

Performing Political Acts: Performance Art in Northern Ireland: Ritual, Catharsis, and Transformation

By André Stitt

*I often think about the war in Northern Ireland that made me what I am: holding a gun in my hand when I was 15, seeing a burnt and severed leg in a street in Belfast after a bomb, the smell of excrement mixed with a sweet aroma not unlike lilies, being shot at for going out with a Catholic, random violence and the sound of Jean Jeanie. I also think about making a performance on a frosty morning in 1979 in a derelict church I knew as a child. Naked, my breath caught in the winter light. And, I often think about the sense of freedom, wonder, and dignity making art has afforded me.*¹

*Realising the 'bottom line' is never ideological, but human; that art is not in, of, or onto itself. It's for people.*²

On yer doorstep

For over forty years artists have been creating performances, art actions, interventions, and other time-based art in Northern Ireland during a period of traumatic civil conflict. Their work reveals contextual methodologies, issues, and concerns specific to performance art that was happening in a conflict zone on their own doorstep.

In this text, I will explore how and why radical art was made in an environment of political conflict taking place in a developed western society, such as Northern Ireland, and if this art, produced through performance, contributes to personal and/or societal conflict transformation.

I will present examples of my own formative engagement with performance art in Belfast during the 1970's along with examples of simultaneous engagements by other artists in Northern Ireland from this period through to the present. It is not in the scope of this investigation to produce an in-depth 'time-line' of performance art in Northern Ireland during this period. For the purposes of the current text I will focus on examples of artists whose work utilised elements of ritual and catharsis and who, both out of necessity and as a result of 'the Troubles', created an 'experimental exercise of freedom'³ outside of official institutional art environments.

I will also consider how the transformative possibilities of their work might bear testimony to the specific context of Northern Ireland. As long-term supporter and advocate of experimental and interventionist art Slavka Sverakova suggests, "The North...did not release performance from the severe grip of political and moral issues. It felt that the artists trusted performance to do the most difficult and sophisticated jobs in raising awareness to the public." ⁴

Performing protest

In the early 1970's artistic response to the viscosity of the developing civil conflict in Northern Ireland had tried to find a suitable language for political and social engagement. Protest has a significant and varied history in Northern Ireland. This was reflected by artists' initial responses to the unfolding conflict, euphemistically identified by the media, socially and politically, as 'the Troubles'.

A number of early responses, such as a series of bronze sculptures by F.E. McWilliam *Women of Belfast* in 1972, tended towards direct protest and a form of illustrative comment made through conventional media such as sculpture or painting, which engaged with the traumatised body at a conventional remove. However, a generation of emerging artists felt an inability to adequately confront daily violence through these traditional means of portrayal and exposition. Robert Ballagh's 1972 *Bloody Sunday Floor Drawings* was an early art-as-performance interface that used the artist's forensic outline to body-map a response to a mass shooting in order to

register a resounding act of military transgression: Bloody Sunday, Derry/Londonderry, 30th January 1972. As with McWilliam, Ballagh's work was literal, illustrative and only partially successful. The work being positioned at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin disconnected it not only from its source and location, but also from the aspirations of direct social and political engagement implicit in the artistic actions of recognised performance art activity. The artist did not engage in a 'live' physical interaction witnessed in real-time by a public where-by the artist's body was observed carrying out the action in order to confront or physically challenge the audience in order to seek a reaction. It is, however, in early artistic engagements such as Ballagh's that we see a willingness to emphasise the body relative to a current public event and its subsequent trauma.

Although Ballagh's piece used the body as a template and as a signifier of traumatic public events, the act of drawing around the body was not promoted to the level of public spectacle and confrontation that may be observed or attributed to much of performance art. A public audience was not invited to see the 'live' manifestation of the act itself. The exhibited work constituted a 'trace' or document of the artist's action and was not therefore recognised as a performance artwork at the time.

Both McWilliam's and Ballagh's responses or 'protests' also clearly placed their discourse within a recognised art institutional context: the gallery. However, a significant protest/re-enactment event took place in the summer of 1972 by a group of students led by Eamon Melaugh on the streets of the Bogside in Derry/Londonderry. The students, wearing paper labels designating their roles, re-enacted procedural searches, arrests, and interrogations concerned with issues of the British state 'internment' of citizens without trial in Northern Ireland. The action presented a powerful visual performance of the procedures used and reaffirmed the reality and quotidian experience in the unfolding warzone. Melaugh, an activist in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement, has described the action as 'role playing'.⁵ Here we have a distinction between straight-forward street protest as

street theatre and what would become an increasingly integrated codification of visual material as an identity for performance art made in Northern Ireland through the 1970's and beyond.

Initiation

There is no doubt that in terms of a direct action in an 'arts' context Ballagh's work was a significant departure from conventional art making; however, performance art as such did not become a recognised feature of the visual arts in Northern Ireland until at least 1974-75. This recognition was due in part to several visits by the German multi-artist Joseph Beuys and his support of an artist-run initiative in central Belfast, the A.R.E.⁶ The Art and Research Exchange, which was founded with a seed grant from Beuys and Nobel prize-winning writer Heinrich Böll in 1977 (with an official opening in 1978) as an art/social interspace. "...'[R]adicalised' by the simultaneous indoctrination and enlightenment from the teachings of the Fine Art course at the College of Art in Belfast, ARE seemed a natural and timely vehicle for driving forward a set of philosophical and theoretical propositions that had been distinctly lacking in the mainstream arts infrastructure."⁷

As noted above, a conflation of possibilities had emerged during this period with a significant shift in the dynamics of the pedagogical environment at the Ulster College of Art & Design in Belfast (now Belfast School of Art, University of Ulster). This was in part as a result of the recruitment to the lecturing staff of Adrian Hall in 1972 and Alastair MacLennan in 1975. The impact of these artist/teachers alerted, enabled, and encouraged young student/artists to the possibilities of making, thinking, and doing, outside and beyond the confinement of institutional environments and traditions. Implicit in their guidance was the intrinsic relation to real and lived events taking place in the (then) current climate of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Emphasis was placed on working outside the confines of the institution and 'predictable' art-associated venues. For a student studying art in the early 1970's,

the internal and 'hermetic' environment of the college seemed at odds with the reality of the external conflict. While Hall, MacLennan, and other tutors such as David Ledsham and Tony Hill (a Beuys graduate) advocated an experimental inter-disciplinarity, there remained tensions with institutional priorities at the time. As Liam Kelly notes rather dryly in his history of the school "The Troubles were not only an important political event but also a hugely significant cultural event only too slowly recognised by the college." ⁸

