

IMAGING AND THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Visual Arts Panel: A Summary of Voices

To launch the inaugural Visual Arts Panel at the 8th EFACIS conference an artist, a photographer, an academic, and a cultural director were invited to discuss their own experiences about art, imaging, and imagination as it resides within a contemporary and post-conflict Northern Ireland. As a Canadian artist, leading this panel, I had my own direct experiences in Northern Ireland, having come to the country to lecture via an academic position at Queen's University Belfast. I was invited in the autumn 2006 to lead the new MA in Photography course as part of the Visual Studies Programme offered through the Film Studies Department at Queen's University Belfast. I held that post until April 2009. Through my appointment at Queen's I realised early on that the range of voices and views about Northern Ireland are often complex and can easily be misunderstood beyond the boundaries of the country. As such I proposed in late 2010 to offer a Visual Arts panel focusing on the Northern Irish arts scene as a platform from which speakers could speak directly with their audience about their own cultural experiences and in relation to their own studies and projects that they have led.

The panel included Pauline Hadaway, Director of Belfast Exposed, who spoke about the history of Northern Ireland's only contemporary photography gallery which commissions new work, maintains an image archive, and publishes its own theoretical and photo-illustrated titles.¹ The artist Rita Duffy, considered one of Northern Ireland's foremost practitioners, has been working on projects that embrace and comment on the political, domestic, figurative, and narrative traditions both within the country and elsewhere. Rita spoke openly about the development of her own practice and her experiences as an artist born and raised in Northern Ireland.² Dr Shane Alcobia Murphy, Senior Lecturer at the School of English Language and Literature, University of Aberdeen, examined how his research offers a broader definition to the role of film and duration in Northern Irish art-film-making. Lastly, I also spoke about my own direct experiences of having resided, worked, and later returned to Northern Ireland as an artist in order to conclude a large-scale photographic project touching

1 Pauline Hadaway has published numerous articles on the development of the gallery and the evolution of photography in the context of Belfast's particular historical experience, exploring often tensions between political engagement, community and autonomy; see also Long.

2 For a complete biographical and illustrated catalogue of Rita Duffy's own practice, see "Rita Duffy."

on the country's recent socio-political histories. This project was drawn from my experiences leading the Photography Programme at Queen's University Belfast; there, I gained an opportunity, not only to deliver a new arts programme, but equally to learn more about the visual vocabularies and complex relationships that have defined the country through the Troubles to the present.

Overall, the panel concluded that there was a gap in such visual arts discussions and that further debate, writing, and inclusion of voices from Northern Ireland would assist in the development of synergistic study areas.

A Canadian Artist's Response to Northern Ireland

In order to contextualise how my project began in Northern Ireland, I must first explain that in relation to my own artistic practice I started creating contemporary conceptual art whilst in Vancouver in the 1990s and that I continue to produce large opuses of work about the built environment. Whilst at Queen's University I also worked as a guest MA & PhD Convener at the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning over a two-year period.³ Through this post, I brought to the University a cross-cultural dynamic as a Canadian citizen, with no past experience or personal relationship tied to the political conditions that have shaped Northern Ireland over the last forty years. While I am conscious of what has arisen in Northern Ireland, I was unable to build on this platform directly, as it is not an immediate part of my cultural or social fabric.

Rather than adopting a misguided stance about the significance of the Troubles (1960-1998) and the cultural arts developed during this time, I have sought advice and guidance from senior artists and institutional representatives. In most cases these are the same people who have been actively defining and promoting Northern Ireland's artists and cultural venues over the last 30 years. It should be noted that there have been numerous organisations which, through the efforts of individuals, collectives, and boards, have worked tirelessly during the Troubles to present a platform for the arts to be seen and experienced by the public and visitors to Northern Ireland. These include: Belfast Exposed Gallery for the promotion of photography; Ormeau Baths Gallery, and Millennium Arts Court Centre in Portadown for the promotion of contemporary fine art display, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast Print Workshop and Gallery, Black Box, Catalyst Arts Gallery, Crescent Arts Centre, Engine Room, Queen Street Studios, and other venues.

3 For the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) Sinead Morrissey, School of English, and I delivered *Picture Text*, an MA programme that addressed semiotics and visuality (see "Picturetext"). Of note, when CETL was launched, it offered the first-ever comprehensive consolidation of the University's creative programmes, which assisted in Queen's University later establishing the School of Creative Arts in 2011.

