

**“ART AS DIRECT POLITICAL ACTION:”
AN INVESTIGATION THROUGH CASE
STUDIES AND INTERVIEWS**

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ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 1970, *Artforum*, an international magazine of contemporary art, conducted a survey of various important artists asking the following question: what is your position regarding the kinds of direct political action that should be taken by artists?¹

The question was asked in relation to the “deepening political crisis in America,” the Vietnam War. The development of television brought images of war into American homes more dramatically and immediately than any previous conflict. Though the war was taking place abroad, the violence was made real to audiences, including artists, many of whom felt pressure to respond to the political situation. Around the same time in another part of the world, violence broke out in Northern Ireland. In this case, however, the violence took place on the doorsteps and in the homes of those involved—Catholics and Protestants, republicans and loyalists, fighting over identity, religion, sovereignty, and territory—in what became known as the Troubles.

Because of the similarities in timeframe between the Vietnam War and the Troubles, I felt it was fitting to appropriate *Artforum*’s question to the situation in Ireland and examine the interaction between art and politics there. I have made the question the foundation of my investigation of Irish contemporary art and politics, looking at Irish art created during the Troubles, with a timeframe of the late 1970s to the 1990s.

As a student of both government and art history, I am constantly looking for ways to make connections between the two subjects. With this project, I wanted to know *how* art and politics interact for the artist and viewer—not how the two might come up in

¹ “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” *Artforum*, New York, September 1970, in ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*.

government offices, but in a gallery. In past academic pursuits, I have been led astray by art policy, which deals with issues such as artist's resale rights, art education policy, or funding for community arts. I will have gone on a mission to find the connection between my definition of art and politics and ended up miles away from my desired destination. This project has expanded my understanding of the phrase "art and politics," but also allowed me to focus precisely on the aspect of my choosing.

More than this general notion of art and politics, I was interested in specific discussions. Is Irish contemporary art concerned with national identity—and does it deconstruct or build identity? Does public money complicate political art? Is Irish contemporary political art different? Using these questions and case studies of two Irish contemporary artists to guide me, I investigated the relationship between art and politics. What follows is a presentation and discussion of my findings.

TWO: METHODOLOGY

My research began with a small project early in the semester. The exercise asked us to examine some aspect of life in Dublin, talk to people involved, and analyze our findings. I set out to research activism in Dublin, but became concerned with one example in particular—the destruction of local artist studios. A well-known artist, Robert Ballagh, had lent his voice to the matter, decrying the property developers and mourning the loss of studio space, known as the Broadstone Studios. I learned about zoning codes, nonprofit funding, working artists, government councils, and community organizing. The names and resources I learned about through the Broadstone Studios allowed me to narrow my topic for my final paper. Because of my studies in art history and government, my recent coursework on Irish politics and history, and my interaction with

the Broadstone Studios, I knew I wanted to look at contemporary art in relation to contemporary issues.

I continued to collect the names of various artists or people in the Irish art world during meetings with Dr. Yvonne Scott, director of the Trinity Irish Art Research Centre, and Dr. Roisin Kennedy, lecturer of art history at University College Dublin and my advisor for this paper, who recommended further reading and provided a general overview of Irish contemporary art. I identified a list of contemporary Irish artists to examine, prioritizing Robert Ballagh, Willie Doherty, and Rita Duffy because they demonstrated a combination of political work and critical success.

Ballagh is an artist well known for his republican sympathies, works from Dublin, and uses Pop Art, appropriation, and realism to make his commentary. From Derry, Doherty works with lens-based media, usually combining both text and images to touch on themes of surveillance and the media. Duffy is from Belfast, where she paints iconography of recent Irish history to portray her experiences.

When it came time to research, I had an extensive list of places to visit, people to speak with, and readings to consult. I began at the National Irish Visual Arts Library, or NIVAL, at the National College of Art and Design, in Dublin. NIVAL contains extensive files on Irish artists, galleries, and museums—including anything from invitations for exhibition openings to newspaper clippings. I examined the files of my three main artists at NIVAL and then moved onto readings at the general library at the National College of Art and Design, including some general art theory, as well as writing specifically on Irish art.

My main text for general theory on art and politics was *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*,² which is a collection of essays and statements by artists, curators, academics, and critics on twentieth century art. *Art in Theory* allowed me to look at the issue of art and politics from a non-Ireland specific perspective. Other important texts included *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political*, *Thinking Long*, and *A Shout in the Street*³—all exhibition catalogs containing essays on Irish contemporary art. The Irish contemporary art magazine *CIRCA* was also helpful, as the full archive is available online and the magazine has frequently addressed the question of political art in Ireland.

During my research in Dublin, I made interview requests to over eighteen individuals in Dublin, Belfast, or Derry, all via email or phone. These individuals were names I had come across in my reading or were suggested to me during preliminary interviews. I felt it was important to have a cross-section of people to interview—artists, academics, and curators—and sometimes those labels overlapped. In the end, I had eight interviews. Had I been more persistent, I believe I could have had more interviews, but with such limited time to complete my research (three weeks), I was satisfied that eight interviews would provide enough diversity in terms of both opinion and information.

I interviewed one artist (Robert Ballagh), three academics (Dominic Bryan, Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, Declan McGonagle), and four curators (Sean Kissane, Theo Sims, and Peter Richards, Pauline Ross). For further details on the backgrounds of these individuals, please see interview transcripts in the *Appendix*. I made contact with the

² Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*.

³ Refer to full bibliography in *Appendix* for complete citations.

following organizations and individuals with no success: Douglas Hyde Gallery at Trinity College, the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, the Third Eye Gallery in Belfast, Catalyst Arts in Belfast, the Void Gallery in Derry, and the artists Rita Duffy and Willie Doherty (through their commercial galleries).

I researched each individual before interviewing him or her. I had a set of prepared questions (refer to *Appendix*) that I tried to ask during each interview and a few questions that were specific to the interviewee. All interviews were digitally recorded. I had four interviews in Dublin, two in Belfast, and two in Derry. At the beginning of each interview, I tried to make known my knowledge of Irish politics and history and my research in Irish contemporary art, which sometimes proved irrelevant as interviewees would give lengthy explanations about events in Irish history or repeat information from sources I had already read.

All interviews, with the exception of Ballagh's, took place in traditional offices. For my interview with Ballagh, he invited me to his studio, which is obviously the traditional office of an artist. His responses to my questions provided very little new information, but being in his studio and observing Ballagh's everyday business offered ample insight into Ballagh's persona and current status.⁴

Finding myself overwhelmed with transcribing interviews, I found it necessary to leave out some parts of my interviews, which I judged to be less relevant to my topic.

Transcribing interviews took much longer than I anticipated; a forty-minute interview

⁴ Ballagh received about five phone calls during my interview, all of which he took and told me about afterwards. Refer to transcripts in *Appendix*. The studio was littered with old prints by Ballagh and the expected artist paraphernalia—paint cans, brushes, canvases, and easels. In one corner was a large tool cabinet containing heavy power tools. The most telling aspect of his studio, however, was the stack of books on such subjects as the new EU constitution and the Lisbon Treaty.

could take three hours to transcribe. I have included the interview transcripts in the *Appendix* because I wanted to make available the information I collected, but could not include in the final paper itself. The interviews are valuable conversations with key participants in Irish contemporary art, which might be a resource for future students or simply of interest to readers.

I also made the decision to leave out Rita Duffy from my group of primary artists because there was a lack of critical reading on her work and interviewees were reluctant to comment on her work. Though as a female, she would have provided further contrast to the two male artists, Ballagh and Doherty provided contrast enough in terms of geography, aesthetic, medium, background, message, and timeframe.

In terms of structure, this paper has two parts—case studies and key questions. Before the case studies, I will give a brief overview of twentieth century Irish art. The case studies of Ballagh and Doherty will include biography, visual analysis, and criticism. Then I will compare the two artists to illustrate a change within Irish contemporary art. In the second section, I will explore the responses to key questions I had about Irish contemporary art and politics, drawing upon interview responses and art historical literature, looking specifically at issues of national identity, public money for political art, and the distinction of Irish contemporary art.⁵

⁵ For those readers who are truly interested in my research, the interview transcripts could be considered the third part to my paper, as they took up the majority of my research time (preparation, conducting the actual interview, and transcription).

THREE: MAIN BODY

Part 1: Setting the Stage for Irish Contemporary Art, Case Study: Robert Ballagh, Case Study: Willie Doherty, Ballagh and Doherty Case Studies in Contrast

Setting the Stage for Irish Contemporary Art

In 1999, Declan McGonagle, among others, curated an exhibition and wrote an accompanying book called *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political*. The title captures much of the conflict between art for art's sake and political art, as well as a transition within Irish art. In the 1950s-60s, Irish art was heavily concerned with the poetic, or the landscape—Ireland's rolling hills, the green grass that seemed to glow, the grey skies filled by clouds heavy with rain, and the rough sea that was home to the fishing industry. These images have supported Ireland's booming cultural tourism industry. Of course, even a seemingly straightforward landscape painting can have political undertones. McGonagle made the connection by explaining that the West of Ireland was seen as the soul of Irish culture, as Catholics had been driven west during the Protestant plantation of Ireland of the seventeenth century.⁶ Thus, by painting the Western Irish landscape, Jack Yeats, an Irish modernist and Expressionist painter of the early nineteenth century, was a political artist. Still, Irish landscape paintings remain within the poetic realm—something that we look at because they are beautiful and reinforce a romanticized natural aesthetic of Ireland.

Before the Troubles, Irish artists like Louis Le Brocquy and Francis Bacon were already leading the way in Irish modernism. With the onset of the Troubles, however, McGonagle points out that many Irish artists become more concerned with the political than the poetic, but had difficulty finding the critical means to be able to address the

⁶ Declan McGonagle, in interview.

underlying issues of the phenomena of violence, rather than representing that phenomena.⁷ This transition will be revisited after the case studies of Ballagh and Doherty, but may be helpful to keep in mind while reading about the artists.

Case Study One: Robert Ballagh

Robert Ballagh's work is an art history student's dream—appropriation, influence from various art movements, and a multitude of mediums. Ciaran Carty, Ballagh's biographer, has said, "The real theme of Ballagh's art is art itself."⁸ His oeuvre includes Pop Art, surrealism, commercial art, public art, political art, self-portrait, portrait, installation art, and photography. Despite the large range of his work, this section on Ballagh will look specifically at his work to do with the Troubles. Dealing with biography first will provide context for later examination of some of his works.

Ballagh's life story and art could easily serve as a text for learning about the recent Irish history. A forthcoming biography, in fact, aims to improve upon an already existing text on Ballagh by showing the influence of recent history on Ballagh's life. In an interview with the artist, he revealed, "As well as being a biography of me, it's a biography of Ireland during the last fifty to sixty years."⁹ Born in Dublin in 1943 to a Catholic mother and a Protestant father, he would have had parents and relatives who remembered and lived through the War for Independence and the Irish Civil War. As a young man during the 1970s, he was a musician in a showband, touring both the North and South.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ciaran Carty, "No. 3."

⁹ Robert Ballagh, in interview.

Events such as the Miami Showband killings of 1975, in which members of the band were shot at a road block during a bomb transfer gone wrong, would have had a significant influence on Ballagh and his art. Ballagh explained his personal connection during an interview:

I used to be one of those musicians. I played in showband, which was the popular form of entertainment in Ireland at the time. Now I had retired in the 60s, but I had played with the lead singer of that band—young fellow called Fran O’Toole who was killed in the ambush. When I read about it in the paper the next morning, I was absolutely shocked because I had played in the ballroom they played in Banbridge. I had driven that road back to Dublin many, many times. When you have personal experience, even a place where a tragedy takes place—any connection—it makes it so much more powerful.¹⁰

One piece in reaction to the events was part of a series of mirror pieces by Ballagh. Paint was applied directly to the mirror, but some space was left blank so the viewer would see himself reflected within the artwork—as Ballagh saw aspects of his own life reflected in the current events in Ireland at the time. Other references to his musical past can be found in later works, such as the Fender guitar bag in *Inside No. 3*.

Originally a student of architecture, Ballagh made the transition to studio art when he became a studio assistant for Micheal Farrell, a painter whose own work would have references to the political situation in Ireland.¹¹ Never formally trained in the practice of art, Ballagh has admitted that early stylistic choices (such as silk screening) were made because of lack of skill.¹² Ballagh also relied on appropriation, borrowing or quoting other images, early in his career, starting with his series called “People Looking at Paintings.” He would paint various figures looking up at paintings by contemporary

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Philip Vann, “Robert Ballagh: An Overview,” 9.

¹² Ibid.

masters, such as Mondrian, Rothko, or Pollock. He went on to use this method of appropriation to comment on the Troubles.

As a Dublin-based artist, he has the geographic distinction of a Southern artist. Ballagh, however, would disagree: “I have never recognized the border—politically, artistically, or in any way. I consider myself an Irishman and my Ireland is a 32-county country.”¹³ Although Ballagh may have traveled to and spent time in the North during periods of violence, he did not have the same experience in intensity of or proximity to the conflict as a permanent resident of the North.

The History Lesson, 1989¹⁴

This triangular painting features Ballagh in the center, his head going back and forth between Patrick Pearse and James Connelly, both heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising and thus, the Irish republican tradition. The painting is done in dark, brown tones that allude to politics being conducted in a back room, despite the light coming from a triangular lampshade (echoing the shape of the canvas). The three men are seated at a table, on which books are scattered.

In an interview with Karim White, Ballagh explains his motivation for *The History Lesson*:

I decided to make a painting that would, well, challenge is the wrong word, but to do what was not permitted—engage in dialogue. So I did it with the two leaders of the 1916 Rising and then the picture evolved into this triangular shape to sort of play up the idea of a conspiratorial dialogue. You know, to engage in any of this was seen as subversive and dangerous at the time. So there they are hiding in a back room somewhere illuminated by the pendant light.¹⁵

¹³ Robert Ballagh, in interview.

¹⁴ See *Appendix* for image

¹⁵ “Robert Ballagh Interview with Karim White,” *Robert Ballagh: Works from the Studio 1959-2006*, 65.

Who is Ballagh engaging in dialogue with? Are the two historical figures in dialogue with one another and Ballagh is merely listening, having trouble deciding whom to listen to? This would put Pearse and Connelly either in opposition (in terms of opinion) or competition (for Ballagh's attention) or a combination of the two.

Certainly there is dialogue within the work, but the painting itself seems to be a dialogue with Irish citizens and viewers, particularly with revisionist historians who have challenged the emphasis placed on Pearse and Connelly as the heroes of 1916, but overlooked their other contributions to Irish society. During the 1970s and 1980s, the revisionist perspective would have looked narrowly at Pearse and Connelly as the precursors to the modern IRA. With this painting, Ballagh tries to retrieve 1916 from the Northern Ireland context. Curator of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland and author of *Ireland's Art/Ireland's History*, Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch notes Ballagh's "anti-heroic" attitude, saying that Ballagh wanted to highlight Pearse's work in education and Connelly's writings on socialism in order "to avoid the pitfalls of revisionist interpretation."¹⁶ Ballagh's intent to address revisionism is clear, but it is troubling to call Ballagh's attitude towards these subjects anti-heroic, as Ballagh is decidedly nationalist and undoubtedly views Pearse and Connelly as heroes. The inclusion of Pearse and Connelly speaks to their status, but there is no indication that Ballagh's attitude towards them is decidedly anti-heroic in this painting. Even as Ballagh recasts them as heroes of education and socialism, Pearse and Connelly remain heroes of the Republic.