As a result of institutional and political tensions, a creative environment developed whereby students and future artists pragmatically accepted and where transformed by a new DIY role as arts practitioners rooted in an emerging culture of autonomous, self-initiated, self-regulating, alternative spaces on their own doorstep. Isolated instances of performance art meetings and events occurred and were organised for public exposure. These were principally arranged through a committed team at A.R.E. that included Chris Coppock, Anne Carlisle, Belinda Loftus and Rainer Pagel, which allowed artists to book and organise their own performances. Eventually with the assistance of a burgeoning self-help artists committee, invitations to artists outside Ireland were effected in defiance of the then isolationist political climate. New ideas were transmitted via performances at the A.R.E. by the likes of Dale Franks from Australia, and Roland Miller from England, who also brought Zbigniew Warpechowski from Poland. A host of visiting artists then took part in an Arts Council sponsored event at their 'official' gallery in Belfast in the autumn of 1978, which included Stuart Brisley, Kevin Atherton, Marc Chaimowicz, Nigel Rolfe, Kieran Lyons, and locals Alastair MacLennan and Magaret Gillan. The art college in Belfast also maintained some credible engagement with performance art through a limited programme of visiting artists that included the English performance artist Sonia Knox. During the same period and taking advantage of visiting artists to Belfast, a graduate from the Ulster College of Art, Declan McGonagle, initiated a series of performance art works as part of his new Orchard Gallery programme in Derry/Londonderry.

Meanwhile, through 1979 into the early eighties, local artists such as Philip Roycroft, Brian Cunningham, Martin Wedge, Rainer Pagel, Willie Doherty, Angela McCabe, Damien Coyle, Viv Crane, James King and others continued with self-organised performances and site interventions. This second phase activity culminated in a major event at a large gymnasium in the Botanic Avenue area in the most 'neutral' part Belfast. In 1982, at the invitation of the independent Neighbourhood Open Workshops, Nick Stewart and Angela McCabe organised 24 performances for audiences over eight weekends by artists from the North and South of Ireland. Thereafter, and increasingly through the 1980's and 90's, performance art was established as integral to the identity of art made in Northern Ireland through autonomous artists initiatives, independent spaces, and collectives such as Catalyst Arts, Flaxart, Golden Thread Gallery, and B-Beyond; including contemporary work by artists and initiators such as Peter Richards, Brian Connolly, Brian Patterson, Amanda Dunsmore, Colm Clark, Sinead & Hugh O'Donnell, Christoff Gillan, Sinead Breathnach-Cashell, and Leo Devlin; to name but a few.

Arrival

The arrival in Belfast of the Scottish artist and teacher Alastair MacLennan in 1975 introduced external performance art influences to an emerging generation of young artists. MacLennan proceeded to create a series of public interventions in Belfast city centre that had a subtle though immediate impact. Crucial to these works was that they occurred in real time, in public space, and outside of institutional visual arts centres. By their very nature they implied direct relationships between contemporary 'lived' experience, present circumstance and quotidian social and political events. In making works of performance art in Northern Ireland, artists such as Alastair MacLennan has utilised elements of ritual activity based on materials and repetition to consider arts practice as a means for potential transformation, healing, and resolution of inner and outer conflict. As MacLennan has stated "Each person is art (and can make what art is). Real art resolves inner and outer conflict. It heals

wounds within and without the self. To HEAL is to make WHOLE.”⁹ Indeed for MacLennan art also “requires a spiritual, ethical basis, free from dogmas. Real art has little to do with refined sensibilities gaining pleasure. Its power is transformative.”¹⁰

In his life, ritual emerged from a combination of his own Scottish Calvinist background, a theology that he questioned and the communal discipline and meditation practice of Zen acquired at a monastery in British Columbia in the early 1970’s. The importance of ritual deployed in these early developments arose out of (personal) formative social and cultural experiences. These influences have been utilised, converted or subverted by artists such as MacLennan as a strategy for creating relationships between art and life; a blurring of binary distinctions that reflect interior/external, subjective/objective, and ultimately in Northern Ireland: sectarian division.

Aim seeking target

In many early performances of street actions ritual repetition played an important part as a means to evoke demonstrative reaction or transformative outcome. Daily throughout August 1977 MacLennan walked to and from work, dressed entirely in black with a plastic sheet over his head reaching to below his waist. Bamboo canes attached to the bottom of the sheet held it in place and also acted as an ‘auditory’ signal or warning of his approach. Around his neck hung a dart-board. He carried a black holdall. The journey necessitated negotiating the city centre security barriers where citizens were scrutinised, searched and sometimes singled out for interrogation by soldiers. The work was simply entitled *Target*.

(He) became aware of anxiety as a shared experience between the searchers, and himself that he could control. As time went on he realised that many of the searchers, especially the younger ones, were more anxious about the situation than he was. This created a type of tension and energy that he was

able to manipulate and control and so reverse the status and intimidation of the situation.¹¹

The ritual of daily business, of going to and from work, is exposed as something territorial and oppressive. The ritual of being searched that became a feature of negotiating Belfast, visualized in the use of a dart board, made the artist a 'target' or marked man; it created a tension in a social situation and disrupted a modified appearance of normality – that of people going about their daily business in a developed western society whilst living in a war zone. This in turn drew attention to a social and political context conditioned by the civil conflict. MacLennan simply but effectively demonstrates that appearances are deceptive. What appears at first normal soon delivers unexpected tensions and poses questions concerning control and authority. What makes MacLennan's simple public action all the more remarkable is the fact that he could have been viewed as a security breach (carrying a bomb in his bag perhaps?) and at its extreme consequence, he could have actually been shot at. By making himself the metaphorical target he could well have become a real target.

