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Contemporary Art and Transitional Justice in  
Northern Ireland: The Consolation of Form

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Contemporary Art and Transition in  
Northern Ireland: Critique and the Consolation of Form.



‘[Art] begins not with a presupposition, but in negativity. Created under a minus sign, it pretends to no function, save that of discovering the nature of its own existence. It uses social and political conditions to reflect not them but its own estrangement of them, its capacity to defamiliarise them so that they might be seen free of the bigotry of conviction and yet within the consolation of form.’

Seamus Deane, quoted in Kelly, Liam [Thinking Long](#) 1994 p14

## I. Introduction

Shifting the focus of now-familiar debates about whether artworks can respond to the enormity of past violence, the question at stake here is the slightly different relationship between contemporary art and what is known within socio-legal debates as processes of ‘transitional justice’, the formal legal and quasi-legal mechanisms that attempt to support and facilitate a broad societal shift away from past violence and into sustainable peaceful futures.<sup>1</sup> Scholars of transition and transitional justice processes have tended to focus on the negotiated roles of elite actors and legal processes; but there is also recognition that if a shift is to be successful, transitional societies must enact it in various extra-legal and non-executive domains. This article contends that insofar as artworks constitute a public space of ‘felt contact’<sup>2</sup> – through their forms and by use of colour, light, line, scale, sound<sup>3</sup> – they must be understood to *partake* in a present which is enacting that shift on a wider canvas. This partaking is poorly understood as facilitative or therapeutic visual accompaniment; it is not merely illustrative or a witnessing of social and political issues. Rather, it is a complex site of composition and, therefore, of potential critical intervention. The creativity that the artwork inevitably flaunts, coupled with the work of composition – the positioning, relating,

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Mario Di Paolantonio, for his support and thoughts, the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the research on which this article draws, and the organisers and respondents at conference in Lisbon, Keele, London and New York where preparatory papers were given during 2006-7, for their useful remarks. [Thanks also to the artists discussed here, all of who took time to speak with me.](#)

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is Adorno’s, and it used here because I mean to emphasise the contact [or encounter](#) that is necessary for any potentiality of the artwork to be actualised as intervention in the present (1951:247).

<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1994) describe the sense in which an encounter with an ‘artwork’ cannot be thought as if across a ‘gap’, but is a *becoming with* the shape, size, colour and materials of the piece. For a different voice, one that also emphasises the ‘beyond’ of colour *through* colour, the gesture of a work, and its complex relationship to time, see Lyotard (2004).

entangling and disentangling of elements - means that each artwork can potentially create common points of reference, or challenge them, drawing out, focusing or intensifying sentiment, even potentially suggesting lines of flight. The politics of contemporary art in Northern Ireland will be explored through the critical constellations that the chosen artworks produce, as composite sites of gathering (Weibel, 2005) or *constellations* in Walter Benjamin's sense, that engage the cultural processes of transition through their problematisation of it. The artworks become sites in which the assumptions of transition are opened up for critical reflection, probing the notion of what constitutes Peace and its conditions of possibility.

This argument is developed in opposition to those who, looking for the signs of successful transition in Northern Ireland, point to the rise of commercial and 'cultural' interests as they are felt on the streets of the two major cities, Belfast and Derry. The process of 'normalisation', here, becomes synonymous with the triumph of commercial capitalist enterprise, such that Belfast, whose city centre was once ringed by metal barriers, has apparently emerged as 'a shiny new metropolis of head-turning galleries, museums, restaurants, luxury hotels – and exciting new property developments' (Ben West 'Belfast's Ship Comes In' The Observer, October 8 2006). For this commentator, the partaking of art unproblematically signals pleasure-seeking behaviour turned outwards, toward objects, and away from the fractious politics of identity. Here art is figured as part and parcel of a neo-liberal capitalist present; galleries are understood as uncritical and non-conflictual spaces<sup>4</sup>, part of a commercial scene where freedom from the past enables the post-historical (post-finite) present of consumption to reign supreme. If, on a kinder reading, the implication is that the presence of art might be a sociological measure of the 'normal' and good circulation of social and cultural capital, replacing the 'abnormal' and bad social capital of sectarianism, there remains a yawning avoidance of the critical engagement that artworks proffer.

While formal legal transitional mechanisms do not simply ignore the past in an attempt to impose a model of the future, many of these mechanisms explicitly attempt to 'deal' with the past (Bell, 2003), hoping to produce citizen-subjects who are 'over' that past, and implicitly imagine a future in which the conflict becomes merely historical, a narrative or set of narratives that do not constrain the sentiments and identifications of those

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<sup>4</sup> As David Harvey has said about shopping malls (2000:168), they are intended as spaces of hope, where one is explicitly intended to lose a sense of time, where natural rhythms of life and death do not matter – and where the shops are always open.

in the present. But as in so many countries emerging from violent conflict, the problem of the past constantly reappears even as the image of the future is conjured up. Events, such as the attacks on army barracks in Antrim in March 2009 or the reaction to the Eames report<sup>5</sup> earlier that year, suggest that the present still harbours these 'past' sentiments that evidently run deep and that can appear violently. More recently still, the fraught negotiations over the devolution of policing and justice in January 2010, illustrate that each step in the process of devolution and transition is likely to be held up to critical scrutiny in which voices from 'the past' are necessarily given legitimate airing. This being so, it might be objected, one hardly needs artworks to question the hegemony of the discourse of Peace. But if it is precisely in the (dialectical) image that Benjamin saw the political possibility of a questioning of the present. Through the image's 'telescoping of the past through the present' (V, p 588 (N7a, 3) – 'it is not that the past throws its light on the present, or that the present its light on the past, but [the dialectical] image is that wherein the past comes together with the present in a constellation.' (Arcades, V p576 (N2a, 3, quoted in Buck – Morss, 1989:291) – it is here that one finds a mode of critical questioning of the present that renders the present problematic not in terms of perceived exclusions nor with reference to a past that cannot or will not be erased, but in terms of the present's inability to be conceived through a linear conception of time. That is, the past and its relation to both the present and to the future are set in oscillation as artworks explore the complex temporalities of a present self-consciously attempting to narrate itself away from the past. The artworks are not only 'without the bigotry of conviction', as Seamus Deane put it, but also suggest that the task of dealing with the past is flawed wherever the past is conceived as a history that can be rendered present to be judged by subjects who are thereby placed beyond it. That is the illusion of a present 'no-time' that dovetails with the desires of commercial enterprise and neo-liberal conceptions of freedom.

In the sections that follow, these issues are discussed with reference to the work of four contemporary artists in Northern Ireland: the paintings of Rita Duffy, the photography and installation work of Anthony Haughey, and the sculptural works of Philip Napier and Mike Hogg.