¹⁶ Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Ireland's Art/Ireland's History*, 241.

Case Study Two: Willie Doherty

Willie Doherty is a Derry-based artist whose work in photography and video deals with notions of the media, surveillance, and representation in the Northern Ireland context. Born in 1959 in Derry, he witnessed Bloody Sunday as a child. He attended art school at Ulster Polytechnic, where he trained in sculpture. Some of his first works are photographs with simple text. He later moved into video and installation pieces. He was twice nominated for the Turner Prize (1994 and 2003), which might be described as the Nobel Prize in contemporary art, given to British contemporary artists under the age of fifty. Furthermore, Doherty has represented both Ireland and the United Kingdom at the Venice Biennale, an international contemporary art exhibition.¹⁷

Having achieved much international recognition, most of the artist's work is heavily local, as Doherty deals with the medieval walls that surround Derry, the nearby border with Co Donegal, and the rural landscape. Derry's famous walls have encouraged notions of insider and outsider for centuries, which Doherty examines in works like *Within/Without* and *Sever/Isolate*. In these photographic works, the viewer is left wondering who is within and who is without?

Heavy media attention was also specific to Derry, as journalists and photographers came from around the world to report the sectarian street violence taking place there during the late 1970s and early 1980s. By using lens-based media and text, Doherty challenges the media images of the Troubles and a commonly accepted notion of photography as truth and reality. In an interview in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Doherty traces his concern with photography:

¹⁷ Kerlin Gallery, "Willie Doherty."

People were outraged and angry about how events that they witnessed had been turned around. I suppose the best example for me is Bloody Sunday in Derry, where as a 12-year-old boy, I witnessed thirteen people being shot and then to be told afterwards it didn't happen. It was an incredibly influential experience, and it was important for me because it was very clearly crystallized that all those photographs were unreliable.¹⁸

His works rely upon our trust in photographs and the meaning we give to words—text and image using one another to subvert each other.

Border/Border Incident, 1994¹⁹

A set of two large, color photographs show a burnt-out car in a rural setting. Displayed side by side, one photograph is called *Border* and the other, *Border Incident*. In both photographs, the sky is grey, but still light enough to indicate daytime. The background shows the rough Irish landscape—scattered shrubbery and trees and green farm plots separated by ditches. The cars in both photographs are on the side of the road, with windows missing and rust on the car body. Rather than the imagery in the photographs, the titles give meaning to these works.

Looking only at the photograph called *Border*, the narrative is that a car has been left at the border. With no clue as to time or place, this border is a desolate, no man's land—perfect for leaving things that are no longer useful. Anyone could have left the car there unnoticed. Call the same situation a *Border Incident*, however, and the meaning of the photograph changes. *Something* happened at *that* place with *that* car. The addition of “incident” brings a sinister, tragic sense to the photograph—something went wrong. Suddenly, there are people in that car whose families expected them home. There are perpetrators and victims. There is violence.

¹⁸ “Willie Doherty in Interview with Tim Maul,” *Journal of Contemporary Art*.

¹⁹ See *Appendix* for image

In *Border/Border Incident*, Doherty plays on the relationship between reality and fiction, words and images, meanings and perceptions. He expects viewers to attach meaning to the words “border” and “border incident,” and then traps viewers in their realization of the meaning they give to words by placing the two photographs next to each other. The message ends there if the viewer is ignorant of the Northern Ireland context.

To any resident of the North, these cars would not merely have been abandoned cars on the side of the road. In all likelihood, they were used to complete some paramilitary plot—maybe the driver was the victim of a punishment beating and the car had to be burnt out to destroy the evidence. Or the vehicle and its passengers had been destroyed by a car bomb. Even beyond the image of a burnt-out car, the idea of the border would resonate with Irish citizens. In the Irish context, the border was often considered an arbitrary line between people who shared the same culture and were part of the same community, who shared some aspects of cultural identity, but because of the border, had different geographic identities. Since its establishment in 1921, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic has been a point of contention, with politics in the North and South being decided by “the border question.”²⁰ Doherty relies on the loaded meaning of the border for this work.

In both Irish and international contexts, Doherty provides two alternative readings—border or border incident—but does not take a side. If the viewer associates paramilitary violence with the scene, it could be loyalist or republican. With *Border/Border Incident*, Doherty provides the image and the viewer gives the image

²⁰ Declan McGonagle, in interview.

meaning. In an article for *CIRCA*, Paul O'Brien furthers the discussion of Doherty's reliance on meaning:

Doherty's photographs raise the question of how we fill in meanings to images, in the context of the set of accepted ideological responses. They also raise the issue of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, terrorism after all being a kind of street theatre which relies on the society of the spectacle for survival.²¹

By combining words and images in the gallery context, rather than a journalistic context, Doherty has succeeded in McGonagle's battle between representation and embodiment—Doherty embodied the phenomena of terrorism, street theatre, and spectacle without settling for merely representing it.

Ballagh and Doherty Case Studies in Contrast

Looking at Ballagh and Doherty provides deep contrasts in background, recognition, message, and medium. Ballagh was from the Republic, but considered himself well versed in and concerned with the situation in the North. Doherty is from the North and witnessed Bloody Sunday as a child. It would be easy to dismiss Ballagh's 32-county Ireland and label him as a Southern artist, but the art parallels the politics in this instance—the notion of identity is complicated. The Good Friday Agreement guarantees the right to hold dual Irish-British citizenship precisely because there is not one, settled upon notion of national identity. Similarly, there is so much crossover and commonality between the artists' experiences North and South, that it would be unfair to categorize them as one or the other.

During an interview, Theo Sims, director of the Context Gallery in Derry, ventured so far as to say that he thought there was a huge difference between Southern

²¹ Paul O'Brien, "Willie Doherty: Language, Imagery, and the Real."

and Northern Irish contemporary art. When challenged to explain the difference, however, he gave a list of surface-level differences, such as uplifting versus depressing, which he promptly retracted. Sims was willing to say there was a difference, but could not articulate it. I do not consider this is an inadequacy of Sims, but rather an indication that the difference is truly too subtle and complex to explain. A revealing test of this would be to show a group of curators Irish contemporary artwork which they were not already familiar with and ask them to decide if it was from the North and South.

Furthermore, the two artists have achieved success, but on different terms. Indicators of Ballagh's success, commercial value of his work aside, include being asked to design postage stamps and the pre-Euro Irish banknotes.²² His populist methods have won him the task of designing populist objects—stamps and money. Doherty's success has been more confined to the art world and he has achieved more external validations of success—such as the Turner prize nominations and the Biennales. The context of their success may also be generational and time-based—the Turner Prize only began in 1984.

Ballagh and Doherty represent two different generations of artists and are thus working within different political and artistic contexts. Ballagh, already a young man when most of the violence in the North took place, would have had a clear memory of pre-Troubles Ireland. He made a conscious choice to concern his art with the Troubles. As Doherty did not know another way of life, this choice may have been less obvious to Doherty. McGonagle describes the period of Ballagh's popularity (the late 1970s and early 1980s) by saying, "Visual art thinking was still largely trapped in signature object

²² Philip Vann, "Robert Ballagh: An Overview," 17.

mode and reactions to that mode.”²³ Artists were struggling to find what McGonagle called the “critical means” to deal with the political situation, which he believes only came to fruition with lens-based media and performance art during Doherty’s time in art school.²⁴ McGonagle, in catalog after catalog, drives home this point of divergence in Irish art. In this excerpt from the 2008 *A Shout in the Street* exhibition catalog, McGonagle further articulates the position of the Irish practice during the 1970s:

Art was not then positioned nor understood, generally, as a means of negotiating reality, as a means of dialoguing and as a reciprocal rather than rhetorical process. Ideas of engagement were marginalized as Community Arts and engagement with political issues was held on the fringes of mainstream art practice and discourse.²⁵

This divide between the ways artists treat reality—Ballagh’s signature object mode versus Doherty’s new critical means—parallels the cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism. Purposefully direct in his message and using the accessible imagery of Pop Art and realist painting, Ballagh relies on traditional modernist methods to convey meaning. Ballagh is modernist because the formal qualities of his work, such as hard-edged lines, were primary to his underlying themes. To make the undertones of and associations with the subject matter primary, however, like Doherty’s many readings of a burnt-out car, is to operate within a postmodern framework. In *Thinking Long*, American art historian Lucy Lippard explains “some of his images are appropriated from reality, but words take them back to an existential state.”²⁶ The transition from conveying history and reality to the interrogation of those subjects separates the practices of Ballagh and Doherty.

²³ Declan McGonagle, *A Shout in the Street*, 15.

²⁴ Declan McGonagle, in interview.

²⁵ Declan McGonagle, *A Shout in the Street*, 15.

²⁶ Lucy Lippard, “Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind: Some New Irish Art,” 25.

Part 2: Art and Politics Revisited, National Identity, Public Money Complicating Political Art, Is Irish Art Different?

Art and Politics Revisited

Let us review the *Artforum* question—“what is your position regarding the kinds of direct political action that should be taken by artists?”²⁷ In the original 1970 survey, artists responded in a variety of ways. Carl André replied with a complicated abstract analogy of art as a branch of agriculture. Jo Baer went for the obvious “all art is political.” Walter Carby Barnard said there should be no relationship, saying, “my guess is that most artists are better off outside of politics.” Different still, Don Judd discussed artist unions and policy changes within museum boards of directors.

It is clear that the notion of “art and politics” as a phrase means different things to different people. I found the same variety of responses as *Artforum* did in 1970; my results were parallel. Curator Sean Kissane responded with the example of the Guerilla Girls, who were concerned with female artist representation and marginalization within the art world.²⁸ Ballagh’s first impulse was to discuss his involvement with *droite de suite*, or artist resale rights, which is surprisingly because Ballagh was the most outwardly political interviewee.²⁹ Golden Thread Gallery director Peter Richards replied, “I think that especially in Northern Ireland, an overtly and fraught political backdrop, has probably made that situation more polemic, where there were artists who sought to completely avoid that subject.”³⁰ McGonagle emphasized that artists of his

²⁷ “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” *Artforum*, New York, September 1970, in *Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*.

²⁸ Sean Kissane, in interview.

²⁹ Robert Ballagh, in interview.

³⁰ Peter Richards, in interview.

contemporary did not know *how* art could be direct political action.³¹ The range of responses indicates the complexity of the relationship between art and politics and that this relationship can change, but in the very least, confirms the strong relationship between the two aspects of society.

Many respondents were sure to point out that all artists in the Northern Ireland political context consciously made a choice to either reflect that context or avoid it completely, but that even the decision to *not* paint about the Troubles was inherently political. Irish artist and art critic, Brian O’Doherty takes this a step further in saying, “To make visual art in such a context is to initiate, however indirectly, a social action.”³² The question then is, if art is social action, what is the consequence of that action? Can we measure the effect of it? The following paragraphs, in the form of more questions will look at different ways to measure the effects of this convergence of art and politics in Irish contemporary art—is it building national identity? Is the whole interaction becoming sullied by public money? Is it setting itself apart from other practices?

Is Irish contemporary political art concerned with national identity?

As I walked through a recent exhibition called *A Shout in the Street* at the Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast, I was overwhelmed by images of Bobby Sands, the murals, Orange marches, bonfires, traditional Gaelic music, flute bands, paramilitary acronyms, and death counts. How else could you categorize these images but as Troubles images? If these are the images that I associate with the Troubles and recent Irish history, then they inform my understanding of Irish national identity. From written research and

³¹ Declan McGonagle, in interview.

³² Brian O’Doherty, “Thinking North,” 6.

interviews, it became clear that a steep resistance has developed against reading Irish contemporary art as being concerned with national identity.

For instance, in 1985, American art critic Lucy Lippard recognized an “identity crisis at the center of much of Irish art.”³³ But by 1999, McGonagle is writing, “Artists are living beyond these questions of nationalism. The task for artists in general and Irish artists in particular is to create third readings.”³⁴ So *can* be concerned with national identity, but that is not its main theme? If all of those symbols in *A Shout in the Street* do not serve to build cultural capital, what do they do? Another writer in *Irish Art Now*, Kim Levin also wants us to resist looking at the art in terms of national identity, asking “How can we explain the irresistible temptation to interpret their work in terms of nationality, however spurious or stereotyped?”³⁵ Why do we have to resist this? Is this what makes it Irish? How is that nationality conveyed?

Let us return to *A Shout in the Street*. As part of the exhibition series *Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art* at the Golden Thread Gallery, the show is “not an attempt to create one history: central to the project is an acknowledgement that there are many versions of history,”³⁶ explains Golden Thread director Peter Richards. Our own versions of history, however, serve to create a sense of national identity. This argument is better made by someone outside of the art historical perspective. Dominic Bryan, a lecturer in social anthropology at Queen’s University in Belfast whose primary interest is in political symbols, explained in an interview, “Art in the past has provided us with symbols which have a long-lasting influence on the way that people understand historical

³³ Lucy Lippard, “Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind: Some New Irish Art,” 17.

³⁴ Declan McGonagle, *Irish Art Now*, 34.

³⁵ Kim Levin, *Irish Art Now*, 28.

³⁶ Peter Richards, *A Shout in the Street*, 8.

moments,” citing examples of King William of Orange in the Battle of the Boyne.³⁷

People look to these symbols and the way they are portrayed to tell them about their history and to create a link from who we *were* to who we *are*, thereby creating a sense of national identity.

Two different senses of national identity may come from the same symbol, Bryan adds. For example, Willie Doherty’s burnt-out cars could resonate with either side—Protestant or Catholic—and still build a sense of national identity. Bryan explains the duality:

“People can associate with the same symbol in different ways. But nevertheless, if they all associate with it, it becomes important to them. So it can create what people call a symbolic sense of community, a sense of belonging based around a symbol—even though there’s no common understanding of the symbol. And that’s the power of symbols within politics and community.”³⁸

Because the art in this paper and these exhibitions relies so heavily on the symbols of Irish history, and those symbols naturally build communities, it is unfair to deny the importance of Irish contemporary political art in the discussion of national identity.

Declan McGonagle thinks that more than national identity or party politics or lived experience, this art is about power—“Who has the power? How is it exercised? On whose behalf is it exercised? And with what sort of means?”³⁹ This sets up notions of competition for power—one national identity pitted against another. And, of course, the ultimate indication of power in modern conflict has been money.

³⁷ Dominic Bryan, in interview.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Declan McGonagle, in interview.

Does public money complicate political art?

I would never have raised this question in a United States context, as private philanthropy far outweighs public spending in the arts (1.5 million versus 12 billion).⁴⁰ In Ireland, however, both North and South, the vast majority of galleries, organizations, and publications I encountered received most (if not all) of their funding from government art councils, rather than generous private benefactors or foundations. Noticing this, I became interested in the idea that public money complicates political art. If an artist criticizes the government, but takes money from the government in forms of commissions, does that make the artist a hypocrite? Most of the Irish contemporary artists I had come across in my research had done public art projects or taken payment from the local arts council. For example, Rita Duffy's 1999 *Dessert*,⁴¹ which was a full-size AK47 made out of chocolate, was displayed in St. Dominic's High School on the Falls Road in Belfast and at the ICA London. Though St. Dominic's is a private, Catholic school, the ICA London is a publicly funded institution.