The Northern Ireland contemporary art scene was also the result of graduate students during the early 1980s working together to form the Artist Collective of Northern Ireland. Among the activities of the group was to publish and distribute the art magazine CIRCA, to create Queen Street Artist Studios, and to deliver alternative partnerships for art production across Belfast City. All of these efforts collectively assisted in creating a 'scene' for the visual arts. Indeed the work, vision, and commitment of this community nearly 30 years ago led to a dynamic art scene which is present in Northern Ireland today and recognised across Ireland and elsewhere.⁴

The context of how art is delivered and developed within a country can assist greatly in recognising how other artists respond to their own visual heritage. In particular, one artist – Victor Sloan – might be considered the 'grandfather' of contemporary arts in Northern Ireland. Victor has been generous with his time in dialogue and in offering advice as I developed my own work. He has held the roles of educator, honorary curator, and cultural promoter often concurrently since his appearance in the 1960s. In terms of his practice, Victor may be initially identified in terms of his photographic-painting and assemblages that depict and isolate figures shown at Orange Order marches and meetings: *The Walk, the Platform and the Field* (1985), *Drumming* (1986), *The Birches* (1988), and *Walls* (1989). In these works there is a heavy surface treatment so that the events form a new photo image in which the whole construction and the artist's marks across the surface become a focus for the viewer. Unlike a documentary image where the viewer is left to examine an account, in Sloan's work the artist enacts or inserts other events. For the viewer, and particularly for native residents, the images "bring to the very surface of the image the tensions underlying the apparent normality of life in Northern Ireland" ("Victor Sloan"). To some extent, one could argue that the real, abstracted and forlorn images at the base of Sloan's photographic images of Northern Ireland extend an uncertain narrative. Since Sloan's works are often a response to socio-political and religious concerns, his proposed narratives can only fulfill themes based on the experiences with which viewers come equipped.

As already noted, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and Northern Ireland Act allowed for the establishment of a devolved legislature for Northern Ireland. By creating a power-sharing Assembly, an independent parliament for Northern Ireland to manage itself with representation from all parties, the activities associated with the height of the Troubles came to an end. In observing how the peace process has been remembered, I have noted that most Northern Irish residents past their 30s speak about it in an animated way, whereas for younger residents in their mid-20s the significance of this process experienced during their younger years has pushed these experiences

4 Over the last decade, Peter Richards, curator of Golden Thread, has invited guest curators to stage exhibitions which reflect on the recent production of art from the Troubles to the present. The exhibition and essay series, entitled *Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art*, is an invaluable source and should be referenced to provide further context in regard to the development of contemporary art within the country.

into a more distant past. In a post-conflict recovery period, these younger artists have let the voice and the tension of the Troubles become an arena of expression best left to their parents' generation. In a similar manner I have followed this path of other younger Northern Irish artists, since my own experiences are not directly tied to the Troubles. This said, I am interested in turning the lens onto cultural events that have both defined and restricted dialogue about Northern Ireland – these do not represent conflict openly but allude to them through other visual systems.

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In my work I use visual research as a driver to define how I will systematically treat or respond to a subject.⁵ When I moved to Northern Ireland, I was struck by how early Modernist buildings, particularly those prior to the Troubles, aspired to embrace new architectural ideas. The Modernist structures I saw both in Belfast and throughout the country were monumental, lofty, and transparent – reaching for the Heavens while also becoming features forming significant sight lines on the horizon.

I also noted that while *The Festival of Britain* is understood in terms of its legacy in the creation of the Arts Hub at London's Southbank, virtually nothing is known about its counterpart staging in Belfast. *The Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland* (1951) was designed, according to Craft Northern Ireland historian and Lecturer in Design History, Joseph McBrinn, "with the hopes that the exhibition would demonstrate the North's contribution to Britain's economy and thus help reaffirm the province's place within collective national identity. The exhibition further suggested that the North's vernacular material culture was the root of its modern industrial achievement" (McBrinn). Modernist architectural structures were built and encouraged in Belfast in order to illustrate the country's ability to adopt highly industrial processes while also producing architectural legacies. The impact of Northern Ireland's own vernacular Modernist architecture and its utopian ideals of creating architecture without division or class was overshadowed though by the commencement of the Troubles.

In particular it is this Modernist incubator time within Northern Ireland from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s that holds my fascination. The global and pan-modernist concept of building together for the future, liberating the past, and serving the present needs of the citizen came to fruition in Northern Ireland. As the country grew, the need for extended social amenities increased. Architects embraced the idea that across faiths there should be egalitarian treatment in the use of materials and construction. In this way church building faithfully subscribed to Modernist ideals. Newly commissioned faith buildings took on board the Modernist ethos of new methods of production (such as steel, glass, and concrete assembly) in order to serve humanity with the liberation of the latest technological progression. Overall what remains most

5 For visual documentation, please see Hunter and Magarrey as well as "Sylvia Grace Borda: Artist Website."

unusual in regard to Northern Irish Modernist design is that with faith buildings, overt signifiers were specifically reduced so that the building did not impose associated faith values across the landscape. This masking of buildings through a Modernist idea of creating openness or free social movement creates a paradigm in which it is only by knowing in advance what area of a city or town you are entering that you can guess the faith orientation associated with the neighbourhood. In this way, the Modernist Northern Irish faith buildings ultimately defy their own religious roots or purpose.

For my work *CHURCHES IN-NI* (Churches in Northern Ireland) I have selected to document Northern Ireland's Modernist churches. The project functions in an ironic manner. It subtly plays with the realisation that for most outside of the UK the easiest way to define the country is through the Troubles and its religious divide. In this manner the project offers the viewer the visual symbol of this divide – “the church”; however, since the buildings are Modernist and were originally designed to be undecipherable in terms of faith association, the viewer is left confounded.