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<sup>5</sup> The Eames Report, produced in January 2009 was the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, suggested, inter alia, that there should be compensatory payments made to all those affected by the Troubles, regardless of allegiance. Full report available at: <http://www.cgpni.org/fs/doc/Consultative%20Group%20on%20the%20Past%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

## II. Case by Case: The Work of Rita Duffy

If you travel into Belfast city centre by the airport bus, you will pass a piece of public art on Oxford Street/Lanyon Place by Belfast artist Rita Duffy, whose work has frequently considered precisely the question of how the peaceable, de-militarised and normalised Northern Ireland will be able to ‘domesticate’ legacies of violent historical events. ‘Dreams’ (2004) is no exception insofar as it is composed of portraits etched onto metal sheets of forty children in five sections, with a glass backlit panel at the centre of each of the sections containing scrolls on which those children have recorded their dreams (Figure 1). Juxtaposing the past and present - using metal etchings to refer to Northern Ireland’s sheet-metal industrial past, alongside children’s hopes as the foundation upon which fortunes now depend – the piece not only states a truism, but is also a critical commentary, a questioning of what is unquestioned as transition unfolds.



*Figure 1 Rita Duffy ‘Dreams’ Public artwork, Belfast*

Like the scrolls, the future is inaccessible, but it is linked to the activities of the present, such that how the past tears into the present, and how it is communicated across generations - on the level of affect as much as formally – makes the present vulnerable if state-led, legalistic modes alone define transitional efforts. The rendering of the Troubles as History, and the treatment of past events as a series of historic events or legal cases, cannot begin to



understand the complex but everyday, habitual modes in which the past colours the present, still all too often structured around divisions that Peace Agreements seek to render void, and that cast a long shadow over the future. Like another of her pieces - 'Veil' (2002), in which six heavy metal doors salvaged from Armagh women's prison stand to form a hexagon into which the viewer can peek, and through which one sees a brilliant red interior in which hundreds of glass teardrops hang (Figure 2) - the artwork can be understood to form a critical constellation; not in the sense of revealing an essential component or level of society that escapes notice, but in interrupting the assumption that the present can ever be fully present, or that the issues at stake in Peace Agreements could ever be brought to full presence to be subject to debate and agreement. Nor, by the same token, can an artwork achieve such a feat; yet its play of juxtapositions can perform as a Benjaminian irruptive critical constellation, interrupting that assumption, and forcing an awareness of processes of narrativisation by which the events of the Troubles become History.



*Figure 2: Rita Duffy 'Veil' 2002 Collection of Wolverhampton Gallery*

Here, I will focus on Duffy's exhibition entitled 'Cuchulain Comforted' (Millenium Court Gallery, Portadown, April 2007), where the theme of justice and justice processes is uppermost. On one canvas, a high court judge's wig floats on an intense blood-red background, its floppy horse-hair ears a tumbling cascade, making it, through the isolation of such display, an object of aesthetic contemplation. The wig is joined by several other paintings of the same wig, of other wigs - a barrister's this time -and other legal apparel (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: Rita Duffy 'Justus' Series 2006*

By orienting us around these details, the artworks draw the spectator's attention to the pomp and paraphernalia of, and integral to, the performativity of justice. Viewed alongside the other paintings in her exhibition, however, Duffy's work prompts not simply a wry look at legal theatricalities and the diagrams of power they suggest, but also a contemplation of processes of transitional justice.

Artworks are able to subtract – to lift one aspect, such as the wig, out of its context – and to thereby generate a focussed attention, amplifying its resonances, like a 'pick up' (as Deleuze once suggested of writing, 2002). By such lifting, the contexts and all that separates them are suspended; in the art gallery, the principles that organise legal procedures are likewise rendered exterior. But not all contexts are thereby removed. So although Duffy's painted wig is empty, inviting the viewer to contemplate it in its inanimate state, mere horsehair and stitching, there is arguably also the invitation to consider how justice and legal processes in all their elaborate performance are sutured, which is to say, how they are held together, and how they 'hold up' under examination. For the history of the judiciary has of course been controversial, entangled as it has been with the difficulties of establishing appropriate and workable procedures for justice amidst and after 'the Troubles'. The controversial 'Diplock' courts, as a key example, established in 1972 as a response to terrorist activities in Northern Ireland, and that allowed juryless trials,

have only recently been replaced as part of so-called ‘security normalisation’, with jury trials once again becoming the norm.<sup>6</sup> These were controversial, not only because of the institutional bias within the judiciary – within legal training and appointment, exemplified in the demand that each intending Queen’s counsel take an oath to serve the Queen – but also because they were part of a process of criminalisation that refused the political status sought by those committing acts of violence.<sup>7</sup> The simple question of who dons this wig is therefore, highly charged.

While Duffy herself will let you into the ‘secret’ that the barrister’s apparel we see here is loaned by the barrister who in 1995 challenged the necessity of the oath<sup>8</sup>, the artwork ‘speaks’ to these themes as it must, obliquely, visually. As well as intensifying details through the attention she gives to them, the artworks constitute a newly nuanced assemblage, gathering certain events, and certain legalistic responses to events, within the space - and in Northern Ireland’s town of infamous standoffs, no less – not to suggest homogeneity between them, but to turn a curiosity toward them as images from the past that re-emerge, like dream images. Thus works in this same exhibition juxtapose several specific moments in the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This is clear as soon as we realise that the painting of the parka jacket that floats hauntingly in space and that is entitled ‘Relic’ is a painting of Mairead Farrell’s jacket (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup> (And one does realise this since the catalogue essay and Paul Muldoon’s poem, which accompanies Duffy’s paintings, and is reprinted in the catalogue, name her). Or if one allows the several canvases

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<sup>6</sup> Report of the Commission to consider legal procedures to deal with terrorist activities in Northern Ireland (Chairman: Lord Diplock) *Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by Command of Her Majesty December 1972* Cmnd. 5185 London: HMSO, 1972

<sup>7</sup> The refusal of political status and privileges led to the hunger strikes of 1981.

<sup>8</sup> After the 1995 challenge, QCs in Northern Ireland were no longer required to declare loyalty to the Queen, but were asked to well and truly serve her. In 1999 this was challenged again, with reference to the Good Friday Agreement, and QCs in Northern Ireland now have the option to swear instead to serve all whom they may be lawfully called upon to serve. ▼

<sup>9</sup> Mairead Farrell was a member of the PIRA. She was shot dead by British SAS in Gibraltar in 1988, according to eyewitnesses, while she and her two male companions were surrendering. In 1995 the European Court of Human Rights found that the British Government had contravened Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the ‘right to life’ (although by a narrow majority of 10 to 9). Duffy came across the jacket in the newly opened ‘Irish Republican History Museum’, Conway Mill, Belfast, where *inter alia* women who had been imprisoned in Armagh have gathered an archive of their experiences. The jacket, Duffy recalls, was being venerated like a religious relic.