Let us examine the circular nature of this transaction. Paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland are associated with political parties who have achieved representation in Stormont, the seat of democracy in Northern Ireland, which remains a part of the United Kingdom and receives financial support from Britain. British politicians approve the museum's funding, the museum pays Duffy, and Duffy criticizes the methodology of

⁴⁰ Michael Jay Freidman, "U.S. Supports the Arts Through a Blend of Public and Private Spending."

⁴¹ See *Appendix* for image

violence chosen by paramilitary organizations such as the UVF and IRA in Northern Ireland. Is Duffy guilty of biting the hand that feeds her?

Sean Kissane, curator at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, gives another example of the interaction between money, politics, and art drawing from the wider context of art history, the land art movement of the 1970s:

The idea of creating a hole in the ground was that if you created an art object, which was an object...an actual object, then you would theoretically have to sell that work, that there would be some kind of exchange involved in the art object...If you sold the work, then money was exchanged—theoretically tax was paid. If you paid tax, the money went to the government. If you gave money to the government, you were funding the Vietnam War. If you were funding the Vietnam War, you were killing children. And so the simple act of creating an artwork became very directly politicized. The land art movement was very much to do with finding ways of creating an artwork which would be guiltless and also make a protest. And so by creating a hole in the ground, which was completely ephemeral, and activated by nature, then you created a protest and you bypassed the system.⁴²

Many Irish contemporary artists have tried to protest the system, but have not bypassed the system. I found this problematic because, in Kissane's terms, this makes the artists guilty participants of the very entity they criticize. None of the eight interviewees seemed to be troubled or interested in the art and money question, giving nonchalant responses about putting food on the table and economic realities. Perhaps enough time has passed or there is enough distance between the source of the money and the artist, but the relationship between public money and political art is not a concern in Irish contemporary art.

The one satisfying explanation came from Ballagh. He has taken many private and public commissions, but does not see a contradiction because he believes the primary

⁴² Sean Kissane, in interview.

obligation of the artist is to paint truth. To illustrate this, Ballagh paraphrased Antony Cronin on poetry: “If the poet tells the truth about his position in society then he’s doing as great a political act as any politician.”⁴³ So as long as Ballagh is truthful to himself or the public about what he thinks, where the money comes from is irrelevant.

Is Irish contemporary political art different?

When you walk into a gallery of German Expressionist paintings, there are distinct visual qualities and subject matters shared by the works—you can tell they are all related by walking in the room. When these schools of art were established, such as the Ashcan School or the Hudson River School, both in the United States, the artists shared similar influences from art history, were from the same geographic location, used similar artistic techniques, and read common authors. There need not be a physical school which all the artists attend, but there are enough unifying factors between the artists to form a school.

Are there unifying factors in Irish contemporary art? If I can identify a group of Irish contemporary artists who deal with politics, does that form a school? Less specifically, is Irish contemporary political art different? The simple answer is no. During interviews, many respondents blamed a global economy and therefore, a global art world, for the homogeneity of contemporary art. For example, curator Sean Kissane cites the necessity of participating in international art fairs, saying, “In order to be part of the contemporary discourse, you have to have bought into the economic system. I would suggest that it’s almost impossible to have a national school.”⁴⁴

⁴³ *Robert Ballagh: Works from the Studio 1959-2006*, 64.

⁴⁴ Sean Kissane, in interview.

In her essay for *Irish Art Now*, Levin asks, if we look at this art as contemporary art, not as Irish art, do our readings change?⁴⁵ The national identity problem and Troubles context makes these works distinctly Irish. If you do not recognize the cultural symbols and are ignorant of the context, the work is simply contemporary art. If the simple answer is that there is no national school, the complicated answer is that there is a school *if you are aware of the context*.

SIX: CONCLUSION

My project is far from complete, but as my research time was limited, I did as much as I could in the time permitted. Were I to revisit this topic, there are a number of further steps I would take. First, I would have done more non-Ireland specific research on art and politics. Second, I would have done two visual analyses per artist, rather than only one, so as to give the reader a better understanding of each artist. Even if I had kept it to one visual analysis per artist, *Inside No. 3* would have been a better choice for Ballagh because it would illustrate more points I wanted to make later in the paper. Third, I would have done fewer interviews and asked more focused questions. Talking to eight individuals gave me a broad understanding, but was a very time-consuming process. Fourth, I would have further developed the modern-postmodern divide between Ballagh and Doherty. Despite my limitations of time, I have developed a solid foundation in topics that will serve me well in my further studies in government and art history.

This examination of Irish contemporary art and politics has answered some of my original questions, but has also raised new ones—most importantly, is political art effective? When Ballagh appropriated famous images of war by Goya, Delacroix, and

⁴⁵ Kim Levin, *Irish Art Now*, 29.

David as a commentary on the Troubles, the message was lost to most viewers. He had to make the connection unavoidable by juxtapositioning a newspaper from Derry with the Delacroix when he painted *My Studio 1969*. When the Belfast-based art group Factotem put up billboards criticizing the re-development of the city's Titanic Quarters in 2008, even the city council, who indirectly funded the billboard, did not seem to mind.⁴⁶ If neither ordinary citizens nor politicians are upset, are these works reaching the right audience? Is it the fault of the artist for not communicating his political message better? When Ballagh was quoted in the *Irish Times* condemning the destruction of the artist studios in Dublin and the planned re-development,⁴⁷ the *Irish Times* editorial board responded with a personal attack on Ballagh.⁴⁸ Why do an artist's words get more of a rise than his art?

The effectiveness of political art is hard to measure—it would be impossible to tally how many minds were opened or how many viewers saw a situation differently as a result of a piece of art. Even if we could measure the effectiveness of political art, would it matter? Does art have to be effective to justify its existence? Just as this paper is not supposed to be thesis-driven, neither is fine art. One way to contemplate the effectiveness of political art could be to consider the possibility of its absence. What if the land art movement never happened? What if Robert Rauschenberg never produced his series with American flags and JFK? Although political art has probably never swung an election, it is a vital part of the effort to make sense of what is going on around us.

⁴⁶ Peter Richards, in interview

⁴⁷ Olivia Kelly, "Artist Ballagh opposing planned 14-storey building."

⁴⁸ Irish Times Editorial Board, "Who will pay the price for objectors?"

Citizens of both the North and South are struggling to make sense of a changing Ireland. The economic boom of the last ten years, known as the Celtic Tiger, seems to have been declared as Ireland was the first eurozone to fall into a recession in the recent worldwide economic crisis. The Northern Ireland power-sharing executive could not agree upon an agenda of issues to work on, halting all discussions and progress by refusing to meet for five months. Just as the political situation in both the North and South is still developing and ever changing, the visual culture of Ireland reflects the transformation taking place. As Irish politics and society develop in the future, it will be telling to see how the art that emerges reflects a new Ireland.

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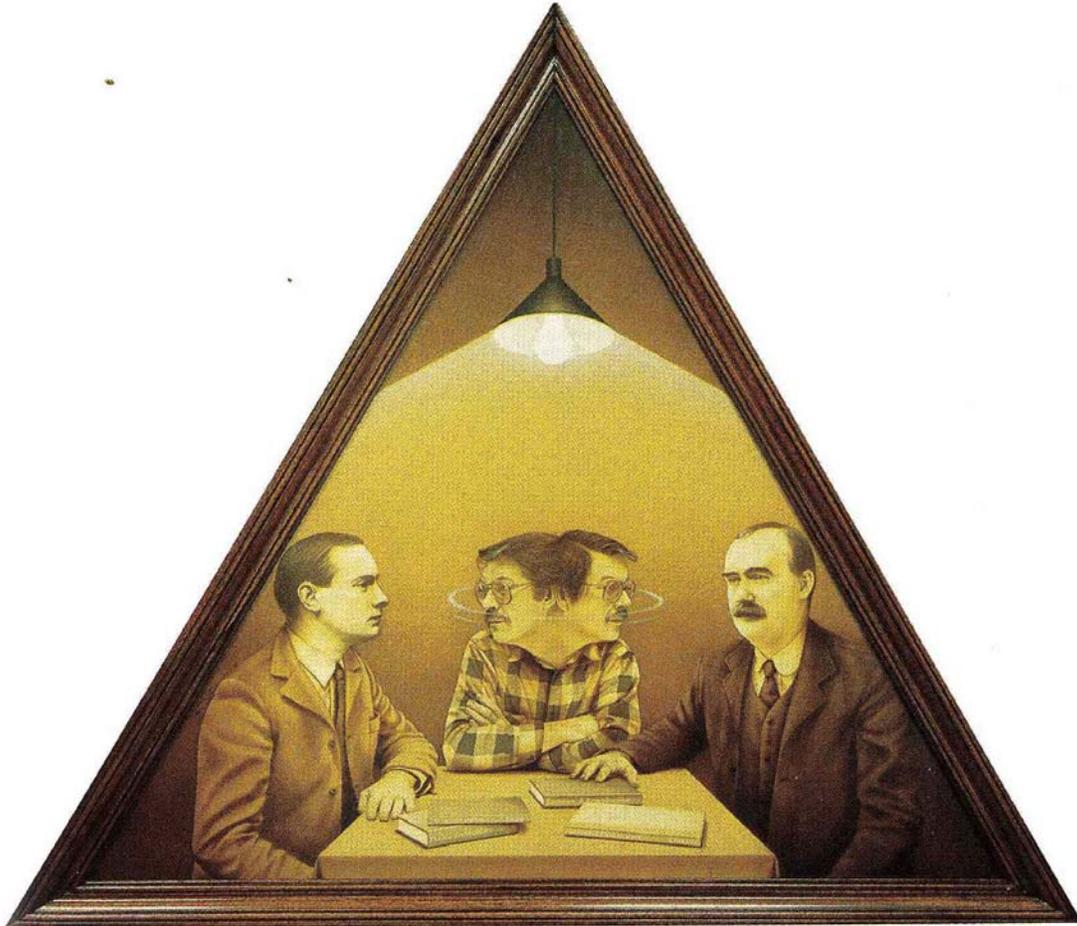
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EIGHT: APPENDIX

In the appendix, readers will find images discussed in the paper, a list of individuals who were interviewed, and the interview transcripts.

IMAGES



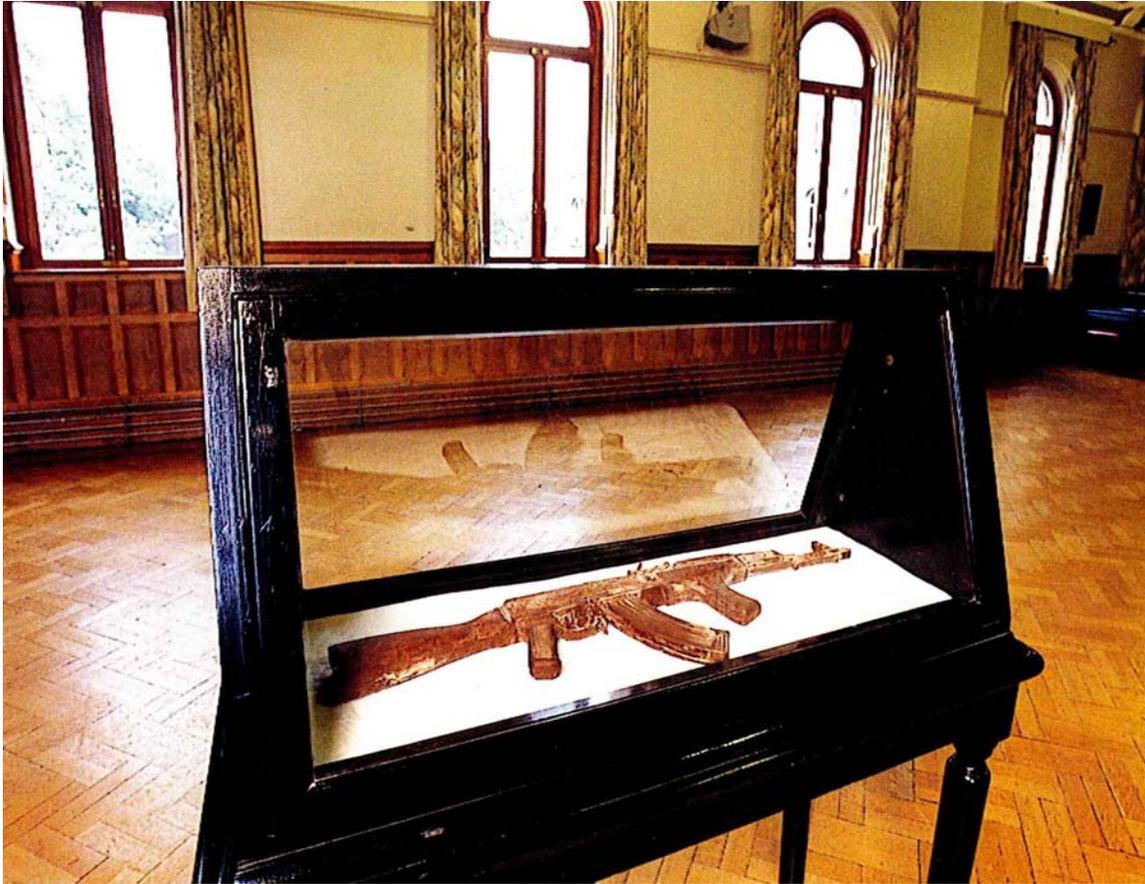
The History Lesson, Robert Ballagh, 1989 ⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Image taken from *Robert Ballagh: Works from the Studio 1959-2006*, 2006.



Border/Border Incident, Willie Doherty, 1994⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Image taken from *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political*, 1999.



Dessert, Rita Duffy, 1999 ⁵¹

INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED

(listed in the order in which they were interviewed, as are transcripts)

Sean Kissane, Curator, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland

Robert Ballagh, Artist, Dublin, Ireland

Dominic Bryan, Professor of Social Anthropology, Queen's University in Belfast, United Kingdom

Peter Richards, Director, the Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, United Kingdom

Theo Sims, Director, the Context Gallery, Derry, United Kingdom

Pauline Ross, Director, the Playhouse, Derry, United Kingdom ⁵²

Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, Curator of Irish Art, National Gallery of Art, Dublin, Ireland

Declan McGonagle, President, National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland

⁵¹ Image taken from *Rita Duffy: The Essential Gesture*, 2005.

⁵² Digital recording of interview with Ross was accidentally deleted before it had been transcribed. Summary is notes given in lieu of transcript.

TRANSCRIPTS

Transcript of Interview with Sean Kissane at the Irish Museum of Modern Art 13 November 2008

[I introduce myself, explain that I have been studying Irish politics and history for the past two months, have visited Belfast, Derry, and Co Mayo. I explain that my project is on art and politics in Ireland, specifically contemporary art dealing with the Troubles.]

