of these characters be derived from private weaknesses of their hearts or minds¹¹.

This suggests that despite women's participation, violent conflict in Northern Ireland is primarily gendered as masculine¹².

It has been acknowledged that some republican women and a small minority of loyalist women were active combatants in paramilitary organisations. Women's roles within various organisations included transporting arms, munitions and intelligence on their bodies or in their prams; conducting surveillance; destroying evidence of crimes and carrying out punishment beatings on behalf of their organisations¹³. Sara McDowell argues that although there is evidence of this participation, women's roles within paramilitary organisations remained largely feminised, and that they employed "their femininity and the associations with it to their advantage by using their bodies [...]"¹⁴. This association of women's sectarian violence is at odds with the roles traditionally ascribed to women in the national context. Furthermore, the idea that women, particularly mothers, can be perpetrators of political violence is considered to be unnatural because of essentialist ideas about women's reproductive capabilities as life-givers not life-takers¹⁵. Fidelma Ashe terms this troubling femininity as an "abject femininity", one that contradicts widespread essentialist assumptions about women's passive roles in armed conflict¹⁶. She borrows the term "abject" from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of*

10. Bill Rolston, "Women on the Walls...", p. 373.

11. Jennifer Cornell, "Evolving Representations of Republican Women: Northern Ireland and the Socio-Politics of British Television Drama", *Writing Ulster*, no. 5, 1998, p. 149-150.

12. See Alan Bairner, "Masculinity, Violence and the Irish Peace Process", *Capital & Class*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1999, p. 125-144; and Jacqueline Reilly, Orla T. Muldoon, C. Byrne, "Young Men as Victims and Perpetrators of Violence in Northern Ireland: A Qualitative Analysis", *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2004, p. 469-484.

13. Sandra McEvoy, "Loyalist Women Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland: Beginning a Feminist Conversation about Conflict Resolution", *Security Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2009, p. 270.

14. Sara McDowell, "Commemorating Dead 'Men': Gendering the Past and Present in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland", *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2008, p. 339.

15. Sandra McEvoy, "Loyalist Women Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland...", p. 265.

16. Fidelma Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection: Reflecting on Feminism and Northern Irish Politics", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2006, p. 584.

Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1982). In positioning the abject as something that lies outside the boundaries of what is deemed as societally acceptable, abject femininity utilises abject practices, including pathological, violent and adverse forms of femininity. These women are troubling because they are considered in direct opposition to the feminist illusion that seeks to unify diverse feminine identities in Northern Ireland and that emphasises women's participation in the peace process as a possible solution to conflict¹⁷.

Same Difference

Doherty's earliest documented time-based work, *Same Difference* (1990) (fig. 1), clearly troubles normative representations of Northern Irish femininity. First exhibited at Matt's Gallery, London, *Same Difference* is a two-screen slide installation of two identical images of a black and white photograph of a woman projected onto two diagonally opposite walls in a dark space. The image is a cropped picture of a woman's face taken from a television broadcast. The dark-haired woman has a small, slightly pursed mouth and is wearing a white collared shirt. Two different sequences of words are projected in white directly across the bridge of her nose and both lead the viewer to question her connections to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Despite being Doherty's first work to physically depict a human subject, it retains many of the conventions employed in his earlier photographs from the 1980s. The projection of two images referenced his use of diptych format in earlier black and white photographs. In works like *Fog/Ice Last Hours of Daylight* (1985) and *Stone upon Stone* (1986), this format functions as a comparative strategy highlighting the dominant binaries that occur in Northern Ireland such as Irish / English, Catholic / Protestant, North / South and Us / Them. On utilising this installation format Doherty has remarked:

I think what I tried to do with that earlier work was not so much force the viewer to take a position but more a case of presenting the viewer with a number of options, so it was about making a choice where I always felt in fact there wasn't a choice but the work proposed that it was possible to look at something from two positions simultaneously¹⁸.