This performance, one of MacLennan's earliest in Belfast, also acts as an affirmation of life by creating a cathartic destabilisation of power at the interface between life and death. Catharsis derives from the Greek word for 'purification' or 'cleansing'. The term has been used for centuries as a medical term meaning a 'purging'. The term catharsis has also been adopted by modern psychotherapy to describe the act of expressing deep emotions often associated with events in an individual's past which have never before been adequately expressed.¹² It is also an emotional release associated with exposing and claiming the underlying causes of a problem.

Catharsis in this example, as in much of MacLennan's later work, is derived from a subtle shift in the consciousness of both artist and public. He has noted that the

‘purification’ or ‘cleansing’ associated with catharsis “...can be very subtle, subliminal, an alteration in mood or feeling, or a subsiding of tension.”¹³

Through making art as daily ritual activity, and drawing attention to its possible cathartic consequence, MacLennan was reclaiming the physical and social habitat, using himself as a public statement and as an example by creating a work of performance art. In MacLennan’s case, we can take his emphasis on “[s]kill in action, where skill is the resolution of conflict”¹⁴ to mean the resolution of conflict by the skill of the artist through the ritual of repetitive tasks activated during the performance.

In psychology, the term ‘ritual’ may refer to a repetitive, systematic, behavioral process enacted in order to neutralize or prevent anxiety. In the context of Northern Ireland ritual is used by MacLennan to alleviate a state of anxiety brought about as a consequence of the civil conflict. A ritual is also a patterned action that may be either demonstrative or transformative.¹⁵ The interactive elements here of skill and ritual, indicative of MacLennan’s own position, and the way in which he connects statement with intent through the realisation of performance and what he terms an ‘actuation’¹⁶ suggests that (his) art aspires to be transformative.

In transit

In my own emerging performance art practice throughout 1976-1977 I daubed the slogan ‘Art Is Not A Mirror It’s A Fucking Hammer’ on walls and buildings around Belfast. Intentionally crude, the slogans were a provocation that reflected sectarian graffiti prevalent in Belfast at that time. In the autumn of 1978 I finalised these street interventions, or ‘akshuns’¹⁷ as I came to call them, with a symbolic ritual immolation that consisted of the burning of my paintings outside the art college in Belfast city centre. The performance was cathartic and transformative; expressed through a purging of traditional formulas and values associated with art making (ie. painting). The eradication of prior artistic concerns through the use of fire to cleanse

and purge enabled me as a young artist to break free of traditional art making and to complete a transformation to a more radical and social/political engagement through performance art. The process of burning with petrol (a direct association with the rioting and petrol bombing in Belfast I had experienced and taken part in before going to art school) accompanied by a sloganeering manifesto converged in an act of purification that drew direct relationships between making art and the physical and psychic environment of Belfast in 1978. From that point of departure in 1978 I deliberately engaged in art making that was specific to sites in and around Belfast.

Art Is Not A Mirror It's A Fucking Hammer reflected a number of concerns regarding territory, political power and the potential for ritual as a means of empowerment and for reclaiming or transforming identity. Although concerned with a transitional state – the seeking out of new ways of artistic expression beyond painting – the work also embraced aspects of ritual from the repetition of tasks, and the way the site was laid out, to the almost ‘religious’ incantation of a manifesto implicit in its title. I personally experienced an overwhelming cathartic release particularly when I let out a primal scream at the start of the ‘akshun’. After what was for me a life changing experience, I then spent over a year working in an abandoned and derelict church in my family neighbourhood in Belfast. Neil Jefferies has observed that in my work at the church at this time I had begun “...to experiment with ritualistic actions; his interest in utilising them was as part of a holistic process; to heal the psychological damage inflicted upon him by the violent situation he was living in.”¹⁸ This series of ‘akshuns’ at ‘the Church’ allowed me to formulate a language of materials and strategies for working through site-specific works focused on the use of ritual behaviour and cathartic experience. Thereafter these site-responsive works formed the basis of my performance art activity and identity as an artist for the next 30 years.

I started consciously exploring, inventing and developing ‘personal’ rituals that would, I hoped, lead me to some form of catharsis, understanding, and

realisation, possibly a transcendence of my own conditioned identity.

Through making these initial 'ritual akshuns' I identified ritual activity as a means of redressing the limitations of social structure. I identified it as a form of non-conformist art via ritual performance.¹⁹

Ritual elements have also been used as structural devices and intrinsic references in the work of the artists John Carson and Nick Stewart relative to the social, cultural and political environment of Northern Ireland. Indeed one can identify codes, signifiers and materials used in performance art from Northern Ireland as a reflection of the dominant ritual activities carried out within the sectarian divisions: eg. violent and repetitive behaviour, the use of meat associated with viscera, petrol, burning, the use of coloured ribbons, clothing, hats, flags, walking sticks, batons, music, paramilitary garments and associated implements etc. The demographic and environmental influence on performance art of collective, social, communal and cultural ritual particular to Northern Ireland exerted a central role by means of their political and religious demonstrations and affirmations. John Carson whose performance *Men of Ireland/The Men in Me* most clearly illustrates this in his use of cultural stereotypes. He emphasises this when he says,

The work directly referred to the religious rituals, and the rituals and symbols employed and paraded by Catholic/Republican and Protestant/Loyalist communities, to preserve and assert their sense of identity. Additionally it referred to codified behaviours and repeated actions, which lead to the formation of stereotypes.²⁰

His performance at A.R.E. in Belfast in 1980 consisted of the artist enacting nine different cameos with a total duration (including changeovers) of approximately four hours. Set against a seventies backdrop of civil unrest, economic and industrial decline, and a British government struggling to come to terms with the legacy of its colonial control over Northern Ireland *Men of Ireland/The Men In Me* was a

performance that examined Irish male stereotypes. Each time suitably attired as a different Irish character stereotype Carson enacted a twenty-minute routine surrounded by a circle of life-size wooden 'cut-outs' of all nine characters with each action accompanied by a recorded sound track of appropriate popular songs.

The first character in the arena was the worker, who set the scene by painting a map of Ireland inside the circle formed by the nine cut-out figures. The four sections of the map corresponded to the four provinces of Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connaught. Ulster was painted orange and the other three provinces were painted green.