[hands me an exhibition catalog called *How Things Turn Out*]

SEAN KISSANE: Why don't you look at that? First of all, because it is people who are more your generation. And those artists would all be under 40. This is a show we did in about 2002 maybe, or 2003...or 2002. And there was an invited writer who came from...Maria Hlavajova, who was based in Bratislava. And she was invited to come to Ireland and look at younger generation artists—North and South. And her text in this catalog is about how she went to Northern Ireland expecting everything to be about politics and found, in fact, that it was the opposite and that really people were just trying to go on with their lives. And that's one of the first things to point out. Just because there is a political situation in a country does not mean that 100 percent of the artists are going to deal with that or even have an engagement. The irony is, of course, that most of the artists have a political position or opinion, but they are dealing with it in very, very different ways.

So one of the more interesting ones would be...I will show you now...her Heather Allen [looks for one of her works in the catalog]...Oh there isn't a picture. And she lives outside Belfast and her work for the exhibition was kind of an installation where she organized a party on the opening night. And basically one gallery room is painted black and um, she organized a kind of a rave. So basically we had to allow drinking and smoking in the gallery room for that night, which you can imagine is difficult because you have to turn off the smoke alarms and so on. But what she was reconstructing was a container party. And what that is...is that, if you hold extreme views of any kind in Northern Ireland, be it extreme nationalist or extreme loyalist, then obviously you're going to find it hard to find social spaces in which you feel accepted and also in which you feel comfortable. For example, if you're an extreme loyalist and you see an extreme nationalist that you recognize at a bar, then of course you're going to start causing trouble. So what they do is they have container parties. They have containers in which they organize their own social events and this is what she recreated. Now again, this would kind of be...considering that you're bringing it back to the museum context...it's a very nontraditional art...medium, if you like. It more raises awareness of the fact that social constructs exist around notions of political, but that you don't necessarily have to make monument to a particular event orDo you know what I mean? You don't have to make Bloody Sunday concrete. You can show the ways which society changes around political events. And she's a very interesting artist to look at.

Another artist was in this exhibition was Eoghan McTigue and he made a very simple thing about the tricolor. And in Belfast, particularly, the curbstones in certain parts of the city are painted green or red to denote nationalist or loyalist. So what he did was he created flags for the exhibition which were a blend of the two so that you would have blue and green, red and orange, that kind of thing. If you change the patterns of the flag, the colors of the tricolor, then you end up with modernist painting. Again, if you mix the colors, you end up with something like the French flag, which is *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. And so you go into the Shankill Road, which is loyalist and it's painted red, blue, and white, and they're saying *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and it's a very clever inversion, if you like, of the founding fathers of French enlightenment thought. And so he's an interesting one.

You also should look at Phil Collins who was in the last Turner Prize and Phil spent about 2 or 3 years living in Belfast and his entire practice is based around the idea of media vacuum. So because of the Good Friday Agreement and theoretically peace and disarmament occurring in the North, you had a media vacuum occur. We went from being completely saturated, certainly in Ireland, of "today, x was killed, x was bombed," to almost silence about Northern Ireland. So his interest is entering a space after the silence has occurred. So one of his main focuses is the Drumcree Church. Because these issues have become about civil rights, which of course was the founding principle of the Northern struggle, the Troubles, has now been turned into a framework within which to call a civil unrest and to amplify sectarian divides. And so many of his photographs from the time were just Orangemen. Often they were Orangeboys, I would call them, because they were very young men in track suits and runners, rather than the traditional bowler hat and black suit. His documentation of this vacuum has been quite interesting.

I brought you this second book, which unfortunately I can't give you...

EMILY MEINHARDT: Would NCAD have it?

SK: They would, they would. It's called *Shifting Ground* and it's from a show in 2001. In the 70s, there were some extremely interesting artists working in Ireland and I wanted to point out this to you, which is John Aiken, and it was a performance installation which was done in 1978 at the Project Gallery. Lines of rope were stretched out on the ground like this [points to photograph of installation in catalog]. Bars of sand were used to cover them. And then during the opening, the ropes were pulled violently and that was a bomb, effectively, destroying an artwork in the gallery. Very, very simple means—much to do with land art and things like *arte povera*. A very, very powerful means of examining that.

Now another very interesting art work from the period was this piece which is by James Coleman, which I guess is Ireland's most important video artist. This was a work, which was, again, from 1978, and it was called *Strongbow*. And if you know your Irish history, he was really the kind of first Norman lord to conquer Ireland, I suppose in around 1170. And effectively, the Norman conquest, is how Irish people, when they talk about 700 or 800 years of oppression—that's what they're talking about. They're talking about an invasion. Whereas the reality is that it would have been...Elizabethan plantations would have been a more accurate starting point. But this is the cast of Strongbow's tomb from—it's either Christ Church or St. Patrick's Cathedral, I can't remember. The original installation showed this cast of Strongbow in a very darkened room and on a monitor was an orange and a green hand

clapping together. It started quietly and then it built up into a very deafening cacophony of these clapping hands—until it was uncomfortable to be in the space. Then it stopped and started again. Now this piece is owned by the IMMA collection and when we asked the artist to reinstall this piece for the show in 2001, he examined the point that at that time, the NI peace talks were actually in process, and so peace in Ireland was a work in process also. So what he did was he remade the work by creating—this is a new plaster cast—can you see it here? [points out plaster cast in photograph in catalog]. This is the line of the new plaster cast. Then he transferred the video onto DVD, put it on a fancy new plasma screen. Lined the gallery room with plaster board making it look like a kind of studio and left all the packing boxes in lines and the rigging and so on, so that basically, you can no longer fix the history in the same way that it was, that history is actually about discourse. That history is constantly changing. That to take a fixed point is a mistake—misleading. So this is a very, very smart work about the Troubles.

You know Partick Ireland?

EM: Yeah...Brian O'Doherty...

SK: And you know he's buried himself?

EM: Just in April of this year, right?

SK: Exactly. So that was also an interesting perspective on the time. What else did I want to say to you...did you want to ask specific questions?

EM: The questions were more you as a participant in the world of contemporary Irish art...your observations...general questions about what you believe the relationship between art politics is and should be and has been.

SK: My position on any work to do with the Troubles is that it cannot be seen in isolation. This is not an Irish issue. This was a global issue, because if you don't look at Martin Luther King, if you don't look at conceptual art in the US, if you don't look at movements for civil rights internationally, you've absolutely no grasp at all of the Irish situation. The kind of civil rights in Derry could not have happened without the civil rights movement in the US and so it comes out of that post-1968 examination of women's roles, gender roles, sexual roles, politics roles...because those are all kind of tied into very essentialist difference—essentialist being in terms of gender, religion, race, all of those kinds of notions. Catholic and Protestant was an essentialist divide in the same way which gender is or sexual orientation might be. These were all of the issues which were being examined or interrogated through various civil rights movements. It's almost like an end to feudalism or an end to notions of fixed governance and trying to take on a much wider sense of what to be democratic is. It's a real striving for democratic structures, which are truly democratic. Gerrymandering, of course, in the North, was a really serious problem which disenfranchised to a large extent the Catholic population. So that would be my first perspective, that I would not look at something like John Aiken's work from 1978 without looking at Michael Heizer in Nevada. Do you know those works?

EM: No, I don't know Heizer.

SK: Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim and Walter De Maria...

EM: De Maria I know...

SK: They were all the founding land artists in the late 60s in the US. Michael Heizer created these things called the *Nevada Depressions*. 1968 was called the year of the hole in the ground. The idea of creating a hole in the ground was that if you created an art object, which was an object...an actual object, then you would theoretically have to sell that work, that there would be some kind of exchange involved in the art object...If you sold the work, then money was exchanged—theoretically taxed was paid. If you paid tax, the money went to the government. If you gave money to the government, you were funding the Vietnam War. If you were funding the Vietnam War, you were killing children. And so the simple act of creating an artwork became very directly politicized. The land art movement was very much to do with finding ways of creating an artwork which would be guiltless and also make a protest. And so by creating a hole in the ground, which was completely ephemeral, and activated by nature, then you created a protest and you bypassed the system. They did completely wonderful things...like Smithson created the *Spiral Jetty*...

EM: I know Smithson. Going off of those topics of funding and how that complicates or politicizes the art, why do you think that Willie Doherty or Rita Duffy or any of those artists who have been supported by public money...Arts Council...why does it not concern them that it might be supporting the system by taking their money? Or taking commissions to support people who...like in Robert Ballagh's case, he didn't like how Easter Rising was being commemorated by ...it wasn't being commemorated properly...he still took government money and used that...

SK: Well it's important to point out that they're a different generation. Forty years have passed since the land art and since classic conceptual movements happened and the art system did not collapse. Different ways were found of protest. And in fact, the civil rights movement *did* occur. And the women's rights movement *did* occur. And various types of emancipation have occurred. And so it's now the agency has changed. It's now up to artists to deal with things in their own way. Willie's work...it's never directly political. Ever. He never chooses a side. I would compare him to someone like Shiran Neshat. Do you know her? [I shake my head] She's an Iranian artist. She deals with women's roles in Iran, but she shows in the US. For example, what she will do, is she will have an image [finds image on his computer]...she will have an image like this and this is called *Women of Allah* and obviously the barrel of the gun looks like a jewel, but the poetry...there are two types of poetry. The first one is feminist poetry which says, "We hate the veil. The veil has ruined our lives. It has taken away our femininity. We are just black crows. We have no power over our appearance." The next image will have a poem written by a feminist poet and it will say, "The veil has saved me. The veil has freed me from the male gaze. I am no longer an object of solely sexual pleasure for a man. I am now free to pursue professional roles from

the fact that I have been freed from sexual oppression. And so for me, I think it's an interesting comparison, the way she deals with gender politics—gender and politics in the same work.

Willie does something similar. In a work like this, he was also included in this exhibition, in this work called *The Walls*, also owned by IMMA [finds image on computer]. He's very, very ambiguous in the way he deals with...so it's the walls of Derry and it says, "Within forever. Without forever." But it's completely ambiguous. Who's within and who's without? The wall separates them and that's really all that matters. It's not something like the Berlin Wall, in which there's a clear inside/outside, but again, you're not taking the communist perspective—to the communists they're inside, you know what I mean? And you're outside. Whereas, if you're a westerner, you're inside...and they're outside. And so again, it's this notion of trying not to oversimplify the approaches that the artists take, but to actually look at international comparisons and to always shift the view. Because you only bring your perspective and you bring all of your essentialist culturist baggage with you. And you are not actually guilt free in your viewing of the work. And so people like Willie Doherty and Shiran Neshat very much implicate you in the act of viewing in that they first of all give you your own perspective. Because Willie always offers a perspective—maybe two, maybe three. But the point is, you will automatically respond to the one which you feel describes yourself. What Willie's work does is then mirrors that back to you by making you have to consider the opposing side—and in a way it's not political as such, it's more to do with the act of viewing. I think it would be a mistake to categorize him as a political artist in the same kind of way because he does so much more than that. I think he deals with things like emotions, very human elements of stuff. It's not about making a political statement.

Rita Duffy's work I only know very slightly. From what I remember, it's paintings with elements of pretty clear martial imagery.

EM: It's caricatures of both sides—images of Mother Ulster and Mother Ireland—

SK: She's married to Richard Hamilton—he does "Citizen/Soldier"...they're hugely iconic [finds images on computer]. This is the hugely important one. It was a triptych. Do you know the others?

EM: No, I think I've only seen that one reproduced on its own.

SK: It's important in comparison with Willie's works – Richard does something similar...basically the other one was an Orangeman in his bowler hat. And the third image was a policeman...or an officer...you know, army guy.

EM: That they all view themselves as soldiers?

SK: The title is something like, "Citizen. Soldier..." I can't remember the third one. You should try to find that. As you say, each one has a tripartite. It's a kind of unholy trinity in the way that they combine the roles within the structure. I don't know Rita Duffy's work enough to comment on it. I don't know if that answers your question.

EM: That's okay. I think I have two more questions. A lot of what I've been reading has had to do with national identity and Declan McGonagle makes the point in one of his essays that art about national identity is over, that's not what it's about anymore...we're past that point...this work is not to do with just national identity anymore. I was wondering if you could comment on how works like we've discussed either helps to build or deconstruct ideas of national identity.

SK: I would say you have to look at the work of Damien Kiberd. He is a professor at UCD and he has a hugely complex take on what it is to be Irish because of colonialism. And it's hugely important to consider agency within the colonial Irish experience because while we were—we were the only white Europeans, you know, Western Europe, to have been colonized. So it gives us the unique position of being both...oh god, I can't remember my terminology. We're both the Other and...it's Other. If the white British is Something, I can't remember the term, then the black slave is the Other because they are sufficiently different to the person who is colonizing that it's easy to make them subhuman. Ah! I can show you an example. Because the first point of colonization is dehumanization. You have to consider your subject subhuman in order to colonize them. And so the British did that through a number of interesting series. So this is an example—I don't know the date of this [points to image on computer]. This is Florence Nightingale—19th century, beautiful...it's the study of physiognomy—the notion that the face reflects the morals. And Brigid McBruiser is what they would consider a typical Irish face. And you can see that it's very, very monkey featured, implying sub-evolutionary, Victorian notions of whatever. I'm not sure what this is [reading from image], "Look on this picture and then on that. Contrasted Faces." This is very Damien Kiberd kind of territory. This is another one, "the Eternal Paddy." Gentleman Englishman with this monkey-like Irishman. And so this process of dehumanization—or sub-humanization even—was hugely important in the Irish experience. And it's a typical colonial strategy.

Now that's all very well and good. We were treated very badly...desperate, desperate...terrible, terrible. What do the Irish do in India? They become some of the most brutal colonial agents. The Amritsar Massacre...General O'Dwyer...who I think is Irish [looks it up on the computer]

The notion that those who are colonized—as soon as they get out of their colonial framework—become worse than their oppressors.

Oh here we go, O'Dwyer requested that martial law be imposed and was granted by Lord Chance...oh he was Irish.

Anyway, the point is that as you get out of your own territory by which you were told you were subhuman, you subhumanize anyone around you. Maybe it's an act of making yourself feel better. It's the notion of agency that the Irish are not guiltless in the colonial experience by any means. There is an enormous national guilt there. And that is conveniently ignored by politicians. If you consider something like the Fianna Fáil party, it's the nationalist party, it's Sinn Féin, it's "ourselves alone," this notion that we are a kind of Celtic blah blah blah—it's nonsense. We are hugely implicated in the Western colonial experience and it's only through viewing history by works by somebody like Willie Doherty, which maintains distance from the image that the artist tries not to adopt a specific

stance. It's only then that you can get a fair viewpoint on either the history or the experience. So I would disagree with McGonagle. Don't know what you think of that.

EM: That's very helpful. Could you speak on Irish contemporary art, not just political, if it's characterized by something different. I know there's no school per se, but is there something that sets it apart?