Victoria Bell 15/12/08 15:02

**Deleted:** Footnote explaining what then happened – loyalty to queen still remained .. challenged again

Victoria Bell 15/12/08 15:06

**Deleted:** Bar counsel requested neutral phrase – ‘ but was resisted by judiciary. Philip Magee, a personal friend of Duffy’s, also borrowed the high court judge’s wig for her to paint.

on which Duffy has painted a dropped white handkerchief, evoking in its simplicity, Father Daly's handkerchief waving amidst the mayhem of Bloody Sunday 1972 (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Rita Duffy 'Relic' 2001 Oil on linen 183

x 122cm Collection of AIB



Figure 5: Rita Duffy 'Cloth 1' 2006 Oil on linen 140 x 112cm

Through these details, two legalistic mechanisms are evoked – the European Court of Human Rights on the one hand and the judicial inquiries (the Widgery Inquiry and the

Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday)<sup>10</sup> on the other – two significant mechanisms for ‘dealing with the past’ that have been employed in Northern Ireland. In each of these fora, issues of state violence are discussed in different terms<sup>11</sup> in ways that are able to supersede the state. While not a wholly satisfactory form of seeking transitional justice or redress, these fora arguably offer people a formalised and public space in which to present their version of events. If no justice is necessarily delivered, something other than the ‘official account’ has been archived, laid down for those in the future and as such they are rightly understood to be important transitional mechanisms. Duffy’s art exhibition, however, treats the question of memory and transition differently. Bringing the two rather different legal mechanisms into proximity, but without the constrained procedure of the legalistic realms, without their necessity to distinguish ‘case by case’, the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ can be reflected upon across different instances. Without directing that rumination, without the need for one homogenising narrative, and without pressure for discursive resolution still less judgement, the artworks request that a simple piece of the puzzle command centre stage: the simple white handkerchief, the ghostly coat of a young woman. Here also is the difference between the art gallery and the museum in which Farrell’s original jacket is displayed, since the jacket in the museum is accompanied by a narrative; indeed, it is ensconced within a particular republican historical museum in Belfast and has its attendant written account. In the art exhibition, by contrast, the painted jacket is lifted in both substance and theme by its rendering in paint and by its display alongside these other pieces of cloth. It is lifted out of a biographical or republican narrative, and eschewing these – as ‘history breaks down into images’ (Benjamin, Vol 5:596) – is given a proximity to other images that have been crafted from the same materials and techniques (such that the canvas, oil, graphite serve to unite – visually, sensually – as much as do the ‘thematic’ of the exhibition). It refuses to place us against that history, beyond it, in order to comment upon it; but it invites critique through the details, the fragments, of that significant past. This is also what makes this space different from the work of ‘making public’ of the murals, which

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<sup>10</sup> The Widgery and Saville Inquiries were judicial inquiries established under the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) 1921 Act, the latter established in January 1998 in order to re-examine the events of that day.

<sup>11</sup> In the first in relation to the European Convention on Human Rights, and in the second in relation to a perceived need to address a ‘definite matter of public importance.’ The public inquiry is in the UK public law tradition, but in its second instance here it was arguably close to the truth and reconciliation commissions in other parts of the world, including, unusually, international judges (Hegarty, 2003).

have the widest reputation outside Northern Ireland in terms of politicised visual culture there. Although no longer true across the board, it is still the case that the murals depict purposefully partisan accounts of history, celebrating for example, ‘freedom fighters’ or those who have lost their lives for the republican or unionist cause, or casting doubt on the sincerity of the ‘other side’ in the Peace process. In the art gallery, the visual rhetoric is not intending to ‘draw support’ (Rolston, 1992) as do the murals, but to draw reflection and a different set of connections. It is interruptive in the sense that it starts to suggest the *problem* of transition, a problem that law cannot consider within its procedural constraints. The images, like dream images, are without a coherent narrative; they cannot fall into a line of historical progress, cannot be connected to the present through the dominant narratives, except as details that must be rendered past, understood as ‘dealt with’ through legal and quasi-legal mechanisms that are part of the Peace process. But like dream images, they will continue to return, and will resist any attempt to fully explain them in terms of linear time.<sup>12</sup>

Through gathering these fragments and details, the most profound problem of transition is held up, ‘arrested’ for critical examination. Duffy calls this exhibition ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, the title of W. B. Yeats’ poem concerning the Celtic warrior who, according to legend, wrapped himself in cloth as his enemies approached so that they would not know that he was mortally wounded. As they drew close, his sword fell and cut off the hand of one of his foes, and in return Cuchulain’s own hand was severed. He remains an ambiguous figure, celebrated in republicanism - Oliver Sheppard’s (1912) sculpture of the warrior, originally commissioned as a memorial to the 1798 rebellion, now stands in the General Post Office in Dublin, a memorial to the 1916 Easter uprising (Kelly, 1996:12) - but also as the hound of Ulster, a hero who defended the province against invasion from the South, a defence whose necessity is associated with a loyalist rendering of history. So while ‘Cloth’ became the simple title of the exhibition’s publication that Duffy produced alongside the commissioned poem by poet Paul Muldoon (2007), the political ambiguities of the mythical figure of Cuchulain evoke the highly ambiguous desire

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<sup>12</sup> For the poet Paul Muldoon, who responds to Duffy’s work in the accompanying collaborative book, Duffy’s paintings evoke the history of flax-production in Northern Ireland, details of violent incidents during the Troubles, various specific cloths, in a series of loosely connected autobiographical verses that remember people, facts and scenes. Insofar as these memories and facts are prompted by Duffy’s exhibitions, they belong in that sense both ‘only’ to Muldoon but also to the creative connection that the paintings prompted.

and comforts associated with being bound. Cloth can comfort but also bind one too tightly, it can cover in order to protect but also to hide, it can be used to heal but also to deceive. Moreover, in Northern Ireland - where cloth has historically been a key industry, with linen production a main source of survival especially for the Catholic community given the discriminatory employment practices ship-building industries - it is of course also readily associated with rituals not only of the legal profession but of the church, that is, with the rituals of the 'men of the cloth'. And which cloth one waves, or seeks comfort within, is precisely - if crudely - the history of politics in Northern Ireland. These, as well as the maternal rituals of domestic pride, of laundry and tablecloths, which seek to maintain order even within disorder, are evoked by Duffy's paintings from the 'Cuchulain Comforted' exhibition (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Rita Duffy 'Console' 2006 Oil on linen 76cm x 76cm

Bringing the warrior's cloths into proximity with the domestic and embodied rituals that maintain individual and social decorum, Duffy provokes wonder at how the rituals of 'civilised society' – tablecloths and handkerchiefs, but also of justice and legal processes - are maintained in the midst of conflict, how they carry on despite and perhaps sometimes in resolute ignorance of all which threatens to interrupt them. Furthermore, in the period of transition, the rituals of justice and legal process are maintained despite the paradox, noted by many scholars of transitional justice, of the state's own participation in the violence that its courts are then asked to consider.

As with much of Duffy's earlier work, there is concern here with the experience of everyday existence within a society in which the need to enact rituals to confer identity and stability has been both a comfort and a conservative mimesis that sustains closed



communities united by past and potential acts of violence. The continuities of cultural practices – from the ‘ancient rules’<sup>13</sup> of vaulted professions to the domestic traditions of ‘good housekeeping’ – are joined by the more philosophical questions - what do we wrap ourselves in, for comfort or in order to survive? What thereby gets folded in, that cannot be aired?