Depending on the spatial configurations within exhibition spaces, these photographs were either exhibited alongside each other, or on opposite walls, so that the viewer's body was forced to oscillate between two viewing positions to take the work in its entirety. The diptych composition was commonly used in religious altarpieces and, with regards to *Same Difference*, Doherty alludes to the symbolic connection between women and religious ideologies in an Irish context.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

18. Willie Doherty, interview with Tim Maul, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 1995, on line: <http://www.jca-online.com/doherty.html>.



Fig. 1 – Willie Doherty, *Same Difference*, 1990.

Courtesy of the artist and the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

The black and white formatted photograph, a medium often associated with the genre of photo-journalism, relates to concerns of the artist with regards to the instability of photography as an index of “truth”, particularly in the context of how the Troubles were represented by international media. The fact that Doherty photographed this image from a live television broadcast incorporates the suggestion of a mug shot or surveillance photograph, and therefore allows for the possibility that the woman is not representative of normative femininity, or a passive victim of sectarian violence. The image is that of Donna Maguire (b. 1967), once called the Angel of Death and Europe’s most dangerous woman, a member of the Provisional IRA, who in 1990 was charged with the murder of a British soldier in Dortmund, Germany. Cleared of this charge, she was later found guilty of attempted murder, explosive offenses and spying on British military installations with the intent to sabotage¹⁹. There are parallels between the use of criminal photographs in Doherty’s *Same Difference* and *They’re All the Same* (1990) and the mug shots from the FBI’s most wanted list in Andy Warhol’s censored World’s Fair mural *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964) as both comment on the circulation of images via the media and spectacle²⁰.

Conceived of at a time when video art as a medium had established a foothold in Ireland, the use of slide projection with its slightly dated technology makes a direct connection between Doherty’s lens-based practice and conventions of documentary photography. Crucially, it also establishes an important link with the pioneering time-based work of internationally acclaimed Irish artist, James Coleman (b. 1941). *Same Difference* references Coleman’s *Slide Piece* (1973), projected 35mm

19. “Troubles Chronology”, *Fortnight*, no. 333, 1994, p. 31.

20. Claire Valier, *Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Culture*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 5.

colour slides of a street scene in Milan with synchronised audio descriptions by a single male voice. In this work, the different descriptions of the image explored the subjective ways different viewers could interpret the work, thus emphasising the importance of verbal and visual language to contextualise images and manipulate meaning. A significant difference is that *Same Difference* does not contain an audio element and this alludes to the broadcast censorship of paramilitary organisations in radio and television media in Northern Ireland in the 1980s²¹. While Doherty's later work utilises voice-overs in a manner reminiscent of Coleman's aesthetic and theoretical concerns, it is significant that in *Same Difference* the viewer should be denied the authority of a voice-over. The viewer is reliant on the projected words to contextualise the work. Interestingly, the words are quite literally inscribed on the woman's body.

In *Same Difference*, the sequencing of the projected words allows for the possibility that, at some point, the same words could be superimposed over each face. The first grouping of words has decidedly negative connotations: "murderer", "impulsive", "aggressive", "savage", "grotesque", "repulsive", "calculating", "barbaric" and "deranged". The second grouping of words has more positive or heroic associations, words like "volunteer", "daring", "fearless", "mythical", "romantic", "untamed", "wild", "beautiful", "heroic", "passionate", "honourable", "committed" and "noble". Many of them read as binary oppositions. Some words like "loyal" and "dedicated" appear in both groups, encompassing both positive and negative meanings. For this analysis, the negative words allude to abject femininity as being at odds with normative representations of femininity in Northern Ireland, for read in this way they associate the woman's face with violence. The positive words are commonly associated with allegorical woman-as-Ireland images of femininity often promoted by dominant ideologies, such as the figure of Mother Ireland²². Many of these words can also be interpreted as attesting to the heroic and noble cause of male participants. Emphasising the connection between nationalism and masculinity, the terminology used to describe men's roles in the national context such as "honour", "duty" and "bravery" reinforce hegemonic constructions of masculinity²³. Termed by Doherty a "linguistic paralysis", the distinctive linguistic structure of this work draws upon a series of clichés about "Irish psychopaths committing crimes without any apparent reason" which forecloses possible comprehension of the rationale behind such political and military participation²⁴. Importantly, the two different types of words disrupt conventional representations by highlighting the constructed nature of gendered national identities.