SK: I would suggest that it's not possible to have any nationalized school in a globalized economy. The artists in this exhibition—they exhibit in New York, they exhibit in London, they exhibit in Paris. They're so much a part of a global art market now. I would suggest that you have to look at things like art fairs. I would blame things like Basel and Miami and Paulson and Freize and all of those. The extent to which they've homogenized everything. If you're French, Nigerian, Chinese...if you're not participating in those shows and fairs, you're outside the global economy, you're outside of an active framework within which people judge you and discuss you. Economics have over-riden any kind of national...economics and cultural engagement... The writers and the theorists...that guy who did *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud. All of these people are now taken up by the rich galleries. They're patronized and commissioned by an economic structure. In order to be part of the contemporary discourse, you have to have bought into the economic system. I would suggest that it's almost impossible to have a national school. In that way, I think that Declan McGonagle is right about a national identity, but I think there's a huge difference between a national school and a national identity. Because identity politics is always going to be there, but a national school assumes that you can go into an exhibition and say, "Oh, this is clearly Irish...this is clearly German." Sometimes you can make a connection between artists of a certain nationality, but I think the notion of a school is that which is not there rather than the notion of identity.

EM: There was a survey done in the 1970s by *Artforum*, asking artists if they think that art should be used as direct political action. Carl Andre replied...Donald Judd...etc. Could you respond to the same question?

SK: It's still happening. One Venice [Biennale] ago, so that would have been 2005... Rosa Martinez and another woman were the directors. But the directors of the Venice Biennales are almost always men. So it was interesting to see two women and their take on it. They gave a very large platform to the Guerilla Girls. And the work showed in 2005, very much a work from that same survey of *Artforum*. In that time there were no women in MOMA, there were no solo exhibitions, there were women on the boards, no women anywhere. And you think, "Oh, well that's dreadful." But the statistics in 2005 weren't much better. Something like 10 percent of women were in the national collections. Something like 4 solo exhibitions by women. So if you can try and dig up that work from 2005...

EM: Would that be the same time as the work that stated, "Do women have to be nude to be in museums...?"

SK: That's exactly the work. But the point is, we all said, "That's terrible," in '68. But in 2005, it's shocking to see that not very much has shifted. Personally, I find that kind of issue-based work to be thin.

EM: What do you mean by that?

SK: It doesn't have a lot going on. The message is there and that's it. I find it very hard to get excited about. It's the notion that the object isn't beautiful. It's not beautifully painted. It's not beautifully sculpted. The notion of the plastic arts isn't there. And the other perspective is that, once you get it, you get it. You don't go away having to think about it. You go away thinking about the message—you don't go away thinking about the artwork. It doesn't inspire you to get out your paintbrush.

EM: And that has been a criticism of Rita Duffy's work, "Okay, I get it. The four babies are the four provinces..." And it's like, "I get the symbolism. Done."

SK: Right. Move on. Willie's is more thought provoking because it's not done. It's the whole notion of implication, of agency, of nothing being black and white—the grey areas. The notion that something *might* happen—as opposed to something *has happened* or *will* happen. There isn't enough conditional tense in this kind of political work—this overtly political work. That's what's missing or is a weakness of directly issue-based work.

EM: Would you be willing to make the argument that because it's so thin, because it's so limited by that, that's why we haven't seen a great amount of change? There's been lots of feminist work since the 70s...and yet. That there are other methods we should be employing...?

SK: Well no, because again, you're looking at it in isolation. You're not comparing it to the business world or how many women directors there are at Ford. How many women directors are there of x, y, and z? This is a wider social issue. To look at it as an Ulster problem, or a Venice problem, or a worldwide problem...again, it's not happening in vacuum. And you have to look at social context to get your answer. And that's my answer to you. It's merely just another symptom of a global disease.

EM: It's interesting that you say that. I was just reading, in some of my research, that Ireland is the most heavily globalized country in all of the world in terms of investments.

SK: First euro-zone to have a recession.

EM: So then that is reflected in the art as well?

SK: And the economics. And contemporary art as well.

EM: Exactly.

**Transcript of Interview with Robert Ballagh at Studio, 5 Arbour Hill, Dublin
14 November 2008**

[I explain my study abroad program, where I've been in Ireland, what I've been doing for the past two months, what my project is about.]

EMILY MEINHARDT: In 1970, *Artforum* did a survey where they asked artists, "what is your position regarding the different kinds of political action that should be taken by artists?" Lawrence Weiner and Carl Andre replied and now I pose that question to you.

ROBERT BALLAGH: My reply would be multi-faceted. One of the things that I've always been involved in is political and very important to artists—and that's the status of the artist...artist rights. It's something I've been involved with for many years. I was the founding chair of the Association of Artists in Ireland in the early 80s. We worked for many years lobbying government on artist rights. Through that, I became involved with the International Association of Artists, which is a UNESCO affiliate. I became involved in the International Executive Committee, so I worked internationally on the issue of artists rights. More recently I became involved with the implementation of the EU deciding to introduce a directive on artist resale rights or *droite de suite*. This was something that even back in the 80s we were lobbying for, probably thinking then it would never happen. But then the EU decided to make this a directive. And then to our great surprise the Irish government failed to implement it. So I actually ended up taking the Irish government to court over this.

EM: When was this?

RB: 2006. And believe it or not, I defeated the government in the courts and the government, the week before the case was due, rushed through legislation on artist resale rights. And then I won the court case the following week. So now artists in Ireland have the right to benefit from the commercial exploitation of their work. So that's one way that an artist can be quite political—in their work to secure rights for artists. But that's not usually what most people think of when they think of artists being political. They think of artists being political in their work. And there's an interesting quote in that regard. Brian O'Doherty, an artist who signed his work as Patrick Ireland for a great many years as a political gesture over Bloody Sunday, and he wrote an article on me a couple years ago. He said, "Robert Ballagh's art is not a political art, it's art made by an intensely political person."

EM: This was in the book on Michael Farrell?

RB: Yes, exactly. And I just think that it was an interesting and valid comment. And even though I'm seen as a political artist, political person...I actually don't see the bulk of my art as political art. That's not to deny that I have done work over the years that has been viewed as quite political in its intent, but I don't see myself as a political artist

[Phone rings. Ballagh takes the call.]

RB: [laughs] That's about politics, too. That was a trade union asking if I would do a mural of Countess Markievicz.

EM: Where would that be?

RB: In their headquarters. Have to go and see them next week. New projects all the time...

EM: How do you decide what to take and what not to take? How do you prioritize?

RB: Well if I've plenty of money in the kitty—I'm not interested in the money element, it's whether the project interests me or not. If I'm stoney broke, whatever pays the most. But back to what we were saying...this business of political art. What do we mean by political art? You can say that all art is political. Even abstract art is political by refusing...it's political by saying, "I'm not going to paint x, y, and z." It's an exaggeration to say that all art is political, but I think what people mean by that is a work that makes a very definite statement about some political event.

I've done that over the years, but it's really only been an occasional thing, rather than a constant strand through my work. It's because of the age I am. I started to paint at exactly the time that the Troubles started in the North. My life as an artist and a person has paralleled that conflict for over 30 years. So I think it's understandable that there would be crossovers over that period. In 1968 and 1969, I worked on a series of paintings that were in my first one person exhibition in 1969—and many of those paintings were of civil rights marchers—both in the US and in Ireland. People forget that the civil rights movement in the North was hugely inspired by the civil rights movement in the states. They even had the same songs—"We Shall Overcome."

And shortly after that, I did a series of paintings that tried to comment on the Troubles as they were just beginning. And in that series, I looked at classical paintings...the Goya, the Delacroix, and the David. And I tried to do versions of them that would bring forward their comment into a style that was contemporary, a kind of pop art style. I felt that I couldn't do better than they did in terms of creating iconic images. I felt that by doing it in a contemporary style, I would make all of that relevant for the time, the 1970s. Of course, very few people saw this, unfortunately.

These paintings were done for an exhibition which toured around the place and went to Belfast. At that stage, the Arts Council had a gallery in Bedford Street, behind the city hall, which was like a shopfront gallery. And most galleries are tucked away somewhere. So paintings could be hung in the window. And Brian Farrell, who later became director of the Arts Council and was the exhibitions officer then, decided to hang the "Liberty and the Barricades" one in the window. And of course, I got all excited, thinking, "Oh they'll go mad...the loyalists or whoever will go mad." Because of this provocative political image. But when the exhibition was finished, I was talking to Brian and asked if there were any objections. He said, "Oh there was one. One DUP councilor contacted us to complain about the picture. He objected to the naked woman's breasts!" He didn't see the politics at all.

EM: So when you realized that the politics were being lost to the public, did you change what you were doing?

RB: Well I did a couple of years later. It was almost cheeky. I did this painting called, "My Studio, 1969." It was a studio scene. It had my version of the Delacroix in the background. And on the table, there were implements of the trade—you know brushes, etc. And on the table, a copy of the *Irish Independent* which had, "Riots in Derry" in the headline. Explicitly saying, "This is what it's about!" People could not fail to understand what I was saying.

Another thing I did way back then, which I thought was a very powerful gesture, was very ephemeral...after Bloody Sunday...for the Living Arts Exhibition, which was an annual exhibition, where I chalk-marked out the floor 13 victims, like they used to do in the old movies. I got real animal's blood and poured it on it. It was a very powerful gesture and drove some people absolutely mad. The interesting thing about it was when people came to the opening, people started to walk on it, and by the time the exhibition was over, it was all gone. One of the things I'm very aware of, when you have personal tragedy, I think it's a very dangerous thing for an artist to exploit people's tragedies. The fact I couldn't make any money out of this, I couldn't exploit this—it was just a once-off gesture, seemed to me philosophically satisfying.

I ran into a similar problem only a couple of years later—the incident of the Miami Showband. [explains Miami Showband incident] They killed three of the members of the band.

EM: Was this one of your mirror pieces?

RB: I did the mirror piece with that. I used to be one of those musicians. I played in showband, which was the popular form of entertainment in Ireland at the time. Now I had retired in the 60s, but I had played with the lead singer of that band—young fellow called Fran O'Toole who was killed in the ambush. When I read about it in the paper the next morning, I was absolutely shocked because I had played in the ballroom they played in Banbridge. I had driven that road back to Dublin many, many times. When you have personal experience, even a place where a tragedy takes place, any connection, it makes it so much more powerful.

[Phone rings again. Ballagh takes the call.]

RB: That was about a public art piece that I'm doing with Brian O'Doherty and an architect from Belfast that's to go in on the Falls Road. You know there's a section of the Falls Road that's going to be declared a gaeltacht? Which is the first new gaeltacht in Ireland since the 1950s. This is an area where the majority of people speak Irish. We're hoping that the powers that be will like what we're suggesting.

EM: Would this be a sculpture installation?

RB: Oh it's a big sculpture.

EM: My next question is about national identity. Declan McGonagle talks a lot about how the focus used to be the focus in Irish contemporary art used to be on national identity, and also the landscape, of course. In one of the shows he curated, he talked about how the show was to capture the changing identity and how Ireland is not what it used to be. Do you think that you're trying to build or deconstruct national identity? Is this something you're concerned with?

RB: Identity has always been a key thing for me. Identity is defined by history and place. I'm very aware of Irish history and I would buy into the post-colonial analysis that people like Declan Kiberd would subscribe to. That would be my version of cultural history.

And also sense of place. I would never be a landscape artist because I don't come from the country—I'm an urban person. My experience is the urban. The major cultural experience of my childhood was going to the movies. If I have any sense of identity, it's drawn from those two sources. The experience of Irish history and my knowledge of that history, from a colonial analysis, coupled with an urban experience...whatever that produces at the end...that's where my sense of identity comes from.

[Phone rings. Ballagh answers.]

EM: Going back to the mirrors and your appropriations...how do you decide what medium to use?

RB: I would like to think that I chose the medium that's most appropriate. My main medium is oil and canvas, but I've never shied away from using other media.

Obviously one of the more interesting areas that I got involved in during the mid-80s was working in the theatre. Theatre is very much a collaborative art form. There's one creator, mainly the playwright, but after that it's pretty much a collaborative affair. I've enjoyed it very much and it's brought me into contact with some very talented people. I've learned about all sorts of different technologies, like using projection, that are used nowadays in the theatre.

EM: Who would you identify as your main audience?

RB: I hope as wide a grouping as possible. I would be very disappointed if my audience was only the fine art audience. I very early on chose to work in a particular...

[Doorbell rings. Ballagh leaves.]

RB: A new biography of me is being published and this guy is the designer of the book.

[Shows me rough copies of the book jacket design.]

EM: Is it the same writer who wrote your previous biography?

RB: Yes, the only problem with working with someone you like and already know though, is that it tends to be a bit uncritical. It's much more about the times that I've lived through...and how, as an artist, my work has reflected the times. As well as being a biography of me, it's a biography of Ireland during the last 50-60 years.

I consciously chose a visual language that would be universally accessible. In other words, I chose to paint in a realist style. When I started off I wasn't able to do it properly. It took a long time, because I'm self-taught, to be able to paint in a mature, realist style. In the beginning, it was using the vernacular of pop art and other ways to communicate what I wanted to say. But all along, I had this idea of painting in a language that was universally accessible. It seemed to that way of painting is...I mean it's 500 years old. The majority of people absolutely understand this language. They're not confused by it. And by choosing that, I felt I had the best chance of access to the widest possible audience. I remember jokingly saying that if the Cubist revolution had succeeded and everyone saw the world through Cubist art, I'd be a Cubist artist. But that didn't happen. The version of the world that most people accepted was according to the classical roots. I haven't denied all of the interventions that have come from modern disciplines. I never subvert totally the traditional realist way of depicting the world.

EM: Just as contrast though, would you say that this one here is slightly surrealist? [Referring to a painting on an easel in the studio. A blue canvas blends in seamlessly to a blue sky, with a cityscape in the foreground.]

RB: This is a print, the final thing hasn't gone on it. Do you know Player's Blue cigarettes? Do you know smoke?

EM: Unfortunately.

RB: They reached sales of 40 billion or something and they commissioned me to do a print of...this is sales in Ireland! Not even international! I don't smoke. My wife smokes. I disapprove of smoking. But what goes on there...that's actually a canvas and what goes on there is the cover of Player's Blue cigarettes. This is the color of Player's Blue. This is an image that comes Dali's art of surrealism and you know, Magritte, the Belgian surrealist.

EM: When it's not a political message, do you feel more comfortable working in a surrealist form?

RB: I was always particularly attracted to Vermeer.

[Phone rings again. Ballagh picks up. Asks the caller to ring back. Denies that he has ever gotten this many phone calls in the course of an hour.]

RB: There's a political connection there, believe it or not. That guy is the brother of one of the hunger strikers who died. He has a painting by Dan O'Neill and he's short of money at the moment. He's interested in selling it and was asking my advice.

EM: Have you seen *Hunger*?

RB: No I haven't. It's very powerful I hear.

EM: I couldn't do anything for two hours after I saw the film.

RB: A friend of mine was Bick McFarland, who was the officer in charge of the Provos during the Hunger Strike. He said he thought it was very good and very powerful, so I think it must be very good if he was willing to say that. He's been invited to France to attend the premiere there and do an after-show talk. I do believe it's very powerful.

EM: Last question. I have been looking at Rita Duffy and Willie Doherty as well...can you comment on your position from the South? Does that give you a different...better...stronger perspective?