In raising these questions, Duffy’s paintings are not illustrative of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. Instead, they form a site of problematisation through the configurations and juxtapositions they present. Because the elements recalled cannot easily be dismissed as past, as ‘dealt with’, the images conjure meanings that are open to reinterpretations and free to enter different constellations of meaning. The problem of transition is how to build an architecture that allows that freedom while explicitly attempting to change the resonances that these fragments have had in the past; Duffy’s juxtapositions problematise the conditions of possibility for a present that attempts to will itself beyond the past, not in order to sound a pessimistic note, but to create a critical constellation that deepens the considerations of what is at stake in the transition to Peace, thereby implying the paradoxes inherent in the notion of an inclusive future – inclusive, that is, of those divisions and loyalties that need to be refigured as mere political difference. And where history becomes museum-ised, glossed as a merely cultural background and curiosity, it dovetails with the designation of art spaces as commercial spaces, and leaves uncriticised the ideas of Peace and democracy as existing within a ‘no-time’ indicative of commercial, neo-liberal measures of success.

### III. Taking Measure: The Work of Philip Napier and Mike Hogg

Commercial and market logic requires measures; it is unthinkable without measurement. But political measurement, required if the success of Peace Agreements is to be claimed, is highly contested and always a matter of debate and dissensus. How is it possible to measure the violence of the past? How can one begin to think the measures required for Peace? By which measure can we declare Peace arrived? What does it mean to talk about altering the values of the past, so that the citizen-subjects desire a future set in opposition to a past? It has become widely accepted that in order to create conditions for peaceable futures in societies emerging from violent pasts, there need to be mechanisms for dealing with those pasts. And while these formal mechanisms of transitional justice do not in and

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<sup>13</sup> The phrase is a reference to the W.B. Yeats poem.

of themselves create Peace, they can be said to aim to provide a sort of equilibrium or balance such that society may move forward peaceably. The Belfast Agreement, as the principal example here, is understood, socio-legally, as a mechanism for dealing with the past; but it is also, perhaps principally, understood as a document that seeks to design the future.

As part of their collaborative exhibition 'The Soft Estate' (2006), Philip Napier and Mike Hogg explored the assumptions and technologies of such designs, which are essentially speculative, but which are drawn up in much the same way, and accompanied by much the same rhetoric, as civil engineering projects, as if a future architectural space were being modelled to be sold to the consumer-population.

At the centre of their installation is a table (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Philip Napier and Mike Hogg 'The Soft Estate' 2006 (Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast) Copyright the artist

The table is a reproduction of an original table designed for the captain's cabin on the Titanic<sup>14</sup>, a design that was part of a bigger plan for greatness, full of celebratory pomp,

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<sup>14</sup> Napier and Hogg's table is a reproduction of the table by Gilbert Logan at the cabinet workshops of Harland and Wolff, Belfast in 1911/12. In fact the original satinwood table

ultimately lost to disaster. The table has a lever at one end, by which one can wind and extend the table. In the exhibition the table is extended, but no leaves have been added; they hang on the wall, patiently standing by. This is not the clothed domestic table depicted in Duffy's oil painting, nor yet the table that Duffy painted surrounded – both threatened and protected – by the security machinery of the surveillance state (Figure 8); this table is not yet ready for its sitters.



*Figure 8: Rita Duffy 'Banquet' 1997 Oil and wax on linen 5' x 5' Copyright the artist*

The gap is important for Napier and Hogg; it is as if the table is waiting for a decision on how many places are needed. If the table is a technology of negotiation, it is also accompanied by the problem of limited representation: who needs to be represented, to be

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never made it into Master Captain Edward Smith's cabin on the Titanic, as it arrived too late for the maiden voyage. It was found, with its chairs, many years later in storage in Southampton and was returned to Belfast where it now sits on permanent display in the Harbour Commissioner's office, Corporation Street.

given voice, to fit around this table? The table cannot accommodate all and its political ethic is never egalitarian; the rectangular shape quietly attests that not all are equal. The image of democracy as pure representation of the people, like that of colonial enterprises as progress, are illusions that eclipse the violences done to those unfavoured, those who are left by the wayside.

The phrase ‘soft estate’ comes, Napier and Hogg tell us, from precisely this wayside, the term being used for the interstitial space between the hard shoulder and the ‘view beyond’, the road verges that play a subtle, too easily dismissed, role in the ecosystem (Long, 2006). If those who are left ‘by the wayside’ are of concern to Napier and Hogg, if the importance of those who persist ‘in-between’ definitions is asserted here, it is not, however, their *representation* that is demanded. Rather it is attention to the peculiarities of the mechanisms by which notions of inclusion, development and progress are supposedly achieved. As Napier himself suggests<sup>15</sup>, although Northern Irish politics is sometimes reduced to the notion that all that is required is to get certain figures around the table – as Paisley and Adams were so pictured in March 2007, with a sense of finality (see eg. the front page of *The Independent* March 27<sup>th</sup> 2007) – there is validity in the perspective that irresolvable but dynamic tensions are integral to the notion of democracy. Reconciliation, in other words, might be a false goal, one that fails to recognise democracy’s constitutive antagonisms.

But the peculiarities of a transition to democracy is not only about how antagonisms need to remain in altered forms, but also about how the present cannot fully present the past to which it seeks to oppose an imagined future.

In mechanisms of transitional justice, and in the cultural life of ‘wounded societies’, past events are reproduced again and again: in Inquiries such as those into the events of Bloody Sunday, in novels and films, in counselling sessions, in individual’s narrations. The past will return, and the present cannot be done with it. The table here is a reproduction of one that has presumably rotted at sea, disintegrated by salt water; yet it appears here again, crafted again from the still-existent plans, not in order to judge colonial history or comment on the decline of traditional industries, but as comment on the peculiarity of reproductions and the precariousness of the process of moving from plans to product.

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<sup>15</sup> In an interview with the author.

The plan has to be accurate or the piece will not stand-up, however much ‘support’ it has. With the reproduction of a piece of furniture, issues of measurement, balance, weight, angles and joins are all important. A second piece in Napier and Hogg’s exhibition humorously confirms this; a normal kitchen table has been sawn in half and is extended the length of the gallery, its mid-rift a series of wooden planks, clamped with G-clamps, to the point, it seems, of near collapse (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Philip Napier and Mike Hogg ‘The Soft Estate’ 2007 (Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin) Copyright the artist

It is close to its own limit, close to not being able to retain itself in table-form, unable to bear its own gap, as it were; it asks, ‘How far can you go, aesthetically, and still recognise this as ‘table’? With peace agreements and conflict resolution, as with any negotiated settlement, different issues of measurement are required. How strained can Peace be and still be claimed as Peace?