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21. A media broadcasting ban (1988-1994) was enacted by the British government to prevent the broadcast of the voices of members of paramilitary organisations on television and radio in the United Kingdom.
 22. Cultural tropes like Mother Ireland, Róisín Dubh, Hag of Beara and Cathleen Ni Houlihan have been a point of interrogation and engagement for feminist writers and artists.
 23. Joane Nagle, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1998, p. 252.
 24. Joe Linehan, "Willie Doherty", *Third Text*, vol. 13, no. 48, 1999, p. 110-111.

Same Difference invites comparisons with other representations of women and conflict, particularly the work of Northern Irish surrealist sculptor, F. E. McWilliam (1909-1992), a contemporary of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth²⁵. McWilliam's *Women of Belfast* (1972-1974) was a series of twenty bronze sculptures aiming to capture the actual moment of violence by depicting women's bodies tangled in their clothing, thrown backwards by the force of a bomb explosion. Describing this emotive subject matter McWilliam stated:

I did not choose the subject consciously, it happened I suppose because the situation in Ulster is inescapable; even at this safe remove, something that is always nagging at the back of one's mind. [...] Inevitably the figures clothed themselves. The drapery used obeys the nature of drapery, but it is used schematically in the sense that it is intended to further the emotion of the experience rather than to depict actual clothing. [...] I would like the drapery itself to be a metaphor for the event²⁶.

If the women's clothing is a metaphor for the sectarian violence, then cloaking the women's faces renders them unidentifiable, enabling their bodies to function as markers of conflict. Art critic Mike Catto observes that by representing women as victims of the Troubles McWilliam implies that their victimhood extends beyond the immediate temporality of the actual occurrence because "they feel its repercussions longer since they are the mothers and wives who sustain generations"²⁷. Bill Rolston identifies that representations of women as victims of conflict are often accompanied by an understanding that "victimhood equals lack of agency" and that "passivity is the essence of (female) victimhood"²⁸. The materiality of McWilliam's sculptures, solid, cast bronze largely resistant to deterioration, suggests the rigidity of static understandings of women as solely passive victims, or peacemakers, in conflict. By contrast, *Same Difference* with its ever changing cycle of projected unspoken words actively disrupts this assumed passivity, and in doing so, illustrates a transgressive femininity. The title, *Same Difference*, itself an idiomatic oxymoron, hints at the possibility that there are no differences between the abject behaviour found in sectarian conflict and the romantic associations of adherence to a specific ideological cause. The juxtaposing of these two positions highlights tensions between non-normative femininity and how women's relationship to the conflict in Northern Ireland is visualised in cultural representations.

25. It is of some relevance that, although McWilliam was born and raised in Banbridge, he remained somewhat distanced from the actual conflict, as his permanent residence was established in London shortly after the end of World War II (Denise Ferran, "A Modern Master", *Irish Arts Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2008, p. 108).

26. Mike Catto, *Art in Ulster 2: A History of Painting, Sculpture and Printmaking, 1957-1977*, Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1977, p. 140-141.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