RB: I have never recognized the border—politically, artistically, or in any way. I consider myself an Irishman and my Ireland is a 32-county country. This goes back to when I was a musician—we played every county in Ireland. I was as likely to play in Belfast as Cork. I've never felt that there was a part of Ireland that I didn't belong to or that didn't belong to me. A lot of people in the South have never traveled North, have no experience in the North. That would not be my experience. I regularly traveled North—and that's both pre-Troubles and post-Troubles. I'd like to think that I have a reasonably accurate view of the North. My critics would say it's one-sided in that it's from a nationalist perspective. Though that's probably true, I'm in a better position than most, because my mother was a Catholic and my father was a Protestant. I think I'm able to see both sides of the issue.

**Transcript with Professor Dominic Bryan at Queen's University in Belfast
17 November 2008**

[I explain my study abroad program, where I've been in Ireland, what I've been doing for the past two months, what my project is about.]

EMILY MEINHARDT: In what way does art in general contribute to national identity and how does Troubles art contribute to building or deconstructing national identity?

DOMINIC BRYAN: There's a number of ways...some of them are long historical ways...Art in the past has provided us with symbols which have a long-lasting influence on the way that people understand historical moments. I can think of two particular examples of that. One would be of King Billy crossing the Boyne, where various Dutch artists painted images of King William in a sort of glorified pose crossing the Boyne. And of course when people were painting these battles, they painted the kings in various glorious poses and from that you have kings painted as Roman emperors. You also got white horses. Have you seen the book by Belinda Loftus, *Mirrors*? She goes into some of that.

Although, there are interesting incidents which reflect upon how a piece of art can be received later. There was a picture of King William crossing the Boyne hung in Stormont up until the 1930s. And it had King Billy with the Pope looking down, longingly on King Billy, because at the time, despite the way it's viewed now, the Pope was supporting King William because he was fighting King James, who was being supported by King Louis of France, who was at war with the Pope, over various control of the Catholic Church. And a Scottish loyalist, so upset by the sight of Pope looking apparently, slashed the picture in Stormont with a knife. So it's interesting how a piece of art, in that case, has become so unacceptable to various people, despite the fact it was representing a truth at the time.

The other image that comes to mind that has been fed down is the Battle of the Somme—which has been re-used and re-used and re-used. The men going over the top—that's used in murals, all sorts of books. A particularly glorious image. And this gets re-created again and again. Then it becomes popular folk memory of what must have happened. And it looks more glorious than some of the black and white photographs of what actually happened in the trenches. There are two examples of how fine art can influence the way people understand politics and remember the past.

EM: And that would trickle down to more informal forms?

DB: It does because you have more popular forms of representation—the most obvious being banners, the Orange banners. And those two images I mentioned have appeared on banners frequently. And Neil Jarmon's book on banners will have stuff on that. Not only his longer book, but he had a little picture book on banners. [Finds book.]

EM: During your lecture, you talked about curbstones and displaying the flags and the murals. How do you think that fine art containing these kinds of symbols or messages differs in its audience, in the message it sends, in how powerful it is than those other forms of symbols?

DB: It's fairly obvious to say that the audience for works of art is a different audience than the audience for banners or murals. There is a crossover of the sort I've just explained. There's another crossover when artists try to undertake popular or public works of art. And I suppose, from your point of view, that becomes a more interesting categorization. Fine art that's going to sit in a gallery is going to have one kind of audience. Although even that can become very populist. Connor's paintings of the Boyne, of the Orange Order, have become pretty populist and used quite widely.

There was an artist in the 1990s who did a lot of popular paintings of the Orange Order...he had a studio down on Lisburn Road because I've visited it...

But clearly those representations that tend to be in galleries, even if they have populist moments, are in a much narrower, or may not be aimed...because I'm sure all artists want as many people to see their pictures as possible...when you're making public works of art...making statements in very public ways...is a quite different way of doing things and is a statement of what the effectiveness they want their piece of art to have.

I might be misremembering this. I think Rita Duffy had a plan that was part of the Belfast bid for the City of Culture in 2002 or something. It was a disaster. She had an idea to tow in an iceberg. Which is mad, but in some ways quite brilliant. I thought the whole image and everything it would have said about things and the message...I was assured by people it was actually possible.

EM: Yeah, from what I read about it, she looked into the port and whether it could handle an iceberg of that size. Would it melt before it got there? And so on. But this was all before it was attempted and I never read of it being realized.

DB: Well I wonder whether putting it out as an idea is a work of art in itself. Because it makes people think. It received a lot of publicity at the time. And it would cause a huge stir. It would be globally recognized. You know a story like that...the media organizations all around the world. The Titanic is a great story. Which has been rewritten by Hollywood. So you just know that all of the American TV stations which live on a diet of simple short stories would lap....

EM: They might not get Rita's message...

DB: Well they might not. But the reasons for art being used will vary and at the time, if you're trying to get City of Culture, I think that there are layered reasons you might do something and the message that the artist has is one of them. But since it's being put forward around the City of Culture bid, it's just to be populist and get Belfast in the headlines. There was another example, not to do with art, but to build a park in the north of the city, called Giant's Park. It's on the old city dump. It's a really big patch when you come into the harbor. And there was talk of building a sky lift from there up to Cave Hill over all of the houses. I've since been told by the Council that it was never really a runner. There were loads of privacy problems. Sky lifts normally go over mountains—this would have been over 3000 houses. But they said that they knew if they suggested this as part of the plan, people would get to know the plan. So sometimes just suggestions of these sort of things have their effect. That said, the idea of public works of art is potentially very powerful, particularly if they have a political nuance to them—if they're being aimed at having some effect. The statues when you go into Derry—the two hands which never quite meet—this sort of tells you something. They're not clasping hands because you never quite get there. Those sorts of images can be effective. They do have an effect on a

very wide scale of giving identity. They are part of the identity making process. Because if you did a substantial work of art for the city of Belfast and it comes to symbolize the city—it gets used on sweatshirts and t-shirts and people see the city—you can create symbols which people will have affinity to which are not necessarily tied to ideas of British or Irish identities. That is an important thing that can happen.

Nobody discusses Protestant or Catholic identities around the Titanic. But in the end, people in Belfast like to bizarrely remind people that it actually came from Belfast. Even though a book recently written revealed that it was shabbily made. You know, because the old joke in Belfast is, “Well it was okay when it left here.” Well the new book says, “Actually, it wasn’t okay when it left here.” Even something symbolically catastrophic as that... We have an investment quarter, where the docks are, called the Titanic quarter...It’s extraordinary really. If that’s the symbol that the rest of the world knows Belfast for, then it remains powerful. Even something which is broadly negative can remain a powerful symbol to be used. And that’s because of the key understanding of how symbols work. Of how different people can associate with the same symbol in different ways. But nevertheless, if they all associate with it, it becomes important to them. So it can create what people call a symbolic sense of community, a sense of belonging based around a symbol—even though there’s no common understanding of the symbol. And that’s the power of symbols within politics and community.

Most of ours here fall on either side. But it’s interesting that artists are often at the forefront of trying to create public works of art that work for both communities. You can do it in two ways symbolically. You either create something which is completely new and therefore, not tarnished by previous politics. Or you appropriate existing symbols which create an emotional resonance and you place them in a new context.

An obvious example of this is the police badge. They argued over what the PSNI’s new badge was going to be. In the legislation, it said the new badge had to be neutral. But politicians later agreed that instead of having a neutral symbol, we should have all of the symbols. So the crown stayed on it, the harp stayed on it, the dove of peace went on it, the scales of justice went on it. So rather than having it neutral and offend no one, you had everybody’s symbols on it. The irony is that the symbols are so small that almost nobody can see them. So in a way, the badge doesn’t offend anybody because if you ask them what’s on the badge, they don’t know. So in a strange way it is neutral.

You’ll know this from general media studies—you can never quite be sure how people read the messages that are being put in. An artist can never do that. In a way, when an artist produces a piece of work, it no longer belongs to them. It’s out there as a social object for people to interpret and reinterpret in ways that can become quite twisted.

Let me give you an example of something that is classic in this way...[goes on to explain how the words of the song “Jerusalem” have had different meanings. William Blake, who wrote the words, was anti-organized religion and the “satanic mills” he writes about in the song were not the industrial wastelands of England, but churches. Today, the song is sung in churches.]

Once the work of art is out there, the ability of the artist to control how meaning is being understood, particularly when a work of art is moving into a new context, it’s sort of beyond them. If they’re living, they can say what they think it means. Shakespeare can’t tell us what various scenes in his plays mean, but thousands of academics can. But we can never really know. It almost becomes pointless trying to work out what the artist means. And sometimes the artist might not have meant anything by it. But we read meaning into it.

I can only offer this bit—that the nature of the interpretation and the context of the work is not necessarily within the control of the artist, however they might mean the piece of art to be interpreted.

EM: So one of Rita Duffy’s works—there are two paintings...one is Mother Ulster and the other is Mother Ireland...there are four babies and those are interpreted to be the four provinces. Critics have said that there isn’t a lot of depth to her work because the symbols are too easily understood. With your background in symbols, do you think that there’s strength in something being that easily understood or that they’re wrong to dislike something because it’s easily understood?

DB: There are such debates around art and symbols. That’s a very difficult question to answer. Some of the stuff I’ve seen, I look at it and think it’s so simplistic. Even using the idea of the four provinces can be a very simplistic way of looking at Ireland. However, if you want you want your images to be effective, they must be simple. To have political resonances, you’re dealing in fairly simple things.

To stray from your fine arts example, you know that we collect a lot of flags. And the loyalists have gotten quite elaborate with their flag production. You learn how a flag works. A flag, once it stops being simple, doesn’t work. When it flaps in the wind and you’ve tried to put a face on it, it doesn’t work. The secret to a flag is its simplicity. The effectiveness of a national flag is how easy it is to draw. There were loads of discussions in South Africa when they wanted a national flag, as to how there were lots of versions...how easy would it be to draw? If you want it to be effective, simplicity is key.

You can obviously have a critic of the artist say, “Your notions of understanding this are fairly simplistic.” So that for example a work that brings the orange and the green together on one canvas...you go, “Yeah but really, the social world is more complicated than that.”

EM: Does taking these symbols, like the red hand of Ulster or the four provinces, and putting them in a fine art context alter their meaning?

DB: I think potentially every time you take something and put it in a new context, it alters its meaning. I think meaning is context-driven. So absolutely, yes. So if you took those images of the four provinces and stuck them on a flag post in front of city hall, you

would potentially have a riot. I think you could get away with something on a fine art canvas that you couldn't get away with in a public space, or a parade or demonstration.

EM: That's interesting you say that because Rita Duffy has displayed some these works in Stormont, in the main hall, so that adds a charge to it.

DB: That adds a charge to it, but it's also a very controlled space. If she's thinking about where she's displaying it, that's all important. But also, it's not really a public space. In one sense, it's the seat of democracy in Northern Ireland. You could argue it's the most public space. But in reality, it's a very controlled space. It's not likely to rile anybody in that building to demonstrate against it. It is symbolic—you may know there were disputes over lilies, Easter lilies, placed in the center of Stormont. So it is a charged place, so it's interesting that she's doing it at Stormont, but it's also not a public space. And the simple answer is, yes, context is everything. You get away with it in fine art in a way you might not in a procession down the center of Belfast.

It tells you about the nature of where we are as a society as to what you can and cannot do. What becomes acceptable and unacceptable? It can tell you about how a world is organized. Ask yourself the question, "Why is it *here*? Why is it not *there*?" That will give you access to the understanding that the artist is having but also to what is possible within society.

Transcript of Interview with Peter Richards, Director at the Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast 18 November 2008

[I explain my study abroad program, where I've been in Ireland, what I've been doing for the past two months, what my project is about.]

EMILY MEINHARDT: Can you tell me how you became involved with the Golden Thread Gallery?

PETER RICHARDS: I became involved in the Golden Thread Gallery in 1998. I went across to do an exhibition at the gallery coinciding with my own submission. Prior to that, I had been involved with Catalyst Arts, which is an artist-run organization in the city. So I began organizing a number of exhibitions, festivals, events. And the Golden Thread Gallery, when I was at Catalyst, was fairly new. And they asked me if I would be involved with their programming committee, so as to try to connect them to a different group of artists. Then I became chair of the board of the gallery. The person before me left for a proper, paid position. I've been in this position for about 6 years now. But I've been involved with the gallery almost since the beginning of its inception.

EM: What was the mission statement at its conception?

PR: The gallery used to be set up on an interface in the North of the city, between the Ardoyne and the Shankill communities, a very contested space to have a gallery. It was set up by a young artist who was looking for studio space. They saw the opportunity to set up a space to facilitate their peer group. It tried to engage with the community and develop them as an audience.

EM: Do you think there was a transition from more of a community-oriented organization to a fine art space?

PR: I, like a number of people, have been through Catalyst and been informed by the artist-led initiative. So it's still deeply rooted in that mindset. But we've probably taken on things in different ways and developed a reputation that has allowed us a different type of budget, so it becomes more institutional. Which is rather ironic, given our founding. And our outlook. I would still see us as very committed. We're interested in the same ideas as Catalyst, but on a different scale.

EM: Would you see Catalyst as a rival or a partner then?

PR: I would see them as the lifeblood as the city. I think without Catalyst, the city wouldn't have the art scene it has. I think they're one of the most significant aspects of Northern Irish visual culture. They're important in responding to the particular context of this city and be able to facilitate...mostly because of the economic climate. Nobody had any money, so nobody needed any money. So you could make anything happen.

EM: One of the more general questions I've been asking in every interview is taken from a 1970 survey done by *Artforum*, asking, what is your position regarding the kinds of direct political action that should be taken by artists? So I put the same question to you.

PR: I think you can't avoid having a politic. I think it goes through phases of being more explicitly or overtly political...more engaged depending upon the particular local and global context you find yourself in. I think that especially in Northern Ireland, an overtly and fraught political backdrop, has probably made that situation more polemic, where there were artists who sought to completely avoid that subject. And then there are those who are very engaged and completely political, such as Factotum. It's two individuals who have set themselves up as one art group and they strategically engage with means of media presentation and media formation. So they publish a free newspaper. One of their projects was to set up a choir. As itself, it's a political strategy, which goes beyond conventionalism or an easily pigeon-holed practice. Because I don't think either one would see themselves as artists or an art activist.

EM: Going off of the idea of not participating in the system and using unconventional means to critique the problems of convention and the status quo, how do you think that artists become implicated when they're making political statements and are accepting public art commissions...does this make them complicit in the very thing they're criticizing?

PR: I think there's a general acceptance that you can't be outside of the system. Maybe that's a change in attitude for a generation of artists. The system is encompassing anyways, so you can't be outside of it. If you take any great success, no matter how extreme the position or motivation might be, you are being encompassed by that. Maybe the alternative has been to ignore that that is the case and to try to work within it so as to subvert it. Or to use it to best of your own ability to get across your own objective.

You know we recently paid for the Factotem guys to produce a billboard which heavily criticized the city council's Titanic Quarter development plans. Fairly controversial, but we were using their own money to pay for it. The Golden Thread has the position to act as a conduit. I'm sure if the council had actually realized what we've done, we'd be in more trouble than we had been.

EM: What did the billboard say?

PR: It was along the lines of, "Festival of Maritime Disasters," highlighting the irony of the Titanic.

EM: And what was the backlash?