It is peculiar, Napier and Hogg suggest, that the language of civil engineering is mimicked in these discussions, as if the future were a matter of testing the site, consulting the residents and drafting the plans. The architectural language of ‘blueprints for peace’, ‘cornerstones of agreement’, ‘firm foundations’, suggest as much. But the modes by which a population’s inclination let alone capacity for that desired future might be *measured* are more complex than those employed in recreating the table. It is not that plans are ‘bad’ *per se*, but that they involve the ‘attention’ and co-ordination of their elements. Much of Mike Hogg’s work has been about the sense of suspension in Northern Ireland in which people continue to live while waiting for something to occur (the end of hostilities, a co-ordinated peace plan, an agreement to return to the peace plan). Here, the issue is the modes by which people can plan a self-generated momentum out of that suspended state, in a way that neither table can.

The laughable but deadly serious characterisations employed by marketing companies, generated precisely to allow commercial enterprises, as well as politicians, to ‘get the measure’ of the population, divide people into bizarre-sounding groupings. In the

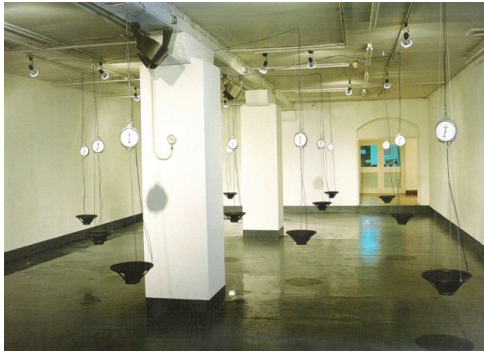
exhibition, these terms – ‘rust belt residualists’, ‘urban adventurers’, ‘welfare borderline’ - are displayed on the wall on a gauge resembling a height chart or a buoyancy measurement painted on the bow of a ship (Figure 10).



*Figure 10: Philip Napier and Mike Hogg 'The Soft Estate' 2006 (Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast) Copyright the artist*

In marketing worlds, these terms are intended to measure the desires of groupings of people so that they can be targeted for particular products or messages; the terms are accompanied by descriptions of this ‘type’. In this age of ‘knowing capitalism’ (Thrift, 2005; see also Savage and Burrows, 2007), these descriptions are based on analyses of known transactions collated by groups such as Mosaic and sold as predictive aids to those who wish to know, for example, which particular product or idea to ‘float’ with which subsection of the population. But the gap between prediction and result, probability and outcome, is of course, the gap of risk. Any plan, and any design – the Titanic, the table, a commercial product, a Peace Agreement – involves risk. While it would be peculiar to say that no peace plan attends to human sentiment, since they are all about moulding a future as acceptable to the People, the possibility of doing so accurately calls for an instrument for which no adequate calibration exists.

In an earlier work -‘Gauge’ (1997) - Napier had explored another impossible measurement that has accompanied transition: how one might ‘weigh up’ a public apology. ‘Gauge’ was first shown at the Orchard Gallery in Derry on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday, and later installed in now derelict buildings that remain in Glenfada Park, site of some of the fatal shootings (Figure 11).



*Figure 11: Philip Napier 'Gauge' 1997 (installation view, Orchard Gallery, Derry)  
Copyright the artist*

Like a visual duet with the text of Derrida (2001), the work meditates on the impossibility of forgiving the unforgiveable while still recognising its un-forgiveability. How can mere words be weighed up against the immeasurable loss of a loved one's death? In Ireland, the apologies have been demanded and offered as if they will end a story, an ending that invariably serves to decolonise reconciliation, making the Troubles a narrative or series of little narratives in which there were two warring parties who can speak of giving and accepting apologies. Since making this piece the strangeness of apologies continued – the IRA (partial) apology of 2002, and the recent British government apology for a shooting they carried out 35 years ago<sup>16</sup>. Fittingly, the piece travelled to Johannesburg in 2006, its movement tracing a long-standing connection between Northern Ireland and South Africa. 'Gauge' highlights the impossibility of doing justice to the past, or evaluating it in relation to a speech act in the present; the artwork complicates the temporalities at stake here, refusing the insertion of the events of Bloody Sunday, and by extension each of the state killings, into a continuum of historical progress that culminates in a present that is 'over' the past. Rather, as Benjamin would have argued, the reality but non-actuality of the past accompanies the present, flashing up and even acting upon it in those moments of danger.

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Hegarty was shot dead in Derry in July 1972 by British soldiers; the British government apologised in August 2007. The BBC reported that the Ministry of Defense has also withdrawn a document, assessing the Army's role in Northern Ireland, in which it described Daniel Hegarty as a terrorist. The document, released in June 2007, had also incorrectly claimed the 15-year-old was armed. The Ministry of Defense wrote to the family and apologized, accepting that Daniel was innocent and that the reference to him as a terrorist was inaccurate. ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/6923421.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6923421.stm))

The table in 'The Soft Estate' also has another journey to undertake; Hogg and Napier intend to take the table out in order to stage conversations around it with groups of people in Northern Ireland. They are interested in how people put themselves into language; not in order to find more accurate ways than the terms of marketing - or of national, political, military or paramilitary groupings - but in order to consider the sense in which language has performative capabilities outside standard notions of what discussion, debate and agreement are habitually taken to mean. One initial such conversation is mapped on a board in the exhibition (Figure 12).

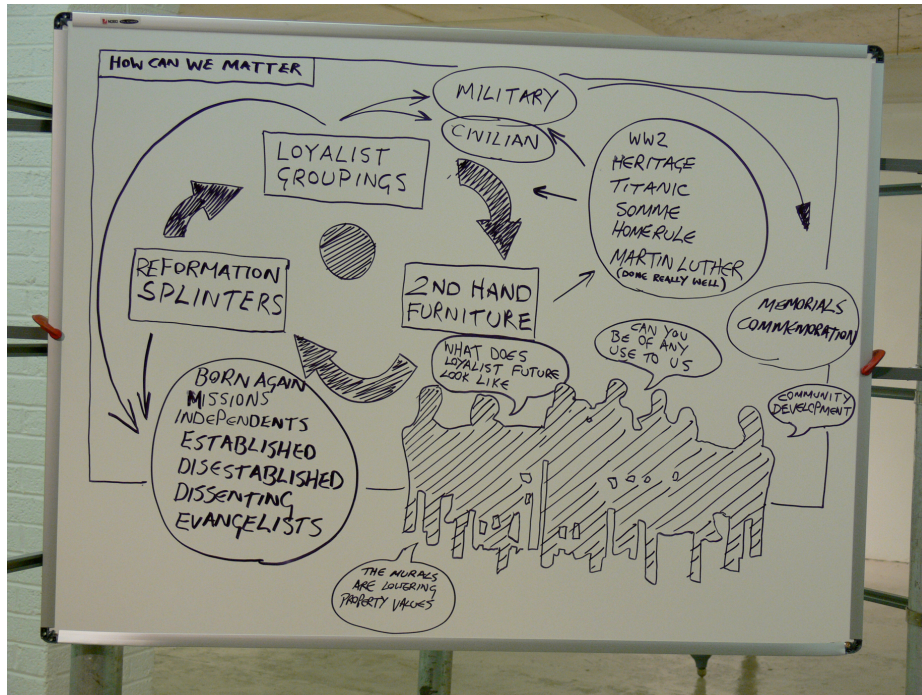


Figure 12: Philip Napier and Mike Hogg 'The Soft Estate: Planner' 2006 (Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast) Copyright the artist