28. Bill Rolston, "Women on the Walls...", p. 368.

Closure

The video work *Closure* (2005) (fig. 2) further interrogates abject femininity and the construction of gender in Northern Ireland. *Closure* is an eleven-minute twenty-second single screen installation. Projected directly onto a wall in a dark space, *Closure* features a woman wearing a black coat walking around the perimeter of a long and narrow enclosure. The space, fenced in by corrugated metal walls, is reminiscent of a military or security installation suggesting she is temporarily incarcerated²⁹. The camera tracks the woman's movements as she slowly paces back and forth cutting occasionally to her face. A first-person voice-over oscillates between revealing the woman's unwavering commitment to an unspecified cause and describing the destruction of domestic space. The female subject is actress Kathryn Brolly, while the voice-over is Derry-native Marie Louise Muir, radio presenter on BBC Ulster Radio 4. Functioning as "companion piece" to Doherty's earlier *Non Specific Threat* (2004)³⁰, *Closure* was also inspired by *Holy Cross* (2003), a BBC television drama based upon the Ardoyne Road incident in North Belfast which arose when Catholic school children and their mothers had to pass through a loyalist neighbourhood in order to access Holy Cross, the Catholic girls primary school³¹. In 2001 tensions ran high in this "flashpoint" area resulting in a protracted blockade over five months. Loyalists mounted noisy protests shouting at the passing mothers with their children, threw urine-filled balloons and waved offensive pornographic material while blowing whistles, setting off fireworks and blast bombs (improvised explosive devices grenades)³². *Holy Cross* dramatised the friction of the flashpoint area and the tensions of the blockade, focusing on the struggles of two mothers from either side of the sectarian divide, and considering what happens when sectarian conflict invades the domestic sphere. Brolly bears similarities to actress Bronagh Gallagher, who plays one of the main characters in *Holy Cross*. Doherty has indicated that *Closure* was also inspired by an incident he witnessed during a protest in Belfast where women blocking a road with prams dragged another woman from her vehicle and assaulted her³³. The woman's particular type of beauty, with her dark hair and fair skin could also allude to the Róisín Dubh cultural trope, though instead of being silent and passive, she represents a confrontational, political and militant femininity³⁴.

The location for *Closure* is related to *Apparatus* (2004-2005), a series of forty photographs Doherty created during the same period. The acrylic glass and laminated c-prints on aluminium produced a high gloss mirror-like surface which often reflects the image of the viewer. Exhibited alongside *Closure*, *Apparatus* depicted various *ad hoc* security measures erected around Belfast; peace walls and security

29. Fiona Barber, "Ghost Stories: An Interview with Willie Doherty", p. 197-198.

30. For a detailed analysis of *Non Specific Threat* see Kate Antosik-Parsons, "Masculinity in Crisis...".

31. Susan Mansfield, "Willie Doherty Interview: Visiting Ghosts", *The Scotsman*, 18 April 2009.

32. Fidelma Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection...", p. 584-585.

33. Fiona Barber, "Ghost Stories: An Interview with Willie Doherty", p. 193.

34. "Róisín Dubh" was a 16th-century folk poem that personified Ireland as a woman. James Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" (1846) was a notable translation.



Fig. 2 – Willie Doherty, *Closure*, 2005.

Courtesy of the artist and the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

barriers, including bricked up windows and doors of abandoned houses. These desolate images attest to the poverty and social deprivation as well as identities staged and contested within the urban landscape. The filming location of *Closure*, a space in front of an old Royal Ulster Constabulary station in Derry where corrugated metal walls were built up around existing fortifications, implies the containment of the female subject within makeshift security enclosure with seemingly no way out.

In *Closure*, the camera keeps pace slightly ahead of the woman as she walks back and forth in a deliberate circular motion within the confines of the enclosure. Her pace is slow and steady, her movements do not betray any agitation nor does she appear to be searching for an escape from her confinement. Throughout the work her gaze remains at eye level, briefly rising to allude to a monitoring surveillance camera. At times, she appears to be staring fixedly at something outside of the frame of the shot emphasising her determination. She remains caught in a bust-length 3/4 profile shot though four times the camera cuts to a close-up of her face (fig. 3). This close cropping functions as a moving portrait of the woman. This editing technique, reminiscent of the cropped portrait in *Same Difference*, allows for intense scrutiny on the seemingly transgressive nature of this woman's abject femininity. There are four key phrases that invite the viewer to examine their assumptions on the nature of this woman. The first phrase, "My ardour is fervent, my passion is unbound", establishes her total commitment to her cause. The second phrase, "My nature is ingrained", challenges widely-held essentialist notions of femininity by forcing the viewer to consider her "ruthlessness" as being an inherent quality. The third phrase, "The bed is putrid", points to women's symbolic role as the bearers of the national race. The bed can be understood as a reference to "childbed" or giving birth or having sex, while putrid suggests something rotten or contaminated or corrupt. The utterance of this phrase seeks to disrupt romantic notions about women's primary roles as mothers and caregivers or dutiful wives. The last phrase, "My desire is overwhelming, my compulsion is shameful", stresses her insatiable urge to rise to action, again suggesting a troubling femininity that transgresses the boundaries of social acceptability.