Next 'The Clergyman' symbolized the religious indoctrination, which determined and defined Northern Ireland's two principal communities. The 'Orangeman' then marched in to assert the Protestant/Loyalist ascendancy. 'The Youth' danced violently over the painted map, irreverently messing up and mixing up the orange and the green. 'The Romantic' represented the artist/poet/philosopher trying to rise above the malaise of bigotry, hatred and violence that was prevalent at the time. The shillelagh wielding, dancing 'Paddy Irishman' happily reinforced the clichéd stereotype of cod Irishness. The masked 'Paramilitary' figure referred to terrorists on both sides of the sectarian divide, who were holding the country to ransom back in the seventies. The businessman was indifferent to the mutual destructiveness of both communities, as long as it did not significantly affect his commercial or economic interests. Last in the arena was 'The Drunk', finding solace along a drink-fuelled road to oblivion. For Carson "the work was cathartic, in that it helped me recognize and begin to come to terms with conflicting aspects of my own upbringing, and personal and national identity [...] It was a form of memorializing how extreme and frightening the situation in Northern Ireland was in the seventies." ²¹

Although Carson's performance is more clearly defined, unambiguous and inclusive in terms of Irish cultural references, the use of ritual and repetition has its origins in the Protestant culture that both John Carson and I grew up in. This was exemplified in Loyalist iconography and demonstrations. However, in terms of ritual behaviour in

general it would be true to say that a binary identification occurs referring to both sides of the political and religious divide when considering Northern Irish culture and identity as a whole. “There were: religious, quasi-religious, paramilitary orders and sectarian groupings; the Church, Catholic/Nationalist, Protestant/Loyalist, all developed their own rituals to confer identity. These ‘orders’ and ‘para-groups’ integrated religion with politics with social and cultural ideology through ritual to establish dependency. Ritual was ubiquitous, and used to affirm righteous power and control by being a conduit for dominant ideologies.”²²

In Carson’s work the cultural cliché reinforces a subjugation of identity to its basic coded denominator. What Rona M. Fields in her banned 1976 study *Society Under Siege: A Psychology of Northern Ireland*,²³ has termed a form of ‘psychological genocide’, a control methodology employed by dominant colonial concerns. Fields states that “(psychological genocide) is the mandated destruction of a group with the explicit outcome of eradicating its symbolic power and its capacity for perpetuating its own identity.”²⁴ The nature of this condition effected both sides and created a position of dependence with a binary whereby both sides become victim. This is also problematic as the nature of ritual in Northern Ireland then becomes a way of asserting communal identity whilst simultaneously victimising the perpetuation of identity through cultural stereotype.

Giving space time

“Above all performance, or rather a certain type of performance, satisfies the need for a special kind of space and time, within which events will have a particular weight. The space-time is both framed by the physical boundaries of the performance, and given a sense of ritual through processes such as concentration and repetition. However, this ‘ritual’ quality is more than merely a formal one. It is not just a matter of a certain ceremonious pace, a certain degree of stylisation, or of a marked distance from everyday life; it is a matter of restoring a specific gravity to actions and objects it is composed of.”²⁵

Nick Stewart says that, when dealing with Irish identity in a series of performances enacted during 1983/84 entitled *Performance/Ritual for an Urban Environment*, he “was attempting to confront the binaries of (my) cultural upbringing: attempting to create an open space between these, a space not so determined by such binary frames. (I was) trying (to use light) to implicate the audience in the process: to extend the space of the images towards the space of the audience.”²⁶ In a later performance for the Available Resources project in Derry/Londonderry in 1991 entitled *All Over Walls* a ‘shroud’ was created from all the pages of the City of Derry/Londonderry telephone directory. The audience followed the artist, who was wearing the ‘shroud’ and carrying a steel bucket of mud in one hand and an oak branch in the other, on a walk around a portion of the walls. During this walk Stewart periodically beat the walls with the branch, having first dipped it into the bucket of mud. Derry/Londonderry is famous for, amongst other things, its 17th century city walls that are amongst the most complete of any city in Europe. The walls have powerful symbolic connotations for both the Unionist and Republican traditions in Ireland.

Arriving at an empty building in the city centre, a former Undertaker’s office, the audience was led to the first floor. In a room at the front they found a carefully constructed installation in the wooden floor and an old fire-place with a text of stencilled words added to its mantelpiece saying: CROWDED FULL OF HEAVEN’S ANGELS IS EVERY LEAF OF THE OAKS OF DERRY. This text is credited to the 6th century monk, Colmcille, or Saint Columba. Stewart lay on the floor and carefully removed the shroud. Then, kneeling in front of the fireplace, he punched the chimneypiece hard, causing a cloud of black soot to pour onto the floor. Finally, he flung open the old Georgian window in the room, allowing the space to be filled with the sounds of the city beyond. Stewart says,

the work is entirely embedded within the idea of space as place, saturated with historic significance and resonant with poetic potential. The city centre

is amongst the most significant places in Ireland in terms of the way it embodies the conflicting perceptions and histories in a single, wall-enclosed, urban space.²⁷

The work was concerned with the contested space of Derry/Londonderry City: while the artist does not take an overt position but rather assuming a hidden or covert identity through the use of telephone directory shroud suggesting a subliminal every person, the performance nevertheless suggests that walls, mental and physical, need to be challenged. The poetics of the performance were aligned with the idea of an elegy for the loss in lives and in life in general brought about by the severe conflicts generated by the unresolved socio-political identities of the Troubles. The performance involved a degree of stamina and pain, both of which Stewart has said heightened his perceptions and emotional responses to the place. However, he also says that he sees the activity as task oriented; “ritual is a word I only really used in a single series of works in the early 80s. Mostly I was influenced by the idea of a task performed.”²⁸

When questioned more directly regarding the cathartic nature of the work he says, “all the performance work I carried out back then had a strong cathartic quality and I felt that I grew substantially as a person through this work. The work provided a space to process the trauma of living through the civil conflict of that time.”²⁹ In Stewart’s work and through his comments it is clear the artist is fully aware of the ritual and cathartic aspects of the performance although he would ascribe the notion of ‘task’ to the activity rather than ‘ritual’. Based on this and the other artists personal recall there seems to be a general consensus regarding the aforementioned ‘live’ artworks: that they could exert a subliminal or subconscious influence upon the artist and possibly the observer. In the introductory essay entitled ‘Ritual and Performance’ for Stewart’s 1995 catalogue David MacLagan writes: “For the performer a sense of ritual is often the secret momentum of the work; an obscure, barely tangible thread, the strength of which may not be felt until tested out in

action”³⁰ Based on what Stewart has previously stated, this ‘testing out’ in the form of ritual enactments or, as he states; ‘tasks’, occurring within the transitional space of the performance could therefore induce forms of catharsis.