It 'maps' a conversation the artists facilitated with a group of LVF<sup>17</sup> men who had approached their local government for some financial help to repaint a mural in their neighbourhood. The artists were asked by the council to facilitate a discussion around what a new mural might depict. For Napier and Hogg this exercise proved 'productive', but that productivity was not a verbal consensus as to what the mural should look like, nor an image

<sup>17</sup> Loyalist Volunteer Force is a loyalist paramilitary group that broke away from the Ulster Volunteer Force; it has been banned as a terrorist organisation.



of what the group decided the mural should depict, but a map of the conversation itself, a 'raw' aesthetic outcome, a translation that does not worry about the impossibilities, non-sequent non-equivalences of that conversation in the way that a consensus-building exercise might. The question of how to depict a loyalist future that does not remain simply locked into repetition of past images was not solved in that exercise. But perhaps the meeting of language-users does not, and need not, result in consensus; perhaps the gathering, the mulling, produces things other than agreement. Like an artwork, for example. It is precisely the idea that one could ever *measure*, *translate* or *summarise* the impact of encounters – including the aesthetic - which is the provocation here. It is the sense that these peculiar measures and translations are nevertheless continually going on, attempting to assess the past, to balance it against a present and a future form, that makes this work a critical constellation, a problematising of political narrativisations that mimic the assumptions of engineering and commercial strategies as if the task were merely to seek and collect data to be collated in order to design and ultimately to produce the future.

#### IV. Common: The Work of Anthony Haughey

We have been exploring how, if the future cannot be simply produced anew, it is in part because it has to be built upon a present in which the past is littered. In some of his early photographs, Anthony Haughey (b. 1963) explicitly focused on physical remnants of conflict, on little details that provide a trace of an earlier violent occurrence – a bullet hole through glass, debris in the landscape, scars on human skin- the visible remnants that can only suggest what constitutes the deeper sense of a 'wounded'<sup>18</sup> present from which any transition must begin. Originally Haughey made these images near his home on the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, but this focus continued in work arising from his trips to Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In his Disputed Territories (2006), images from these different locations are collected such that the viewer has to seek confirmation as to where the image was photographed. In each of these different parts of Europe, Haughey suggests a common problem: that Peace can never simply be done with the past. But the past does not show itself with any clarity, and the remnants, the fragments, are - as both Benjamin and Freud knew so well - not there to be collected and pieced back together; they are strewn over the present only metaphorically speaking. It is no straightforward task to (re)collect and consider them. Rather, the task of their gathering

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<sup>18</sup> On wounded places, see Karen Till 2005

is performed with the 'jerky gait' of the ragpicker who 'every few moments, ... must stop to gather refuse, which he throws in his wicker basket'(AP 364). And even when all are gathered, their meaning and their impact is not thereby understood for their collective meaning, like that of dream-images, is always a highly speculative endeavour, which is not to say that it is fanciful. In transitional societies, I have been arguing, when there is a concerted effort to address the future, there is also necessarily a convoluted attempt at a performative overcoming of the past, a past that is continually called up in order that it be shown to be behind 'us' (Bell, 2004). It is not just that the fragments of the past reappear at every turn, therefore, but the future as common and shared seems to rely upon the recollected past as its very condition.

Haughey's interest in the situation in Ireland led him to explore situations of transition in other countries. His installation piece 'Resolution' is, in part, the recreation of an actually existing space, the International Centre for Missing Persons (ICMP) in Tuzla, Bosnia, set up to identify the horrifying remnants, the thousands of bodies discovered, mostly, in mass graves. There is a mundane office space, with desk and chair, shelves, files and a monitor, where a video shows a technician's hands as he searches bags of belongings and a broom that repeatedly sweeps away the dust that accumulates on the linoleum floor (Figure 13), as if to suggest that the desire to sweep away the past is always in tension with the search for a justice for past wrongs.



*Figure 13: Anthony Haughey 'Resolution' 2004 (installation view, Wolverhampton Gallery) Copyright the artist*

At the ICMP, and through the work of Human Rights Watch, Haughey heard the testimonies of those who had survived, sometimes by making a decision 'in a split second' that saved their lives,<sup>19</sup> and has a soundtrack accompany the installation playing the powerful testimonies of those who were caught up in violence just as traumatic memories will accompany the concerted efforts to forge a new and a common future.

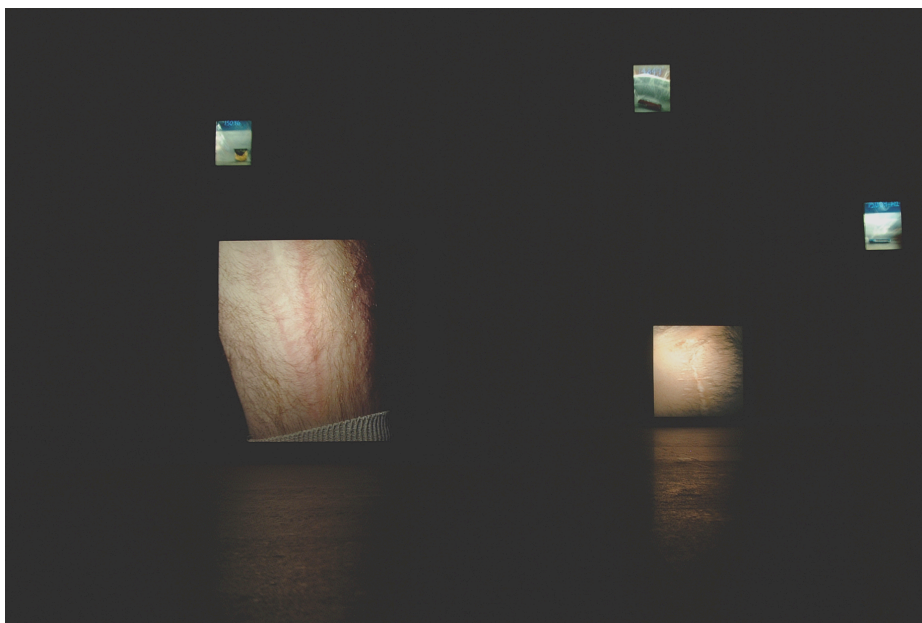
As the notes accompanying its installation at Wolverhampton Gallery explain, the title refers to resolution 819 passed by the UN Security Council on 16 April 1993. This declared Srebrenica as a safe area, an enclave safe from attack. Despite this, the enclave, a group consisting of a small number of UN peacekeepers and local residents, was attacked by Serb forces and was invaded on 11 July 1995. The next day the women and children were taken to Muslim territories, and the men were executed. Between 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July

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<sup>19</sup> Haughey collected testimonies via Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) and from people he met on his research visits to Bosnia and Kosovo. Some of these were re-recorded by Haughey's acquaintances, who had been evacuated from Sarajevo to Ireland - people whose movement in itself indicates a way of thinking connections, linking and entangling issues.