Fig. 3 – Willie Doherty, *Closure*, 2005.

Courtesy of the artist and the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

The voice-over is structured in a way that the potential meanings of words alternate between an affirmation of her allegiance and describing the obliteration of the domestic space. This structure has underlying linguistic connections with the text in *Same Difference*, though arguably, *Closure* draws out more clearly a tension between adherence to an ideological cause and the gendering of women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities. Each phrase referring to her cause begins with the word "my", establishing her relationship to, and ownership of, this unknown thing. When asserting her commitment, the woman uses words such as "judgement", "faith", "loyalty", "destiny" and "integrity". These words serve to elevate the nature of her cause: "My faith is undimmed", "My mission is unending" and "My purpose is clear". The other phrases that describe the domestic begin with the use of the word "the" as a definite article, before a noun indicating that she is referring to a specific thing rather than something more generalised: "The glass is shattered", "The door is permeable", "The joint is fragmenting" and "The paint is blistering". While these relate to a structure, home is also signalled by the mention of "bed". Another series of phrases serve to undercut certain assumptions about femininity such as "My intuition is fatal" and "My destiny is preordained"³⁵. Both of these phrases sit uncomfortably with the viewer because while they can be interpreted as essentialist statements about the constitution of gender, they also emphasise the potentially transgressive nature of the woman's violent actions, highlighting the slippery nature of language.

The steady and determined pace the woman's body maintains throughout the work within the enclosure alludes to incarcerated women combatants. Other cultural representations have sought to address Northern Irish women's experiences of incarceration, such as Rita Duffy's hexagon-shaped *Veil* (2002), constructed of

35. Willie Doherty, *Willie Doherty: Anthology of Time-Based Works*, exhibition catalogue, Yilmaz Dziewior, Matthias Mühling (eds.), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2007, p. 144.

six heavy metal doors from the Armagh Women's Prison, the interior of which could be viewed through peepholes. Lit from below, the space inside was blood red with eighty suspended glass tears. It alluded to the Dirty Protest (1980-1981) when women prisoners used menstrual blood to paint the walls of their cells in the absence of sanitary napkins provided by the prison authorities. These women used menstruation, a symbol of their femininity, in an abject way, to call attention to their struggle to be recognised as political prisoners³⁶. Jolene Mairs' 26-minute documentary *Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol* (2011), taken from a series of interviews of loyalist and republican combatants, families, teachers and prison officers, detailed women's gendered experiences³⁷. One former prisoner, Patricia Moore, detailed that as she stood naked for a strip search menstrual blood ran down her leg and collected in a pool with the officer accusing her "Look at the mess you've made". She expressed that such strip searches were designed to "embarrass, humiliate and degrade" women prisoners³⁸. Considering these works alongside *Closure* suggests that when women's movements and bodies were policed within public, political and militarised spaces, many hardened their resolve in the face of adversarial situations instead of displaying the weakness expected of their gender.

Female combatants often encountered impressions that they would best serve their cause by fulfilling their duties inside the home³⁹. The domestic space of the home is generally understood to be the primary shelter and locus of the family anchored by the mother. According to Jessica Scarlata,

[...] the idealization of "mother" as a national identity has also been an obstacle for women who try to act as political subjects in their own right or demand to be heard as political agents⁴⁰.