In Tara Babel’s performance work *A Day In The Life Of...*, commissioned by the Orchard Gallery for the *Live Art In Derry* event from 2nd – 4th June 1988, the artist employed a recall scenario based on her Belfast aunt. This formative memory was then converted into the sectarian binary through the use of Republican and Loyalist music, political slogans, objects, heavily coded colours, and actions. Babel initially appeared inhabiting the condition of an obsessive Ulster housewife carrying a gun, clothed in a gaudy coloured nylon dressing gown with bright pink socks and brandishing a crucifix. Babel carried out repetitive and ritualistic actions over several days, including exaggerated vacuum cleaning, cooking, general housework and violent tantrums. At one point she would be seen running around the streets throwing bottles at her ‘home’, a roughly made three-sided roofless construction, and attacking a passer-by before returning to her mad, public-private, domestic world.

The work was all the more remarkable as the performance took place at various locations throughout the city of Derry/Londonderry, using the aforementioned portable yet rather dysfunctional doll’s house construction. At another one point in the day’s proceedings “[sh]e appeared near the city’s bus station to work on wallpapering her ‘house’, and set up her ‘kitchen’. Later in the day she cooked smelly pigs’ trotters on a stove. A crowd, which included young punks, gathered and watched with respectful curiosity rather than hostility or mockery. Many people returned during the day to see what Babel’s next ‘actions’ would be.”³¹ The repetition of actions, use of coded materials, their significance in the context of the city, and the way political and religious issues relentlessly weave in and out of the mad woman’s consciousness are recognised and correlate with the repetition of

codified behaviour, and conditions were taken to extremes in the very environment in which the performance is taking place.

In this performance by Tara Babel ritual is used as a structural device and as a reference to social conventions across the political and religious divide in Northern Ireland. It allows the artist to inhabit a threshold position between factional territories in order to embody or enact problematic responses to the civil conflict and therefore form a conduit between the private and public. In this and the other works discussed ritual provided the fulcrum in which to pass from private experience to public engagement through making performed or enacted art in real time in public. In so doing, ritual activity enabled performance art in Northern Ireland to inhabit a liminal space that provided a subversion of social engagement in an environment otherwise dependent on socio-political group affirmation and loyalty. The British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner emphasises this relationship between ritual activity and liminality as enabling a subversion and transition to take place with a view to activating alternatives in socially and culturally constructed space.

By temporarily separating participants from everyday social structure, ritual creates ambiguous social status. Liminality is inherent to ritual, since participants' former identities and obligations to social status must be removed before new identities and obligations can be taken on. Transition from old social identity to a new one necessarily creates ambiguous social status. Most importantly, liminality represents the possibility of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements.³²

Thus liminality, inherent in ritual activity, is also essentially 'subversive' of everyday social structure, and by association performance art in the context of Northern

Ireland with its ritual associations, content, codified signifiers and mannerisms can also be seen as inhabiting a liminal space 'subversive' of everyday social structure. In Babel's work, as in other work discussed, repetitive ritual activities create liminal spaces that subvert (and transform) social structure allowing catharsis to take place.

Testimony

With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10th April 1998 a major political development in the Northern Ireland peace process was effected. This was followed by a gradual though no less dramatic cessation of paramilitary violence and civil disturbance as Northern Ireland entered a period of conflict transformation.

During the Troubles a form of radical visual art performance had emerged as a response to an environment of political conflict. This was characterised by a fluid and encompassing operating methodology that incorporated elements of ritual and catharsis in order to provide a space in which to draw together and analyse issues of empathy, repression, the transmission of images, cultural and colonial experiences of formation, identity and memory. From the late nineties to the present there has been a reflection on the previous years of the Troubles by some of the same artists who had been producing performance work since the nineteen-seventies and also by new and emerging practitioners. This reflection on the Troubles has at times been a contentious issue. Sandra Johnston an artist who emerged in the nineties felt that "artists have a role to play in investigating the cultural, geographic and mediated residues that continue to inform public opinions, and perhaps subtly interfering into the 'certainty' of entrenched perspectives."³³ However, reflecting on her own work at that time she suggests that "in 2004 it was very outmoded to make a 'political' work, there was a prevailing attitude in the Belfast art community to resist making visual representations that involved historical memory and archiving."³⁴

In the last few years this attitude has somewhat changed, there is a greater interest now in the potential of intervening with various residues of the Troubles, and

perhaps also some understanding that acts of evidencing could be a valid thing to attempt.³⁵

In May 1998, with his work *Naming The Dead*, Alastair MacLennan confronted the legacy of the Troubles up to that point by exposing the public to lists of all those who lost their lives through the Troubles in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1998.

MacLennan spent a day on the Ormeau Bridge in Belfast – a connective artery between Protestant and Catholic territories – tying pieces of paper to the bridge with the names of the dead on them, and placing small flowers along the bridge in an act of both remembrance and memorialising. A highly visible performance ‘actuation’ due to its location, the public engaged with the work by stopping and reading through the lists attached to the bridge. The Bridge in effect bore testimony to those who had died and became both a metaphor and potential conduit for confrontation, reflection, and transformation.

In May 2000 I produced a performance ‘akshun’ in Belfast entitled *Conviction*. The akshun took the form of crawling on my hands and knees from my childhood home in Donegall Pass in South Belfast to the Duke of York pub on the other side of the city. “A very tough and exhausting akshun. [...] My head was covered in tar and feathers. An image from my youth when I saw people tarred and feathered and tied to lampposts as a punishment.”³⁶

In *Conviction* I wanted to come to terms with Belfast as an environment that incorporated a personal psycho-geographical history with a symbolic ‘ritual’ journey that had a correlation to the lives lived and lost in the areas I crawled through. I negotiated divided territory on hands and knees in a ritual act of penance. The work for me became a cathartic act of transformation, redemption and healing. The performance activity incorporated elements of ritual relative to Catholic culture –

acts of penance – and to incidents I witnessed in my own Protestant culture – ‘tarring and feathering’ as an act of public punishment and humiliation.