1995 an estimated 8000 men were killed. Haughey reminds us of the folly of our faith in the words of such resolutions and international organisations in the face of genocide's 'radical evil'. On the other hand, the title simultaneously refers to the work of resolution, the necessity of repeating the search to find another solution to the many horrific 'solutions' that the region has enacted historically, as well as the promises – the resolve – that accompanies that arduous task.

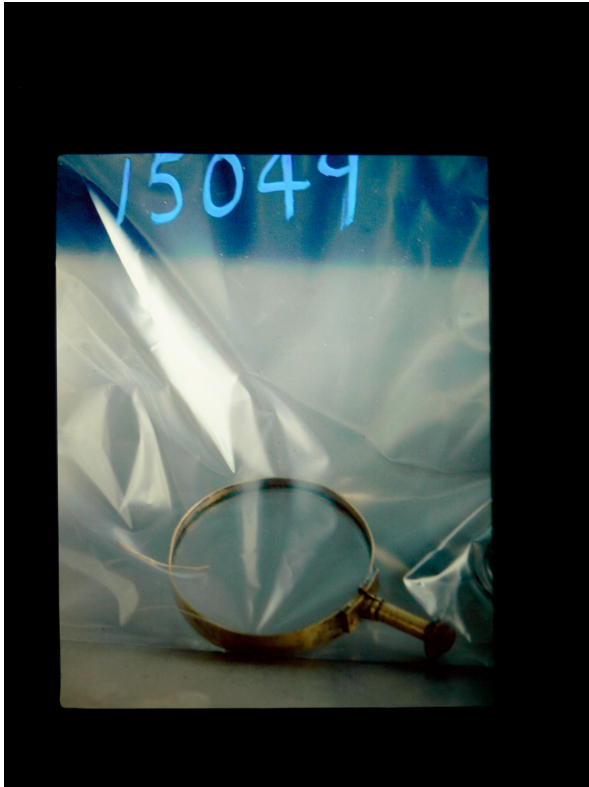
How is it possible to create a common people out of this? On the other side of the gallery, light boxes illuminate what seem from a distance to be jewels or trinkets (Figure 14). On closer inspection the light boxes are photographs of replicas of items found in the pockets of dead bodies – personal items such as watches, scraps of paper, keys – all enclosed in small plastic bags and numbered for reference as part of the identification process (Figure 15 & 16). They are beautiful images, powerfully suggesting the lives of ordinary people in the midst of their everyday comings and goings, cut short.



*Figure 14: Anthony Haughey 'Resolution' 2004 (installation view, lightboxes, Wolverhampton Gallery) Copyright the artist*



Figure 15: Anthony Haughey 'Resolution' 2004 (installation view, detail of lightbox 1, Wolverhampton Gallery) Copyright the artist



*Figure 16: Anthony Haughey 'Resolution' 2004 (installation view, detail of lightbox 2, Wolverhampton Gallery) Copyright the artist*

Of course, the difficulties of forging a sense of being-in-common, and of representing that 'common' is the problem of political governance par excellence, one shared by different routes taken away from the French Revolution's example. Seen in this light, the differences between East and West – between the Cold War enemies, in other words – begin to appear as those between relatives of a common ancestor (Buck-Morss, 2000:14). As Susan Buck-Morss has explored, both 'shared the paradox inherent in the juxtaposition of those two concepts that, while they are the signature of politics in the modern era, do not rest comfortably next to each other: "democracy", rule by the people, and "sovereignty", supreme power of the governing regime' (2000:14).

Peace Agreements repose the problem acutely in our current era: how to establish an authoritative institutionalised governance over a people who still understand themselves as divided? And this question masks the more fundamental one: how to govern

legitimately in an era when legitimacy has to have its modern political meaning, ie. in accordance with the people's 'general will'.

In more recent work, the exhibition 'Migrations' (Belfast Exposed, summer 2006), Haughey only appears, therefore, to turn to a different subject. In fact it continues a rumination on the paradoxes of what democracy means, and allows. This work focuses on the stories of asylum-seekers, people who are living in a reception centre in Mosney, Co. Meath, Ireland. In this project Haughey is working with the people who are living in what was formerly the Butlins holiday camp,<sup>20</sup> and who live there on meagre allowances sometimes for lengthy periods of time, while legal processes decide their fates. In Haughey's artwork these people who live on the periphery of citizenship are transferred into the space of appearance usually understood as belonging to the citizenry. Interestingly he associates this giving of public space through the artwork with a correlative question of speed, the need to slow down. In inflammatory reports on immigration, Haughey argues, there is frequently the use of scare tactics that cite aggregated numbers, tabloid rhetorics that form an 'us' against a 'them'; but in this work consisting of individual portraits and snippets of individual narratives, Haughey focuses on individuals' images and voices,<sup>21</sup> to assert that those who are not counted should be, that those who have no voice should be given one. With that listening, a critical reflection upon the boundaries of democratic concern begins.

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<sup>20</sup> The Butlins camp was opened in 1948, and was the popular economical holiday destination for several generations of Irish children before it closed in 1980. It became a reception centre in 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author, 2006.



*Figure 17: Anthony Haughey 'From the series, Between' 2006 lambda print 150 x 125 cm Copyright the artist*

Speaking about the image of a woman in red clothes (Figure 17), Haughey explains that as well as being about the relationship between her portrait and her text that tells an abbreviated version of how she came to be in Mosney, it is also about the architecture of this place. Above her head hangs a chandelier, a sign of the former times when this space was the entrance to the Butlins ballroom, its halo effect now dramatising the quality of distance and nearness that the past has in the present. Perhaps this is what Benjamin meant when he wrote in the Arcades Project that historical materialism 'explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins – that is, with the present.' [N9a, 6] p474. The careful composition and juxtaposition of colours and elements create a beautiful image riven with a subtle tension between the aesthetic offering that holds together its heterogeneous elements – the plush red carpet, the red clothes, the chandelier, the open stance of the woman – and the request that its 'secret' be explored. The 'secret' that this woman lives in a space once reserved for the fun of vacations, now filled with the lives of those who have been instead forced to leave home, asserts itself through the gap between her image and her text. If 'globalisation' has taken Irish vacationers away from Mosney,



replacing the dreamworld of Butlins holiday camps with cheap airfares to newly achievable holiday destinations abroad, the darker side of these times is the traffic of asylum seekers being temporarily housed in the delapidated buildings abandoned by those resident here.

