

liam kelly

## taking to the streets

● In Ireland, there is a particular relationship between words and image that is, in many ways, endemic to the culture. Witness, for example, the British government's former banning of direct interviews with Sinn Fein representatives so that we got a curious form of image and dubbing. And, of course, there is the word, the text and the bible in Protestant fundamentalism, where truth is revealed in the word. By extension, there is a suspicion of the visual in that it may be 'wayward' and relate to fancifulness. There are also the literary structural models of writers like Joyce, O'Brien and Beckett. But what most of the artists considered in this paper share is the use of words as ways of rinsing up what is invested in the cultural mapping of the psychic landscape of memory.

The political and violent conflict in Northern Ireland for the past thirty years has acted as a catalyst in the shift from a lyrical but potent pastoralism in the work of a previous generation of artists to a more searching intellectual discursive art by the present generation of artists. It has been an intensive period of self reflection and interrogation by artists on issues such as place, tradition and identity within a lingering post-colonial context.

In this paper I will examine how artists such as Willie Doherty, Philip Napier, Shane Cullen, and Paul Seawright have deployed and interrogated language both orally and in written text as a working strategy within a post-colonial context such as Northern Ireland.

Considerations of language is central to Willie Doherty's practice. In his earlier work he superimposed text over images - one to subvert the other. The overprinting of words on image creates a compound, existential state, where contradictions, ironies, subversions are at work.

In *The Walls* (1987) (87), the artist arranges text to settle over sections of a horizontal panoramic view of the Bogside area of the city of Derry in daylight and the elevated dark inner side of the city walls from which we/the artist, the colonised/the coloniser takes in the view and take up a position. *The Walls* lingers with the legacy of the colonised and the coloniser in its absences and presences. From the inner, walled city, captioned 'Within/Forever' (in loyalist blue), we survey the outer/other, the Bogside, captioned 'Always/Without'. Jean Fisher points to the fragility of the

seeing/being seen relationship in *The Walls*.

"As we imagine that, with powerful lenses, we could penetrate the interiors of the facing windows, so we also become aware that those eyes may see us. Indeed, were it not for the presence of this gaze of the other we should not be able to assume the sovereignty of power that this position affords us. The seeing/being seen dyad is a question of both position and disposition: I see you in the place I am not. However, what *The Walls* brings into relief is that this narcissistic relation between oneself and one's other beyond the given boundary is inscribed with a profound uneasiness."<sup>1</sup>

*The Walls* then deal with inclusion and exclusion, and Derry, in microcosm, reflects a siege mentality that is culturally endemic in Northern Ireland as a whole.

Since his audio/slide installation *Same Difference* (Matt's Gallery, London, 1990) to his acclaimed *The Only Good One is a Dead One* (originally Matt's Gallery, 1993) the complexities of language mediated in the press and TV and the dangers of stereotyping as a barrier to understanding has compelled Doherty. He has also explored the media role in the all too easy and immediate construction of innocence and guilt, in the installation *Six Irishmen*. The dualities of perception, ideology and mediation, was developed in a different way in 'The Only Good One is a Dead One'

This work is a double screen, video projection installation. On one screen the artist uses a hand-held video camera to record a night time car journey, while the second screen shows the view from inside a car which is stationary on the street. The accompanying soundtrack is constructed in the interior monologue of a man who is vacillating back and forth between the fear of being the victim and the fantasy of being an assassin.

Paul Seawright's photographic works are another example of the transformative power of text on image. During 1987/88, he made a series of fifteen photographs based on visits to the scenes of various sectarian murders, or the locations where bodies were dumped in the early 1970s - an intense period of sectarian violence. He did not give the series a title, but reviewers have always referred to them as the *Sectarian Murder* series.

The time interval of some fifteen years between murderous and creative act was important to the artist, not only to ensure

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Fisher 'Willie Doherty, Unknown Depths' exhibition catalogue (Fotogallery, Cardiff, in association with Orchard Gallery, Derry and Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1990).

the religious anonymity of each victim, but also, in a sense, to indicate that the murdered were victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Using an old diary from his youth, which noted significant political events among the fairly quotidian entries, Seawright spent protracted periods of time at these sites, considering the meanings associated with their location. In some cases, he re-enacted the route taken from the place from which a victim was snatched to the eventual spot of the murder or dumping of the body. Such reconstructions of reality built up tensions within the artist, as well as eliciting the lingering presence of gross transgressive acts from the location. Each scene was photographed in colour from the victim's viewpoint - close to the ground. The lighting of each scene was controlled, which paralleled the forensic photographers, cold stark approach.

These photographs, however, would remain merely interesting formalist studies if their accompanying text was not integral to their meanings. Seawright had researched original journalists' reports of these killings from local newspapers in Belfast, and selected snippets of text from such reports to work with and to discharge their related images of any easy reading. The text ties them down irrevocably to a place, a sub-culture and a value system of violence. In one work, a roadside inn is viewed, low down from the illuminated grassy edge of the road. A general feeling of tension is engendered by the angle of 'shooting', the absence of people, and the hiatus created between the nearside stationary car and the lorry about to pass the inn.

*Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1973. The man was found lying in a ditch by a motorist at Corr's Corner, five miles from Belfast. He had been shot in the head while trying to hitch a lift home.*

The blunt factual text tells of the killing of this misplaced victim. It also seems to indite the pictorial vehicles, as the location becomes perpetually marked and troubled. The essential difference between Paul Graham's photographs dealing with Northern Ireland, *The Troubled Land* (1987), and Paul Seawright's image and text photoworks, resides in the endorsement of lived experience. As with TV coverage of such events, there is no reference to sectarian claims of justification or politicians' repudiations. The cold sparsity of the

text, together with the concentrated absences in the photographs, unite to sustain a resounding moral condemnation of political cause and effect on both victim and violator.

Philip Napier's art practice is not only an interrogation but a detonation of language around and through an axis of power.

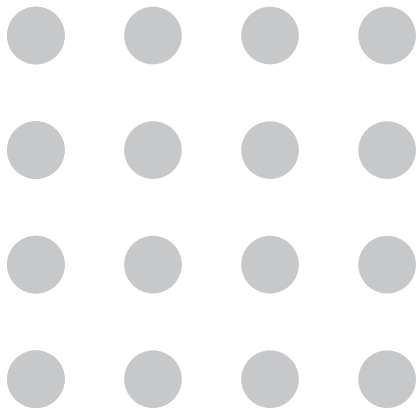
A recent work *Gauge* commissioned and developed for the Orchard Gallery, was conceived as a two part project. Part 1 occurred as an installation in the Orchard Gallery space whilst part 2 was presented as a temporary site-specific public artwork in the Bogside area of Derry, Northern Ireland.

Initially it was the events of Bloody Sunday almost exactly 25 years ago (the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary is 30 January 1997) which provided the contextual point of reference for this work. It was conceived against a backdrop of sustained calls for an apology from the British Government for the events of Bloody Sunday on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1972 when 14 unarmed civilians were shot dead by the British Army.

The project attempts to measure or gauge that apology. In essence the work consists of 14 speakers and a large suspended public address system which relay a continuous spoken apology. This apology is measured through the agitation of the needles on the face of the weighing scales. Mounted taps dribbled water steadily onto the floor of this space forming large shallow pools. The work evolved as a proposition that language alone cannot be adequate; indeed that no measure of language can be enough because it is always contextual and conditional.

In part II, this work was reconceived and installed in a derelict Housing Executive dwelling in Glenfada Park in the Bogside in Derry, facing a courtyard which was the site of the shootings and one of the last architectural remnants of the events of 1972, lingering now amidst widespread redevelopment. The work was installed as though in hiding, in this largely unreconstructed derelict house and was encountered through torchlight amidst unsettling blanket darkness.

The central theme of these differing presentations focuses on the value of an apology. The dialogue surrounding this apology echoes with the registers of colonial and post colonial situations and post conflict situations the world over. That year



alone to my knowledge this debate about apologising has stretched from Japan and its treatment of World War II POW's to South African and its Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, to the War Crimes tribunal in the Hague dealing with Bosnia.

In Philip Napier's *Gauge* it is not specified who is asking for an apology, who is apologising or who is being apologised to. This public and private experience is left to address the cultural and political baggage of its audience.

The act of mediation here arises from its local relevance and universal outreach. Tom McEvilley acknowledges this in his catalogue essay on *Gauge* as he encountered this site specific work.

"Encountered in Glenfada Park, the piece seemed to refer to the Irish demand that the British apologise for Bloody Sunday. Indeed, its appropriateness to the site - combined with its sense of dark hiddenness was uncanny, almost eerie. Still, as one listened, its resonances seemed to pass beyond the specific situation and approach the universal. No only the British relation to the Irish seemed involved, but the relationship of all colonisers to all the colonised peoples everywhere. It reminded me of Hegel's parable of the Master and the Slave, from the second book of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where History is seen as a long slow shift of relationship through struggle, in which the antagonist's attempts to overcome one another through the annihilation culminate in a mutual overcoming through a kind of absorption, a reception of the other as the negation which completes oneself."<sup>2</sup>

Like Napier, Shane Cullen is interested in the ramifications of language - its emotional, psychographic charges.

Shane Cullen's series of tabula-like texts, *Fragmens sur les Institutions Republicaines IV* began in Ireland in 1993 and were completed while on residency at the Centre d'art contemporain de Vassivière en Limousin, France in 1997. The work was exhibited there from 22 February - 13 April 1997. The complete ensemble of texts which form this monumental project were in turn exhibited for the first time in Ireland at the Orchard Gallery, Derry in December 1997.

The work represents secret communications or *comms* written by Irish Republican Hunger Strikers which were smuggled out of the Maze Prison (the so-

called H-Blocks) during the highly charged period of the hunger strike in Northern Ireland in 1981. These hunger strikes, in which ten participants died, were mounted in an effort to establish political status for IRA prisoners.