The work was also about my father, who drank in the Duke of York pub. In 1968, when I was ten years of age, I was in the pub with my father when some of his friends from the *Belfast Newsletter* showed me photos they had just received from their office across the street. These were photos of Tommy Smith and John Carlos, the two African-American athletes who had given a black power salute at the Mexico Olympic games. It was a profound moment and I suspect the photo had a cathartic effect on me at the time because I was aware that for some inexplicable reason I had been changed. I felt it physically, perceptually, emotionally and intellectually. In the moment of receiving the image and by the act of physically holding the photograph I felt a shock of recognition and meaning concerning political and cultural engagement. Thereafter, I became increasingly aware of the nature and possibilities of public protest as performance and spectacle. The moment was transformative and I would identify it as a cathartic experience.

The same year, 1968, was also when I became aware of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, and a year I associate with the beginnings of the Troubles. During *Conviction's* journey across the city I carried photos of the athletes and of my father and his friends, now all dead. The framed photos were hung in the Duke of York pub at the end of the ‘akshun’. Sandra Johnston who witnessed the performance in 2000 reflected later that the work was “...a personal testimony to past anguish in his own life, reactivated in the location that makes this action a form of indictment and catharsis.”³⁷

Johnston’s own site-responsive work also draws from the practical history, formal concerns and methodologies of performance art created in Northern Ireland, albeit in a more subtle form. Central to Johnston’s practice is placing herself as an artist in an ethical and moral position of responsibility.

Johnston's *Composure* in 2004 was a performance with a duration of 24 hours. Beginning with a private 'observing' action in the Chapel of Adoration, Falls Road, Belfast, for twelve hours, the work was then completed at Catalyst Arts, where a drawing installation was developed over the remaining hours. The audience was only invited in to experience the final half hour of the action. The work was based on an interrogation of places that are connected to the history of the Troubles – locations for instance, that are stigmatized in public memory by violent events – and how this history has impacted upon the current status of such sites.

One of these sites selected was Finaghy Road North, in Belfast, where on August 10th 1976 a sequence of events involving the shooting of a republican paramilitary named Danny Lennon by British Troops resulted in a mother, Anne (nee Corrigan) Maguire, with her four young children Andrew, Joanne, John and Mark, being hit by the moving vehicle. Three of the children died and Anne took her own life some months later. This incident instigated the forming of the Peace People organisation. As part of her research Johnston interviewed one of its founders, Anne's sister Mairead Maguire.

..as part of my research (she) kindly agreed to be interviewed on her thoughts about commemorative acts and what she believed should happen to that location. After this interview I became interested and indeed moved by a text Mairead had written entitled, *An Open Letter To the IRA*, which she had written inside the Chapel of Adoration on the Falls Road. This chapel is open continuously day and night and became a place of refuge for many during the Troubles. I decided to spend twelve hours in the chapel as a private preparatory ritual, which then evolved directly into the performance action at Catalyst Arts.³⁸

The ritual of 'observing' at the Chapel of Adoration was followed by the second part carried out at Catalyst Arts in central Belfast. Working off stepladders Johnston drew on two large windows. A video monitor had been installed on the wall between the windows. The video played a looped clip of archive footage featuring Jane Ewart Biggs, the wife of Christopher Ewart Biggs, who had been assassinated by the IRA in his role as the Ambassador to Ireland. In this footage Jane Ewart Biggs 'forgives' the Irish people for murdering her husband. Throughout the broadcast she remained composed and tightly controlled in manner and voice, however the footage also included an off-cut fraction of film from the moment when she had believed the camera had been turned off. This section of footage was not intended to be broadcast, but showed her momentarily collapse in the chair. Johnston was intrigued by this fleeting moment of fragility and developed her action for the Catalyst space in response. "The action involved: holding a small container of saturated sugar solution which I repeatedly dipped my fingers into, then touching my throat I concentrated on repeating Ewart Bigg's words inward, silently, before drawing the sensation of the words trapped beneath the utterance."³⁹ As Johnston moved along the windows she would occasionally return to panes where the solution had dried and blow chalk dust from a sheet of paper, then burnish the chalk into the traces, bringing the hidden marks back into visibility.

Composure, was one of twenty performances made as part of *The Rooms Series*, which Johnston produced over a five-year period. Each work in the series involved 'rituals' of observation inside both private and public spaces where the artist undertook between twelve to forty-eight hours of being unobtrusively present in situations; piecing together a choreography of behaviour through watching the movements of others. These undocumented encounters were then directly translated into performances in gallery situations with only a few hours between the act of observation and its public interpretation. Johnston states: "This is not perhaps a usual understanding of the idea of ritual in performance, to associate it with the act of silent observation and waiting. But, for me by watching, absorbing and then gradually forming physical embodied responses, there was a high degree of ritual

involved in remembering and then inhabiting the gestures of others in relation to the qualities of each space.”⁴⁰

For Johnson “The aim of the work was certainly directed towards catharsis, or at least the desire to be released from emotions of disturbance, guilt and helplessness.”⁴¹ In Johnston’s work the ritual ‘observing’ in the chapel and spending extended periods of time in locations such as the Finaghy Road were pivotal to the method of performance work that evolved. The fact that the observation actions were largely not documented meant that she deliberately relied on memory and the use of recall as a form of testimony within the performance to interrogate issues of place, sites of trauma, commemoration, safety and refuge.

Memoranda: Triple AAA

Integral to re/construction of individual and collective identities are cultural and social practices that shape them as much as their manifestations and commemoration through real life experience, incidents and anecdotes from the trajectories from which future inter/action and thought are being developed. Memory is not a given but is re/formed through continuous work of re/telling the past on remnants of material culture and most importantly residues of places and ‘vistas’.⁴²

Triple AAA was a collaborative performance project enacted by Adrian Hall, Alastair MacLennan and myself at Catalyst Arts in Belfast between 16- 20 September 2013, in which our own collective history formed a visible presence through ‘live’ performance.