The churches form a contemporary portrait of Northern Ireland and its unchronicled Modernist past. Most residents will be able to identify their own local churches within a 15-mile radius, but beyond this range they are left to second-guess the faith associated with the documents. For non-Northern Irish audiences the series fuels an obvious association and desire to see represented the divide, yet the words and histories used to describe the country through on-going media reports about sectarian divisions are defied in the series.

As a conceptual artwork, the series borrows and extends ideas associated with the creation of a typology. In the creation of a photographic typology, documents are created of buildings with similar physical characteristics. Through the placement of the images together the individual characteristics of the building start to illustrate similar forms or patterns. The Düsseldorf Academy, through the husband-and-wife team of Hilla and Bernd Becher, promoted the systematic photography of functionalist architecture organized in picture grids. My work *CHURCHES IN-NI* is an ode to this style of conceptual photography. Furthermore, my consolidation of images of faith buildings throughout the entire country creates both a conceptual and historical archive of pre-Troubles Northern Ireland and traces a development of Modernist buildings erected right up until the Good Friday Agreement.

Ultimately, in this work I am working with cultural identity as the subject. My subjects are situated and only available within the country. For an external audience, unfamiliar with Northern Ireland's landscape or architectural heritage, the photographs have been composed, printed, arranged, and left unnamed in order to become iconic through this editing process. More importantly, the images playfully invite viewers to consider what is 'iconic' or 'stereotypical' in the definition and visualisation of national identity and image-making. While I am interested in assigning new recognition to faith spaces that define for many the everyday living circumstances within Northern Ire-

land, my work sets up a paradigm for the viewer to recognize the subject of the church, while equally seeing it as an independent and sometimes indefinable cultural motif. This process of editing and arrangement is not an easy task, given that most of the imagery that so far has defined Northern Ireland is associated directly with reportage and/or the representation of the Troubles.

The creative capacity to imagine Northern Ireland through a quasi-scientific and systematic approach of photographing 'every Modernist Church' challenges viewers' own perceptions of how to understand the concept of home.⁶ Hence, rather than exhibiting large scale photographs of the Modernist Churches, which might privilege one faith over another, I elected to reproduce the Church series as a set of ceramic plates. Critically, the ability to frame the work in a domestic environment, I hoped, would enable viewers to be more open to relate to the work and consider the series' narrative.⁷ Subsequently, the commemorative plates of the Churches are immediately banal, tactile, and fragile. Of note, ceramic plates themselves have a unique position within Northern Irish histories. The traditional souvenir plate was popular as a token of remembrance and was often associated with travel and the depiction of picturesque locales. A number of ceramic dishes can be found associated with souvenir tokens of visits to Northern Ireland's numerous seaside towns. Up until the Troubles, Northern Ireland supported a domestic ceramic industry, producing many of its own home-wares. In this way, I created my own 21st-century grand tour souvenirs of Modernist faith destinations.

In naming the plate series "Coming to the Table," I further explored the notions of a dinner table as a place of gathering and exchange of conversation. By illustrating the range of Modernist Churches found in Northern Ireland through the plates, I also alluded to the country's shared tabling of power in order to overcome the Troubles and to establish its own devolved legislative institution. The photographic dinnerware thus becomes symbolically a powerful reference representing Northern Ireland's faith buildings, whilst also alluding to wider histories beyond those of the sectarian divide. While the commemorative plate as souvenir offers a sense of orderliness and decorum as laid out on the table, it can also underline a sense of fragility that extends to Northern Ireland politics and cultural identity. Ultimately, "Coming to the Table" acts as a conceptual and reflective work alluding to the broader conditions that are defining Northern Ireland's contemporary landscape, and at a literal level it mimics the viewer's own entrance and approach to the table that completes the title's self-proclaimed invitation.

6 The notions of how to respond to this work through the urban built environment are discussed by Paige Magarrey ("Church Lady").

7 According to Belfast Exposed Gallery, "CHURCHES", exhibited from 20 January to 2 March 2012, proved to be one of the most popular displays ever launched by the organisation, gaining a wide audience following from younger artists to seniors and non-arts audiences.

Lastly, "CHURCHES IN-NI" is complemented by a film loop depicting 100 individual Modernist Churches for viewers to observe. This cumulative time-based work lasting just under four minutes in duration indirectly provokes viewers to locate the Churches within the country borders. There is a subtle question at stake about the viewer's ability to identify these fairly anonymous churches or even the whereabouts of these faith-buildings within their own country, and the ensuing notions of identity and difference that may result. Arising as an outcome of this series, it is my hope that a debate about contemporary photography and imaging art production can begin to emerge.⁸ This exhibition piece is not just about a geographical place or time period in Northern Ireland; it is first of all about creating a work that resonates and reflects multiple points of origin and study. Furthermore, the work has been designed with an opportunity for the public to bring on board their own sense of place, a place they may or not have experienced first-hand, whilst also having an opportunity to reflect on it and question it.

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8 Dorothy Hunter in *Photomonitor* aptly argues how a Canadian can successfully comment on the social-political landscape of Northern Ireland through conceptual photography.

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