The imagining of the domestic space in *Closure* functions to undo assumptions about women's maternal duties and social roles. Phrases such as "The roof is decomposing", "The door is permeable" and "The edge is blurred" conjure up the disintegration of the fixed boundaries of the home. Furthermore, words such as "fragmented" and "unstable" emphasise the breakdown of the secure, family home as separate from the public sphere of sectarian politics. This challenges idealised representations of women's roles for the woman's political commitment

36. Mary McAuliffe, Laura Hale, "'Blood on the Walls': Gender, History and Writing the Armagh Women", in *Irish Women at War: The Twentieth Century*, Gillian McIntosh, Diane Urquhart (eds.), Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2010, p. 171-186.

37. Paula Blair notes the importance of projects like these which enable individual voices to be understood alongside collective histories and official narratives (Paula Blair, *Old Borders, New Technologies: Reframing Film and Visual Culture in Contemporary Northern Ireland*, Oxford, P. Lang, 2014, p. 64).

38. Jolene Mairs, *Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol*, 2011.

39. Miranda Alison, "Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 35, no. 4, December 2004, p. 456.

40. Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland: Gender and Incarceration in Contemporary Irish Film*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2014, p. 139.

is detrimental to her home life. It also proposes that her ideological fervour is more akin to that associated with hegemonic masculinities in Northern Ireland. “The boundary is invisible” reiterates the rupture of a space once viewed as the confined, private sphere of women. In exposing their daughters to violence, the mothers involved in the Holy Cross dispute transgressed the invisible boundaries of the public/private split, asserting political agency by inserting the domestic and familial into sectarian struggles, disrupting normative femininity⁴¹. *Closure* similarly suggests the disintegration of the domestic space, which by extension can be understood as the mother, the site of primary shelter, who repudiates her maternal responsibilities. Crucially, the title of the work, *Closure*, is ambiguous, an end or termination of sorts which would imply that in Northern Ireland the resolution of conflict enables former combatants to move forward with their lives. However, the continual circular pacing of the woman, also mirrored in the looped structure of this work, an endless repeat, suggests that such closure is elusive.

Conclusion

Artworks like *Same Difference* and *Closure* can be understood as interventions into sanitised notions of any “progress” in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland. Doherty emphasises this aspect stating:

For me that’s been one of the most unusual aspects of the whole new political dispensation; part of the deal of the so-called peace is that we all pretend it didn’t happen. There’s been a huge amount of time, money and energy invested in this⁴².

Despite appearances of stability and progress, some twenty years on from the Good Friday Agreement, the political situation in Northern Ireland remains fragile with the Northern Ireland Assembly still suspended after the collapse of the Executive in 2017. This combined with the political and economic uncertainties around Brexit as the United Kingdom prepares to leave the European Union, underscores the unpredictability of times to come. Reassessing women’s contributions to all aspects of the Troubles, not just as victims or peacemakers but as political agents and perpetrators of violence, may hold greater implications in terms of what happens next in Northern Ireland. Women combatants are perceived as abject, not only for the threat they pose to essentialist ideas about normative femininity but also because they can be understood to challenge the hyper-masculinised spaces perpetuated by paramilitary violence. Although it is generally accepted that a larger number of women participated in republican paramilitary organisations than in loyalist organisations, women on both sides of the divide were confronted

41. Fidelma Ashe, “Gendering Ethno-Nationalist Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis of Nationalist Women’s Political Protests”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2007, p. 778.

42. Fiona Barber, “Ghost Stories: An Interview with Willie Doherty”, p. 197.

with entrenched ideas about their agency within their respective organisations as well as their defined roles within the home. Doherty's works not only offer insights into women's militarised roles within nationalist conflict, and women's interventions into public spaces in Northern Ireland more broadly, but also enable the possibility to further destabilise underlying beliefs the Troubles was largely a conflict between men.

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