The entitled *Memoranda* sought to engage and draw upon common experiences of the Troubles via the dynamics of the pedagogical environment at the art college in

Belfast and how that time and place, Belfast in the 1970's, influenced our art/life practice thereafter. When combined, central concerns which emerged were issues of recall, location and displacement that created what one might term a practice of 'act-archiving'⁴³, whereby an archive is produced during 'live' performance. In effect, memory was constantly decoded and converted through use of specific materials with the physical detritus used in a cyclical and ritualistic manner to enable successive actions to emerge. This deconstruction/ reconstruction binary created a porous or permeable version of Northern Ireland as a state of mind; based on memory of particular time, place and activity in Belfast in the mid-late 1970's enacted with the accumulated life experience of times between then and now. The activity in the form of an extended installation/performance became the central activator of a 'memoranda' or archive of experience.

In this 'post-conflict' time of our return we sought to engage with a city composed of material traces, ruptures, assertions, digressions, mutations and representations of conflict. This combined with adhesive creative practices, pedagogy and competing historical formations became our contested territory, offered as a collective meditation on our own witnessing.

In *Memoranda* documentations of our own individual art practice, including photographs of performances, texts, drawings and related materials from the 1970's, were combined with newspaper reports from the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish News* specific to dates we had each lived through in Belfast, along personal materials associated with, and identified as, an iconography of practice.

The installation consisted of a long table, photocopier, industrial paper shredder, museum vitrine, video projections of locations (past and present) and a continuous recorded recitation of all the names of those who died as a consequence the Troubles. The recording was played backwards and relentlessly insinuated itself as a

hypnotic presence into the environment that also acted as an historic marker of events and auditory testimony. This structural fulcrum created an historical time-loop that took audience and artists back through time, and with the iteration of 'memoranda' as a consequence of the 'live' performance returning us to the present. During five days documentations were continually shredded, ritual based cyclical actions were performed in and around the central table; the space completely converted into an overwhelming array of residues and historical detritus.

Suzanna Chan has observed that she felt Johnston's work "sought to unfold questions of if and how an artist can represent and bear witness to the trauma of others?"⁴⁴; the same can be said of the Triple AAA performance. The duration and repetition of the work over several days allowed an unfolding to occur. That the work was embedded with a sense of bearing witness to the trauma of others is also true as experienced through listening to the litany of names of those who died during the Troubles. This was obfuscated (the recording played backwards) in an attempt to draw attention to the ambiguity of behaviour, social interaction, codification language and information particular to Northern Ireland. As to the position of artist in this context: we were concerned with how we could bear witness to this history through the prism of our own experiences and the use of the materials we had brought into the space. A central desire was to see how experiences might be converted through the use of historical archival documents, associated physical gestures and materials to establish a topography of conflict in the art space environment. Central too was how this might reveal behavioural, political and social 'ambiguities and polarities'⁴⁵ for the purposes of creating dialogue, debate and testimony. These central concerns cohabit a creative practice rooted in a history of art making with a specific identity in Northern Ireland that also has as its co-respondent a conversion into teaching and pedagogy. In Triple AAA this was revealed through the artist as archivist; acknowledging that creativity and pedagogy in "conflicted space is inextricably interconnected with practices of documentation and archiving and the way these practices shape memories and inform the re/construction of histories."⁴⁶ There are references here too regarding

Beuys, and the affirmation that fundamental to his art was his teaching.⁴⁷ This holistic view shared by Triple AAA with Beuys confirms the “importance of teaching within the practice of the artist [...] whose actions in pedagogy and art are intertwined in the same cultural critique.”⁴⁸

For each artist in Triple AAA a resolution of sorts was defined by the intensity and focus of five days excavation, interaction, navigation and perishable reduction. For me the accumulative performance reached a moment of finality realised through the body as transgressive metaphor with the textual, phonetic and vernacular rendering of the words ‘Norn Irn’ being cut into the flesh of my arm. Recalling that initial transgressive act of art immolation *Art Is Not A Mirror It’s a Fucking Hammer*, this final ‘akshun’ at the conclusion of the Triple AAA performance brought to an end my own engagement with performance art specific to Northern Ireland.

So it was that at Catalyst Arts in Belfast, during September 2013, Triple AAA revealed an exhumation and exhaustion of personal iconographic materials and concepts. It was here that testimony was revealed and a form of conflict resolution occurred through, in, and of radical art that was defined by a strategy, pedagogy, and history of ritual and catharsis particular to performance art made in Northern Ireland.

I saw you on the street where I was born

By concentrating on societal ills such as conflict and imbalances of power it might be suggested that certain performance artists’ attempt to evoke trauma inherent within their observers’ psyches and elicit a purging of these repressed memories. This may be the case with variations and subtleties when regarding performance art produced in Northern Ireland. However, this is only one of many interpretations. It is clear though that in these performances ritual and catharsis were utilised as a means of

public testimony, and that context, time, space, repetition, codified enactment, recall and memorialising converted into acts of transformation.

Because we are discussing performance artworks made 'live' in real time our means of recall is through witness, testimony, personal retrieval, memory and collected documentation. It is also foremost through lived experiences, and through the work of the artists sampled here, and through numerous other artists in Northern Ireland who have engaged in performance art as a political act of protest, mediation, transformation and empowerment under extreme circumstances. These 'acts' and their attendant recollection through memory, recall and physical documentation can be transmitted through time to the present and therefore be renewed.

The work was always about bringing the contested memory of places through to a point of reckoning in the present tense, finding something in the present that indicated the past but would not necessarily be ensnared by the trauma that had occurred there.⁴⁹

Current performance art in and about Northern Ireland that reflects upon the past adds to the contemporary process of conflict transformation in the form of art as testimony.

I would contend, and with the examples cited as evidence, that without the power of testimony evident in these performances we are unable to summon images of past traumas that are needed to evoke the catalyst of recovery.

Conventional art mediums failed at a specific time and in the specific location of Northern Ireland because conventional practice separated art from everyday experience by operating in traditional terms, in neutered spaces such as galleries and art institutions. From 1975 onwards performance art in Northern Ireland gained momentum because it placed the artist at the centre of art making and evidenced the 'live' or 'living' process of making art as it actually took place. In so doing, it

created focus for the artists' actions and their placement in relation to a specific landscape of civil conflict. This in turn allowed artists, and by extension the public, to inhabit a liminal space where conflict might be converted into its opposite through performance art that utilised ritual and catharsis as a means for transformation in an 'experimental exercise of freedom' on our own doorstep.