PR: The reaction of the developers was more concerning for us than the council—the developers who are engaged with the re-development of the Titanic Quarter. The architectural firm who owns this building will do all the work for the developers of the Titanic Quarter. So to take on a public criticism, it's just what you end up being involved in. But it changes, it's always changing. I think one of the most interesting changes in the last ten years is that we now find groups of people for artists to work with who are important to the realization of the project, rather than before, when we had to find artists to work with groups of people...a skills exchange. Now we are able to commission artists who are doing very challenging projects, but require the public to be involved in its production.

EM: Can you give examples of some of those projects?

PR: *The Soft Estate* project, which is again an artist group called Carbon Design. Their whole process was involved with discussion with the public, trying to engage and connect with the public. They had discussions about how the loyalist community could be culturally defined or define itself, rather than be branded with the social mosaic that applies to the rest of the UK. And it seemed that the nationalist communities were quite good at defining their cultural heritage. The unionist ones were struggling to come to grips with what a cultural heritage could be. And now the Ulster language is being asserted as part of that.

EM: Was that recorded in some way?

PR: The focus point of the exhibition was that the artists commissioned the guys who made the original captain's table for the Titanic, to make a new version of it, a copy of it, which was used as the focal point of the debate. With all the participants sitting around this table.

EM: So it was more of a "happening" à la Allan Kaprow, than for the sake of preserving the discussion as historic record?

PR: Yes. There's a publication that goes with it, I'll get you a copy. We did a project with another two guy group, another collective practice, Nicky Keogh and Paddy Bloomer, who did *Binboat* for the first Northern Irish presentation at Venice. They made this boat out of scrap and sailed it around the canals of Venice under the radar. When they came back, we got them to work with a group of youths on the interface of the Ardoyne and Shankill as a kind of summer intervention project. They constructed this faux rocket that they spent two months building. They raised it with a crane and then dropped and smashed it. The practice was actually to try to reconstruct a rocket crash scene.

EM: Those are great examples. Declan McGonagle talks how about national identity used to be something that Irish contemporary art with very concerned with, but that this is no longer the case...Irish contemporary art is rapidly changing to reflect society and it's not concerned with national identity anymore. Do you think that Irish art, things you would exhibit here, are still concerned with national identity? And if so, do they deconstruct an old notion or serve to build a new one?

PR: For our exhibition program here, there's been a long-running investigation into notions of construction of representations of this place. We've been looking to break down, de-mystify, and explore the connections between our practices and the portrayal of this place nationally and internationally. How is Northern Ireland portrayed? Our next exhibition is Paul Seawright. We're specifically looking at his works from the 1980s and 90s, trying to create an opportunity to revisit the artist's journey through that period. The artist is engaged with trying to create an alternative interpretation and representation to that which was being put out by the media. Fiona Kearney did an article in *Source* magazine about propaganda and how artists use media as a strategy to redefine these ideas. John Duncan's works, especially the bonfire series, seems quite iconic. He's done very well in Wolverhampton—over 30,000 people have seen his exhibition there. It's significant how these art practices represent a place and can instill impact on the outside perception of a place.

EM: Do you think something like Paul Seawright's work is intended to change the minds of people within Northern Ireland or the minds of a worldwide audience?

PR: I suppose Paul, like Willie, would have been concerned explicitly with the very local. And then have drawn out of the model to apply to discussions nationally and internationally. His more recent works in Afghanistan apply some of the strategy he used when working in Northern Ireland—trying to reinterpret the representation of a place. Willie has done that very successfully with more recent video works.

EM: Do you think that Irish contemporary art is different in some way than what you'll find elsewhere? Is there some Irishness to it, even if it's not political?

PR: I've done a number of survey exhibitions of contemporary Northern Irish art, which have been exhibited internationally—Tel Aviv, Prague, Washington, Venice—where we're put forward a group of artists that are contemporary. I think what draws those practices together is a shared experience of creating our own contexts, developing our own initiatives, which I think is very context specific. It happens in a number of places. It's how those local discussions connect to the international. This seems how, in a wider sense, contemporary practices are working at the moment. Things are being focused on local connections and discussions, often outside of the gallery in social interactions. It's a period defined by international survey shows and biennales.

EM: Do you think that the international focus might detract from what artists are trying to convey within the Northern Ireland context? This emphasis on homogenizing the practice?

PR: I think it might be a test of that—whether we're actually doing anything in terms of understanding or constructing a representation. I think it's a useful exercise to make.

EM: Is there anything else you wanted to add or think might be useful on this subject?

PR: I think it will be interesting to go to Catalyst. [Explains the philosophy and activities of Catalyst]

EM: Going back to *A Shout in the Street*..when I was here, there was no text on the wall, no accompanying writing. Could you put it into context for me?

PR: I came up with this idea for *Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art* about 5 years ago. I'm not from here, I came over from Cardiff to do a master's course in 1994. A number of people came into Belfast to take part in that course and a number of people have stayed on and been involved in organizing things. So that has maybe shaped some of what has gone on—this influx of people. A lot of people in Belfast went off to London to be ambitious. There was an exchange of people.

So the *Collective Histories* exhibitions came up because I wanted to understand more about how the art community here saw itself. And a lot of our practice was about exploring notions of history or how history is constructed. So we took our personal practice and tried to work them out to be something else. I thought by inviting other curators who have played a significant role here...to each have a soap box. Okay, you tell me what was important in Northern Irish art post-war. Point out what you think needs to be recorded. What's most representative of an aspect or all aspects. But you choose. We will provide you with the framework and the support. We will realize your exhibition to the best of our abilities.

So with Declan, there were probably two years of discussion before we got to the exhibition. Most of the exhibitions here take two years to realize. Early on, he wanted to try and bring together the things that have influenced our practice here and try to see where the art practice had influenced things outside of the art world. The title *A Shout in the Street* came from a newspaper cry. But a newspaper cry doesn't have to mean panic, it can mean engagement as well.

Napier's accordion piece was the first thing as you entered the exhibition. And it probably created more tension than any other piece, because a lot of people reacted quite badly to it. Some were positive of course.

Then we commissioned the murals by Mark Ervine, David Ervine's son. And Danny Devenny. And Danny knew Bobby Sands. He painted the first mural of Bobby on the Falls Road, so it was quite appropriate...these were opposed positions. They were probably more connected with the real street life. And then it went down and there were John Duncan's photographs of bonfires. There were two works from the Irish museum. The focal point of the room was Locky Morris's *Twist* piece which was this suitcase that had been cut and had playing cards sprawled across the table. That piece told the story of the Birmingham Six. It was iconic and had been in the British Art Show. It would have been very well-recorded and well-documented and then put into a shed for 10 years. So it's interesting to take these things out and have them relate to the narrative of a place. And how they overlap. Because Locky's is based on newspaper coverage and re-articulating that story.

And then at the back, there was the CAIN archive, which was a print out of the acronyms. Then facing that was Sandra Johnson's surveillance video pieces on three screens. There was a sound piece which literally was a shout in the street. [Gives me a copy of the sound track]. This would come on and occasionally disrupt the space and take over. Around the corner was a series of photographs by Victor Sloan. He's best known for his images of the Orange Order. Then Ashleen's work was the Sputnik, which was based on her going into the Maze and doing workshops with prisoners. They worked on castings...castings from various parts of the prison. She wanted to photograph all of their final creations and when they laid all of their pieces out, they made a map of the whole prison compound. Which was completely against all the rules. So she aided without knowing. So that was the thing with Sputnik...this idea of surveillance...who's watching and who's being watched. The bonfire itself was made by youths from East Belfast who were well known for making very good bonfires. So we brought them in to make a real a bonfire, rather than an artist's interpretation of a bonfire. It was interesting to see the kids' reactions to John [Duncan's] photographs. They didn't see the photographs, they only saw the bonfire. And they were looking at it's structural merit and how quick it would burn out, and that way of doing it is rubbish and this way is great. They brought their mates to build the bonfire. It breaks down some of those preconceived merits. John Byrne's video piece *Would you die for Ireland?* was the piece that people spent the most time with. It was a video asking people around Ireland, would you die for Ireland? One the back of this wall was the countdown. That was actually done by a graphics student, rather than an art student. I think he was quite bemused to be included in an art exhibition and why we would want to include his piece. He was simply showing his skill. But actually it was very appropriate for this show. I think that's the thing that Declan was pushing for, to take things which wouldn't have been assumed to be included in the exhibition, while at the same time, including iconic pieces.

EM: So the process of this was basically, if you could have anything you wanted from the last 10 years, what would it be? And we'll try our best to go get it?

PR: Absolutely. That's how the project works.

EM: Were there any pieces you couldn't get?

PR: There was only one we couldn't get. There was a film called *Elephant* produced by the BBC and they were looking for a ridiculous sum of money for us to show it. This is the BBC who also would come looking for us to provide reference material. They want to use us, but as soon as we want to use them, they start seeing a value. It would have cost thousands of pounds to have screened a DVD of a TV program that was shown once on TV?

EM: On the murals you mentioned, why were they unfinished? Was this on purpose? Were they different from the original murals?

PR: We had asked the artists to begin painting the murals the week before and we asked them not to finish until the last day of the show. So people would come back and see the change in the nature of the art. It evolved. Danny was really busy and actually finished his quite quickly. Mark stuck to the briefing and didn't finish his until we were actually about to take it down. Mark was more influenced by...no, I think they were both affected by the other work in the exhibition. Mark took on this role of looking at the mural tradition—he included a mural painter painting a mural in the mural itself. The foreground was the mural itself. It was a reflective process, which was playing on his own mind at the time. I think it was a comment on being asked to be in the show. Danny wasn't particularly keen on Philip [Napier's] piece, and I don't think he was going to do Bobby Sands until he saw that. And thought there needed to be a counterpoint to that piece. We had given an open brief and said that we would create a faux gable end and cut the wood in that shape and prime it for them. Then asked them to paint what they thought best represented where they were at then.

EM: Did Danny change his?

PR: I think Danny's became more complicated than the original one. I think it became more of the style of the 80s.

EM: What happened to those murals now? Storage somewhere?

PR: Danny's was taken down and it's going to a museum on the Falls Road. Mark's is down and anyone who wants it can have it. As soon as we find a good home for it, we'll give it to them. We don't own it and they don't own it really either, so we'll give it to someone who wants it.

**Transcript of Interview with Theo Sims, director of the Context Gallery, Derry, United Kingdom
20 November 2008**

[I explain my study abroad program, where I've been in Ireland, what I've been doing for the past two months, what my project is about.]

EMILY MEINHARDT: Because you're in the old space of the Orchard Gallery and from Derry, could you speak as to why the Orchard Gallery shut down and about its life?

THEO SIMS: I'm not the person to speak to about that. I don't know officially why it closed down and all the ins and outs. Declan speaks for himself. I can't talk about that really.

EM: One question that I have asked during all interviews is appropriated from an 1970 *Artforum* survey, which asked, what is your position regarding art as direct political action?

TS: I think it's had to make art that isn't political in some sense. If you make work in a vacuum...if you make work at the height of the Troubles and it didn't directly have any obvious reference or connotation to the struggle or the Troubles, that would seem to me quite political in itself. If you weren't making a direct reference, the fact that you were making work in that climate—a climate that refused to engage with any specifics—I would say that's a political act as well. There's the obvious genre of art made in Northern Ireland where artists were using familiar iconography with lookout posts, helicopters...all the familiar stuff. And then there are some artists who came through and tried to look at alternatives. There was a big question in the early 90s as to what your role as an artist was, in terms of the struggle, as it were. When a media company like Fox came over, they would rent out houses on the Garvaghy Road before anything happened. And sort of spice up their images by getting the kids to hold a milk bottle with a rag in it. Give some images that the media wanted. I think in the early 90s, there was this question of, if your work maintained these stereotypes, then are you part of the problem rather than part of the solution? There was a big questioning around that time. Some of those artists might not be seen as obvious political artists from Northern Ireland, but I would argue that the work is equally, if not more political, in trying to find some resolutions or a way out for other artists and for expression. The issues that other artists were sharing in other parts of the world—why they hell weren't those issues also going on here? I would say yes, it is definitely a political tool.

EM: In a catalog for an exhibition he curated, Declan McGonagle makes the argument that Irish contemporary art used to be about national identity and that show in particular was demonstrating that it was no longer concerned with that, it was capturing this changing moment in Irish culture and society. Do you think that Irish contemporary art is or was concerned with national identity? Does it build national identity or deconstruct it? If it's not concerned with national identity, what is it concerned with?

TS: It may have been *Beyond the Pale*. I think a lot of it does. I think there's an ongoing conversation in terms of the way it has shifted over the last twenty to thirty years. And now with the introduction of migrant communities and the Celtic Tiger that is now being declared. There are a lot of social concerns that are now very much involved with that general conversation of refocusing what an Irish identity is. I think it is still quite heavily part of the social conversation at the moment. National identity evolves. Generally, artists respond to their environment and climate. As the climate has evolved, the artists have evolved. I think it's always been parallel.

EM: A lot of the artists I've looked at have done public art commissions or community art projects. In a way, I think that implicates them as they take money to do a piece of art but can turn around and criticize where the money essentially came from. How do you feel that it implicates their art?

TS: Biting the hand that feeds you. I think it was more of an issue in the 80s and 90s than it is now. Now it has shifted to be an absolute responsibility for the state to fund and encourage freedom of debate and expression and creativity. There were some difficulties in 90s when artists saw themselves as state-funded in some way. I think it has relaxed these days. Certainly as the monies seem to be so confused these days—from America, from Europe, from Britain...

EM: Some of the people I've talked to have said that because of the global art market and art fairs, that has forced a change...a homogenizing...

TS: I think that's a big sea change for the global art community. The art fair has become the hip way for artists to go these days. But Northern Ireland is outside of that really. The artists, especially here in Derry, are fighting against the commercial impulse that has crept into art. It's probably only a matter of time before it completely goes that way. The same thing with Thatcherism...with the yuppie culture. It's interesting how when she was slash and burn anything for the arts, that's when the arts got really critical...really political...really engaged in issues of unemployment and all this stuff. And then in the 90s with the Blair years, a sort of socialism was half creeping in. But it was sort of a softer capitalism in a way. It's interesting how artists are trying to step outside of the system, but they're also setting up their own system. They're setting up their own galleries and going to the art fairs themselves. They're bypassing the old guard.

Another thing that's interesting is artist-run culture and how that's changed since it was first established 30 or 40 odd years ago with a gallery in Switzerland. It was all about artists not being able to get spaces to show and so they would set up their own spaces. The galleries were run by artists and it was all about promoting artists. I think we're at a stage now where if you want to show, there are so many avenues and options for you. Galleries are so much more accessible, so artist run culture has had to change. In interest of survival, artist-runs have become more engaged with the arts fairs and the commercial side of art. It was curious—no one would have expected that 15-20 years ago.

EM: Do you think that the art that has to do with the Troubles—and obviously this would be a question for the artist as well—that this is made for an Irish audience or international audience? They want to reach as wide an audience as possible, but who is the main target?