In Cullen's representation of these *comms* the emotional and fragile language of the private, graphically and in a proclamatory way, were introduced into the public domain of the polis - that which pervades both the physical and political space.

The book illustrates all 96 panels in Cullen's serial presentation of *fragmens*. These *comms*, handwritten by the artist, have been monumentalised in the act of representation, paradoxically by the handwritten process, apeing a mechanical process. On one level interjection by the artist is located in this act of transcription.

The title of the work is itself taken from a series of political ideological texts written by Louis Saint-Just at the height of the revolutionary period in France. What appears to be an orthographical error, ie, *fragmens*, is in fact an accurate detail of the original manuscript of Saint-Just. It is, actually, an archaic spelling of the word *fragments* in common usage prior to the standardisation of the French language.

The work begs questions not only about the representations/re-presentation of text but its location in the 'polis'. The work looks like a public monument but is anti-monumental and as fragile as the language it represents. The strategy of mediation at work here, in one sense is the opposite of Napier in that it brings the public domain of the city monument into the contemplative domain of the art gallery.

It is also body related - not only to the bodies of those on hunger-strike but also to the body of the artist. Mike Wilson draws our attention to this in his catalogue essay on Cullen's project.

"This work, this monument which is more a representation of a monument than a monument proper, is marked by the trace of a particular body, the body of the painter, it is further marked by the absent bodies, bodies reduced, erased and superceded by text. It is marked by their words, the words of dead men negotiating the terms and conditions of their death."<sup>3</sup>

In relation to these remarks by Wilson about the body it is worth recalling Maude Ellmann's insightful observation that the more the body becomes emaciated by

<sup>2</sup> Tom McEvilley, 'Philip Napier, Gauge', exhibition catalogue, Orchard Gallery, Derry, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Wilson, 'Shane Cullen, Fragmens sur les Institutions Republicaines IV, Orchard Gallery, Derry and Centre d'art contemporain de Vassivière en Limousin, France, 1997.

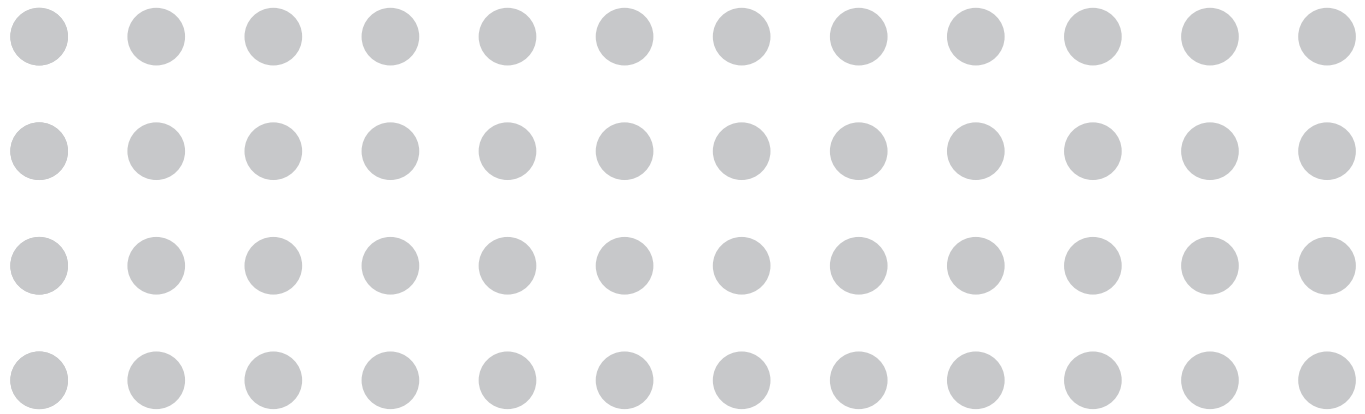
hunger strike the more loquacious the person becomes - there is an urgency in the need to communicate.<sup>4</sup>

Tom Paulin, in his essay 'A New Look at the Language Question' reminds us that the history of a language is often a story of possession an dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture.' Since cultural identity is laid into language it is not surprising that language can become the cause of a violent interaction between the colonised and the coloniser.

In relation to this the critic Seamus Deane cautions:

On the hither side of violence is Ireland as Paradise; on the nether side, Ireland as ruin. But since we live n the nether side we live in ruin and can only console ourselves with the desire for the paradise we briefly glimpse. The result is a discrepancy in our language; words are askew, the are out of line with fact. Violence has fantasy and wordiness as one of its most persistent after-effects.<sup>5</sup>

The works of these artists examined, beg questions not only about the legacy of violence but about representation/re-presentation of language and text and its location in myth and in the 'polis'. ●



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<sup>4</sup> See Maud Ellmann, 'The Hunger Artists, Starving, writing and Imprisonment,' Virago, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Brian Friel: the Double Stage' in Celtic Revivals, Essays in Modern Irish Literature, Faber and Faber, 1985.