¹ Stitt, André (2013) *Amnesia*, performance text.

² MacLennan, Alastair (1985) *Performance Magazine* #37, London.

³ A phrase coined in the late 1950's by Brazilian critic Mario Pedrosa who applied it to a range of artists motivated to abandon traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture for a new aesthetic that connected directly with political, cultural and social concerns through a performative practice.

⁴ Sverakova, Slavka (2000) *Performance Art in Ireland 1975 –1998*, Art Action 1958-1998, Quebec Editions Intervention.

⁵ Melaugh, Eamon (1972) cain.ulst.ac.uk/melaugh/portfolio4/f4p16.htm [accessed 10 January 2014]

⁶ Art & Research Exchange. Originally the organisation materialised as the Northern Ireland workshop of the Free International University (F.I.U.), established in Germany some years earlier by Joseph Beuys and the Nobel Prize winning author, Heinrich Böll. The FIU, as its title suggests, had aspirations to become a global network of creative groups and individuals involved in interdisciplinary research and creative development, crossing boundaries between art and community, politics and economics, history and culture.

⁷ Coppock Chris (2007) A.R.E. - Acronyms, Community Arts and Stiff Little Fingers, *The Vacuum Issue* 11, Belfast.

⁸ Kelly, Liam (2009) *The School of Art + Design/Belfast 1960-2009*, Belfast, Ormeau Baths Gallery.

⁹ MacLennan, Alastair (1988) *Is No*, Bristol, Arnolfini pp. 82-83

¹⁰ Montano, Linda M. (2000) *Performance Artists Talking In The Eighties*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press pp.385-386

¹¹ Pendle, Andrew, (1984) *Beyond Art*, Dublin, Theatre Ireland.

¹² Scheff, Thomas J.(1979) *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

¹³ MacLennan, Alastair & Stitt, André (2011) Interview, Dunedin College Art, New Zealand.

¹⁴ MacLennan, Alastair (1981) Vox, issue 7, Dublin. I'm using a primary first source in this instance. MacLennan has created many statements or manifestos focusing on resolving 'conflict' through 'skill' and 'action'. As with many of the artist's public pronouncements they often contain repetitions or variations reiterated in extended form, depending on what is conceptually pertinent at the time. In a sense they may correlate to ritual Zen style aphorisms. Other examples of the 'conflict', 'skill' and 'action' versions can be found in various publications including (1988) Is No, Bristol, Arnolfini and (1984) High Performance Magazine, Vol. 7, Number 1, Los Angeles, Astro Artz pp. 58-61

¹⁵ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/504688/ritual/66240/Functions-of-ritual>

¹⁶ MacLennan uses the term 'Actuation' for his work. "...an 'actuation' activates a space...it activates energy latently lying there...it effects demonstrative interfusion of energies lying seemingly dormant." MacLennan, Alastair [email from MacLennan received Wed, Jun 1, 2011]

¹⁷ 'Akshun' or 'Akshuns' is a term I have used since 1977 to denote the 'type' of performance art I make. Basically it is a Northern Irish phonetic translation of the word 'Action' as in 'live action' or 'action art'.

¹⁸ Jefferies, Neil (2008) On Through the Not So Quiet Land, UWIC.

¹⁹ Stitt, André (2008) Early Akshun, Belfast 1976-1980, Substance, Exeter, England, SpaceX, pgs. 204-227

²⁰ Carson, John (2013) [email interview received Fri, Nov 29, 2013]

²¹ ibid

²² ibid Stitt, André (2008)

²³ Fields, Rona, M. (1977) Society Under Siege, A Psychology of Northern Ireland, Philadelphia, Temple University Press. When first editions of this book were imported into the UK they were confiscated. Apparently under orders from the British government, UK Customs later 'pulped' copies. Effectively censoring the publication from public use and knowledge, several 'alternative' and political bookshops were also raided and the book removed.

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ MacLagan, David (1995) Ritual and Performance in Neither Time Nor Material, Nick Stewart, Performance, Installation, Drawing, Video 1982-1995, Derry/Londonderry, Orchard Gallery.

²⁶ Stewart, Nick (2013) [email interview received Fri., Nov. 29, 2013]

²⁷ ibid

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ MacLagan, David (1995) ibid

³¹ Roth, Moira (1988) Live Art in Derry, Los Angeles, High Performance #44, Astro Artz.

³² Alexander B.C. (1991) Victor Turner Revisited : Ritual As Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press.

³³ Johnston, Sandra, (2013) [email interview received Mon., Dec. 16, 2013]

³⁴ ibid

³⁵ ibid

³⁶ Stitt, André, (2002) Small Time Life, London, Black Dog pp. 84-85

³⁷ Johnston, Sandra, (2013) Beyond Reasonable Doubt, An Investigation of Doubt, Risk and Testimony Through Performance Art Processes in Relation to Systems of Legal Justice, Berlin, Lit Verlag GmbH.

³⁸ Johnston, Sandra, (2013)

³⁹ ibid

⁴⁰ ibid

⁴¹ ibid

⁴² Mey, Kirstin, Loughlan, Grainne, (2009) Research in Art & Technologies, Report No. 2, 06/06 – 4/09, Belfast, Interface, University of Ulster.

⁴³ Julie Bacon first used the term in 1999 referring to the exploration in interdisciplinary performance and installation works that she was making. This concerned itself with the relationship between ‘live’ presence in the art work (that of the artists and others) and the processes of historicisation.

⁴⁴ Chan, Suzanna, (2005) Performance Art in Ireland, Circa 111, Ireland.

⁴⁵ Roms, Heike, (2007) Performance Archives Performance, Flashes from the Archives of Oblivion, Cardiff, exhibition catalogue, curated by André Stitt.

⁴⁶ ibid Mey, Kirstin, Loughlan, Grainne, (2009)

⁴⁷ Podesva, Kristina (2007) *A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on education in Art*, Filip 6, Vancouver BC, Canada, Projectile Publishing Society.

⁴⁸ Hunter, R, Bodor, J. (2012) *The Art of Action in Great Britain*, in *Histories & Practices of Live Art*, Heddon & Klein (eds) Palgrave Macmillan pp. 77-78

⁴⁹ *ibid* Johnston, Sandra, (2013)