In the exhibition the large-scale portrait photographs were accompanied, moreover, by a series of postcards addressed to the Minister of Justice in Ireland, sent via the gallery in Belfast, a journey involving the traversing of the border into Northern Ireland, which, due to their status is unavailable to many of the cards' senders. In a different way to the photographs, the postcards juxtapose the past with its present usage. The art work of John Hines, whose image of the boating lake at Mosney – which would have been well known to Irish people in its heyday – is on one side of the card; on the other, current residents have written their messages to the Irish Minister of Justice, Michael McDowell. The residents sent the postcards to the gallery, where they were displayed as they arrived (Figure 18) before being forwarded to the Minister. The residents of Mosney - from the Sudan, Congo, Iraq, Angola, Nigeria – send their succinct messages, requesting that their citizenship be granted such that their lives can resume beyond the limbo with which they currently live. Thus Haughey attempts to facilitate direct communication to the state; but the ‘politics’ of this work is in the display of an assertion that the entanglement of histories produces the opportunity to consider the uneven, which is to say unequal, present.

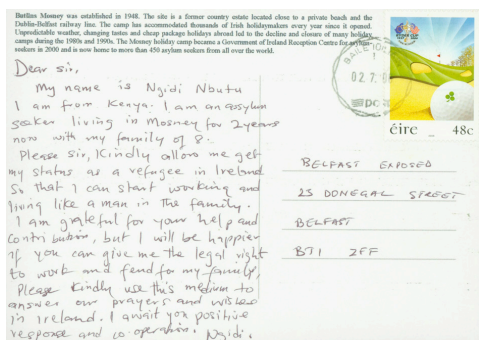


Figure 18 Anthony Haughey 2006 (Postcard from current Mosney resident, ‘Migrations’ exhibition, Belfast Exposed Gallery, Belfast) Copyright the artist

The past and present usages of Mosney are displayed on either side of the postcards, indicating as Haughey puts it the ‘rupturing’ that migrant narratives can give to a national historical narrative. Overall the exhibition is a critical constellation that presents the traces - the physical trace of handwritten script, as well as the image trace of the photographs – of those obliged to exist in the shadows of democracy’s delimitations; it is a local story that

focuses on those from elsewhere in order to suggest the performative boundaries of the nation-state. The border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is only *one* of the borders that has to be negotiated, its status only one around which the communities present on the island of Ireland have struggled. Other borders within Ireland are highlighted here, and other possible narratives; there are borders that are within the nation-state of the Republic of Ireland and that mark out those who are resident but not citizens. The exclusionary aspects of the term citizen from the perspective of those resident in Mosney and the vulnerability of the space between citizen and non-citizen means that the North's pursuit of Peace and full devolution is cast as only one of the questions for the political communal future of Ireland, and the history of the 'Troubles' in Ireland only one of its relevant histories. Such critical reflection questions the extent to which transitional justice measures fail to escape the myopia of the focus on internal histories and conflicts, eclipsing the complexities of a present in which 'troubles' also rage elsewhere, and furthermore, beyond this, suggests that 'the common' is perhaps unachievable, insofar as the exposure of the defining violence of the nation-state's ability to define who counts as 'the people' and who does not simultaneously exposes the paradox of democratic rule.

#### V. Concluding Remarks

While Walter Benjamin spoke of the past being 'telescoped' through the present, placing the present 'in a critical condition' (Arcades, N), he understood that the resulting critical constellation would also necessarily include the future (Caygill, 1998:98). The critical task in Northern Ireland, the work of critique, that is, cannot be premised on an understanding of the present as the culmination - or indeed, as a repetition - of the past; the processes of Peace, if Peace has any meaning, have to be aligned to the present as a 'now-time' that the past is unable to fully explain. In approaching the dialectical image, therefore, Benjamin made clear that the present has to guide the assembly of historical fragments in order to properly orientate the work of critique. Without that 'pull' - Benjamin speaks of it as a 'magnetic pole' - reconstructions of the past are arbitrary and without critical significance for the present.

Peace processes are by definition fraught affairs, in which arguments about how to understand the past and its relationship to the present are central; even after formal all-party agreements, as in Northern Ireland, the extent to which the past is truly past continues to be hotly debated, as all participants are aware that the peace process is on-going, performative,

and in need of continued commitment. But to critique the present too often falls into a desire to resurrect a political imaginary from the past, to pursue it anew in the present. Against such a desire, against any sense of returning to the past or representing the past, and instead in the spirit of Benjamin's reflections on critical constellations, this article has explored contemporary artworks which can be thought to work to problematise the notion of return as well as any notion of historical progress as it is often articulated. Problematising the acceptance of neo-liberal conceptions of normality and interrupting notions of progress and normality that are presented as historical inevitabilities, Benjamin's reflections on images that might act as anti-essences, as critical constellations, have provided a guide here; for him images could lead to a irruptive questioning of the neutralisation of events through progress, resemblance and recognition. In Northern Ireland, insofar as political progress is understood to take only one form, Peace risks becoming synonymous with a no-time of consumer capitalism, where democracy's paradoxes are unquestioned. By contrast, these artworks open up a space in which to question the enormity of the tasks of Peace – of delivering Justice, of measuring values, of being-in-common – such that they suggest the present is not so much haunted by the past as traversed by the complexities that accompany these tasks of seeking to render governable that which is necessarily immeasurable, paradoxical, absent. And if, as Susanne Draper has argued in relation to transition in Chile and Uruguay, 'incommensurability haunts the very core of the reign of measure'(2009:48), the actuality of the present has to be understood to contain different temporalities that have no common measure.

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Figure 18: Anthony Haughey 2006 (Postcard from current Mosney resident, 'Migrations' exhibition, Belfast Exposed Gallery, Belfast) Copyright the artist

## Abstract

Contemporary artworks in Northern Ireland are explored here as critical constellations, in Walter Benjamin's sense, that engage the cultural processes of transition through their problematisation of it. It is argued that the artworks become sites in which the assumptions of transition are opened up for critical reflection, requesting attention to the foreclosing of the meanings of memory, of past-and-future, of community. A mode of critical questioning of the present renders the present problematic not in terms of exclusions nor with reference to a past that cannot or will not be erased, but in terms of the present's inability to be conceived through a linear conception of time. That is, the past and its relation to both the present and to the future are set in oscillation as artworks explore the complex temporalities of a present self-consciously attempting to narrate itself away from the past. The artworks, 'without the bigotry of conviction' as Seamus Deane put it, suggest that the task of dealing with the past is flawed wherever the past is conceived as a history that can be rendered present to be judged by subjects who are thereby placed beyond it. That is the illusion of a present 'no-time' that dovetails with the desires of commercial enterprise and neo-liberal conceptions of freedom. If this suggests an unceasing restlessness, the consolation is that this questioning does take a form, not as judgement or political decision but as artworks which by definition, remain open to reinterpretation and new understandings. These issues are discussed with reference to the work of four artists in Northern Ireland: the paintings of Rita Duffy, the photography and installation work of Anthony Haughey, and the sculptural works of Philip Napier and Mike Hogg.

Key words: transition, Northern Ireland, art, violence, Walter Benjamin, Rita Duffy, Philip Napier, Mike Hogg, Anthony Haughey, critical constellations