TS: That sort of art is sort of banner art or propaganda. I think there's a distinction. Let's take Derry and the Derry murals. That's so much propaganda. The quality of the actual art isn't really at stake, it's the message. They know there are TV cameras from around the world capturing those images. So their messages are getting out. If you think of artists like Conor McFeely or Locky Morris, their work isn't so obvious so as to say, this is what it's really like, here we are. Their work is so layered and complicated. And it's not specific either about the Troubles or the war—it's more layered than that. It's about psychology and human interaction and fear and darkness and a global apprehension...Big Brother...these sorts of things. And that was the hardest thing—these artists being labeled. If you're an artist in Northern Ireland in the 80s and 90s, there was automatically a stereotype that your work had to be focusing on the Troubles and it was hard to break out of that. I think some artists didn't do it as successfully.

EM: A lot of times, you can walk into a gallery and say, I'm in a room of German art. Or this is a certain school of art. And you can't really do that with Irish contemporary art. Why do you think that is?

TS: Irish art is like saying there's Italian food. Italy's made up of loads of regions—there are typical dishes from regions, but there isn't a dish that's from the whole of Italy. That's a stereotype. And it's the same way with art. Artists from the North are quite different from artists in Dublin who are different from artists in the West. I've lived here and grown up with artists here. Maybe I can just spot it and identify it. You still see the codings of Harland and Wolff cranes and DeLorean car doors...the icons of the war have been replaced with icons of decayed industry. With all the reconstruction in Belfast, there are only a few things that haven't been torn down. There's a shift between the new and the old.

EM: Do you think that Irish contemporary is different in some way?

TS: I don't know what Irish contemporary art is.

EM: The last 10 years...20 years...

TS: I think contemporary Northern Irish art is different from contemporary Southern art.

EM: How?

TS: Northern Irish art has always tended to be really gritty, really gray. I'm generalizing...it's not as bright and funky sometimes as work made in the South. It's a gross generalization and I can't believe I said that. You're not going to see so much kitsch. You're not going to see that...bright colorful stuff just doesn't seem to work in Northern Ireland and I don't know why. People are scared to

used color. And maybe that's something to do with the master's program at the art school. Maybe it was me living in North America for the last 10 years. Everything seems so colorful. Signage is so much more a part of the landscape over there. I think people are visually more attuned to the graphic qualities. If you look at history of neon...signage. I mean Ireland has the hand painted signage and names on pubs. There wasn't the same sense of graphic quality though, as you had in North America.

EM: And you were born and raised in Belfast?

TS: No, Brighton. I did my master's in Belfast from 91-94.

EM: Are you an artist yourself?

TS: Yep.

**Summary of Interview with Pauline Ross, director of the Playhouse Theatre, Derry, United Kingdom
21 November 2008**

[Digital recording of interview with Ross was accidentally deleted before it had been transcribed. Summary of notes is given in lieu of transcript.]

Pauline Ross worked at the Orchard Gallery as the Community Arts Liason while Declan McGonagle was there. When he left, she became the interim director. She told the story of the Orchard Gallery from its conception to its end. She emphasized that Derry was always considered to be on the periphery. She mentioned a new movement in the visual arts. She first encountered Ballagh through theatre, when he was doing set design. She said that Willie Doherty's work is about "what lies beneath," and called Rita Duffy the polar opposite. She expressed the feeling that she was witnessing a movement when she was working with artists at Derry. She mentioned the artists Nancy Spero and Alistair McLennan. She spoke about art as a language with emotional and intellectual levels. She noted that the civil rights movement was connected to fighting for a right to our culture and arts. She felt that the Orchard Gallery was "bigger than the artwork." She noted that Declan made it a priority that all artists who showed at the Orchard Gallery had catalogs made. When asked to describe what this "movement" looked like, Ross described how Willie Doherty used moving images and that it was a movement of the minds, or a conceptual movement. When asked about a difference between North and South, she spoke about the generational differences and said there were two ways of thinking, mentioning the song "Dirty Old Town" and saying Derry was thought of as the bloodiest capital in Europe. When asked about funding, Ross replied that self-censorship would be worse because then it's not the truth. Talking about Willie Doherty's work, she mentioned that video was very pertinent to the time, that there was a secret guerilla war and cameras and video just added to the feeling of Big Brother. Asked about national identity, Ross did not think that Irish contemporary art had anything to do with national identity, saying that the identity was already there...this was bigger than nationhood, it was about the human condition. She mentioned that the Context Gallery is named that because it's all about putting art into context. When asked the *Artforum* question, Ross mentioned "trying to give form to authentic voice" and the idea that "truth is paramount, even though there is no one truth." She said rather than being political, art was about doing it as honestly and authentically as you can.

**Transcript of Interview with Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, curator of Irish art at the National Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
25 November 2008**

[I explain my study abroad program, where I've been in Ireland, what I've been doing for the past two months, what my project is about.]

EMILY MEINHARDT: In 1970, *Artforum* did a survey asking artists, what is your position regarding the kinds of direct political action that should be taken by artists? So I put the same question to you, what is your opinion on art as political action?

SIGHLE BHREATHNACH-LYNCH: I think it has a political role. It has always had a political role. Art is not made in a vacuum. Art does not live outside of the social norms. And therefore, the prevailing ideologies, be they cultural or political in message, will always interact with the art. When you have artists who set out to use their art for political purposes, the art becomes the vehicle for the political message. You see that, certainly from the turn of the Troubles onwards. Not in the South, but in the North of Ireland...the Rita Duffys...the Patrick Irelands. Robert [Ballagh] is quite an exception, I think, in that he is certainly using his art to get the public to think about the Troubles and the way he's focusing on them.

And if you think back to art in the Middle Ages for instance...the building of a cathedral. That isn't just built for aesthetic purposes. That has a hugely powerful cultural and religious and ideological impulse behind it. So I always think of that kind of impulse.

Sometimes the artist doesn't set out specifically to make a point. In a sense, that doesn't matter. For example, we have a painting called *The Ejected Family* by Erskine Nicol. The subject is eviction...one of the casualties of the Famine. And Nicols doesn't set out to make a political point. But when you read the painting from a distance of history, you can see very clearly, what he has decided to put into his picture, where he has decided to put it, etc. Indirectly, it has a message in it. I think art has always had an ideological role.

EM: In the chapter of your book that I was reading, you say that Troubles art looks at nationalist history in an anti-heroic way. Could you give examples and perhaps expand on that...how it's anti-heroic.

SBL: Traditionally, the way that historians treated Irish history was in a heroic way, up to 1966. Therefore the art that was produced then reflected the prevailing notions of Irish history and that Irish people involved were heroes. So Pearse is a hero. Connelly is a hero. And then with the Troubles and history itself being revised, you have a new generation of historians who don't interpret history

in a heroic way. It's from the 70s on that you find that the attitudes towards history have changed and that it brings with it an antiheroic interpretation.

If you're looking at the monuments that I'd be looking at, the traditional ones are heroic and the paintings offer you a hero. Once 1966 has passed, there is a realization that is manifest in the art being produced today and that history is in a sense all about interpretation. People today are less prone to having an image of history or historical events as being heroic. Because we're all more conscious today of...if you like, the fallout of war.

EM: The piece that comes to mind is Ballagh's *History Lesson*. Would you look at that as anti-heroic?

SBL: Exactly. I know from talking to Robert that he felt that history had hijacked Pearse and Connelly for their supposed heroism in the 1916 era. But the Free State, when it was established, created them as heroes. They eliminated what he felt were their most important aspects... and that is Pearse's writings on education and Connelly's on socialism. He thought Connelly was cut off from his own intellectual roots. And that's what I think comes across in Robert's painting, which is why I think it's so interesting.

EM: I've been reading Declan McGonagle and how he talks about how the landscape was a primary concern to Irish contemporary artists and then it was national identity. And then it wasn't about national identity, it was about capturing a changing nature of Irish society. Your book talks a lot about the struggle to find national identity and calls it "the national identity problem." Do you think the art of Ballagh or Doherty serves to build national identity or deconstruct it? Or is it to do with national identity at all?

SBL: I think it deconstructs an old one. It serves to build new constructs. But these constructs are not concrete, they're ever-changing. I think national identity is not something that is timeless. So someone's version of national identity in the 19th century has changed with 20 or 30 years?

EM: Is this specific to Ireland?

SBL: No, I think it's specific to human society. I was born in 1944, so if you think back to Ireland in the 1950s, it was still a very enclosed society, very exclusive, very self-conscious. Still promoting this notion of Ireland as rough and utopian...great stress on religion...huge stress on the revival of the Irish language. Okay, some of those ingredients are still there, but it's a different mix. And it keeps evolving. So there's no one construct and then it's replaced by another. Instead, there's a continuing evolving from one set of ideas which are infiltrated by others, moving on to another construct. The word construct, even by itself, suggests that it's totally unchanging.

EM: Do you think there's a difference between Northern contemporary and Southern contemporary art here?

SBL: Yes, absolutely. I think Northern artists obviously came from a different education system...different life experiences, and the Troubles was very much a direct part of their lives. Whereas, it wasn't in the South, definitely not. Therefore, they're producing realistic art. They're using their art to express what's going on. Their art actually engages with urban lives, as it did in the South. But with certain artists, with the exception of Ballagh...he's a politicized artist and always was. Whereas the others, a lot of them would have thought of themselves as artists in that nineteenth century construct...the artist being separate from the society, rather than within the society.

But Robert always thought of himself as a craftsman. His definition of the artist is not this great aesthete. It's very different. It's grounded in reality. He's just a workman. That's his job. Because he was interested in what was going on...he had very strong political views...he always engaged with the Troubles. And it doesn't surprise me that the Northern artists engage with them to a much greater extent—and they still do. But they're moving away because our notions of national identity and Northern art has changed so much. It will be interesting to see what's going to be produced in the next 30 years, now that there's peace between the two warring communities. They're both now in government and actually tackling problems together. So the interpretation of subject matter changes again...

If you see Willie Doherty doing work like the burnt-out car and the beautiful landscape. That kind of art was so relevant at the time because of this juxtaposition between extremes. In a sense, there's no longer a need to go there. I think contemporary artists tend to want to be up to the minute and in the present, so their art is going to change. And already has, in fact.

EM: I think Ballagh presents a problem in that sometimes, he does deal with the present, but he's constantly referring back. Only when forced to did he reference the riots in Derry, but otherwise, when he meant to refer to the present, he was doing it by referring back to Delacroix and Goya.

SBL: Exactly, referring to the present but he's really more interested in using the past. Which makes him very interesting.

EM: Do you think Irish contemporary art is different? To other contemporary art?

SBL: Well we're back to this distinctive school of Irish art. Now I think the world is much more connected, so that it takes the urge of difference out of the equation. We are much more conscious of being interconnected than we ever were. And therefore, in some ways, there are lots of ways that are similar. It should have been self-evident because we are all human and therefore we are all interconnected. But I think we're more conscious of it today...through the internet, through communications. We know far more about each other. Where you live is very important in forming what kind of social group you are. And a little island like Ireland in Western Europe...it's bound to be different from say, Siberia. And because the artist is not removed from life around him, geography, location, it's those kinds of differences that matter. I can't bring two works to mind, but I guess that artists from Russia for instance, they are

going to produce an art that has a Russian spirit. And sometimes you can see the differences. But it is much harder now to spot those differences.

I was at the Saatchi Gallery two weeks ago and saw an Asian art exhibition. I knew it was from the east, but I couldn't have told you which country. But there's still something distinctively different...something about the style of brushwork and the way the artist was looking...I recognized immediately that it was from the East. So there are differences and that's why makes it exciting.

EM: Given that artists are trying to produce their art for as wide of an audience as possible, do think that Irish contemporary art speaks more to those in Ireland or to an international crowd? That it's meant to say to people in Ireland, we need to look at ourselves differently? Or that it's showing the rest of the world, this is how the conflict really is and you don't know the real Ireland. Is this for outsiders more, or for people who are operating within those symbols and that context?

SBL: That's a good question. I think it's looking at ourselves first because in that kind of art...it's not commissioned art...nobody asked you to produce something...you feel that this is important to you and to express in a particular way. Definitely the audience has to be Ireland first. If your audience is a patron, that's different.

EM: Do you think it has more of an impact outside of Ireland or inside?

SBL: I think it has had far more inside. Definitely. Of course, as we move away from the Troubles, there are people looking in at this kind of art and I'm thinking, in terms of visual arts...that film that was made on the hunger strikes. That couldn't have been made 10 years ago. I think that art that concerns itself with political will have far more impact within its own country's audience...but then it can have a wider audience.

**Transcript of Interview with Declan McGonagle, President of National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland, and former Director of the Orchard Gallery, Derry, United Kingdom
26 November 2008**

[I explain my study abroad program, where I've been in Ireland, what I've been doing for the past two months, what my project is about.]

EMILY MEINHARDT: In 1970, *Artforum* did a survey asking artists this question and now I pose it to you, what is your position regarding the kinds of direct political action that should be taken by artists?

DECLAN MCGONAGLE: I was an art student during the 70s in Belfast, during the early days of the Troubles when the violence had just kicked off. And we, as art students, were wondering, can art do anything about this? People were being killed...bombs were going off in Belfast...we look out the window of the art college building and we see plumes of smoke...and there are bomb scares...and here we are going back into the studio to paint. I remember there was newspaper coverage of the fact that a group of New York artists wanted to protest the Vietnam War and the way they did was draping their paintings in black cloth. And we, as students...with all the arrogance of students at the time, were saying, well isn't that terrible that art, in itself, wasn't able to say anything about Vietnam? There seemed to be a gap what art and artists were concerned with, or what the language of art was capable of doing in relation to something as important or as dramatic and as formative, for a variety of societies and political processes, as the Vietnam War—or in our embryonic case, the Northern Irish Troubles. Throughout my time in college, '71-'76, which was the darkest period of the Troubles, because the level was phenomenal. You would go to sleep at night to the sound of gunfire and wake up in the morning, you would listen to the news telling you that bodies were found. Every day. I give interviews and seminars...and I almost have to downplay it because it sounds like an exaggeration. Here's this Western European city, this is long before the Balkans fell apart...and it just sounds too dramatic to people in many ways. You tend to talk back from it rather than overstate it.

So that question of what art can do in those circumstances was always at the forefront of our minds. When I go back and look at my own slides and paintings I did at that time and I remember the work that was coming out of our painting studio...we were in a very strange space. We were trying to find a way—not to report the Troubles through art, not to deal with phenomena—but to deal with the sense of alienation and displacement that we felt as individuals in that society at that time, where the whole society was fragmented because of the political situation. And then the violence associated with that politics.

You know in crime films or whodunits, they talk about motive, opportunity, and means to commit a crime or a murder. And the detective looks for all three. What we have in Northern Ireland then and what the artists in New York had as well, although there's a subtext to that which I'll come to...they had the means, they had the language of paint, culture, art history. We had motive and opportunity—the motivation was there to do something. You know...is it possible to make a political painting? We had opportunity because the context meant it was unavoidable. What was missing was the critical means. The tangible means of production was always there—you can draw, make, do...There were lots of practical means, but no critical means. Because the language of discourse around the idea of art being political was to marginalize art if it attempted to be political in that overt sense.

A good example is Leon Golub, who was a New York painter. His early paintings were of these naked Spartan warriors...fantastic huge paintings on unstretched canvas. He was almost making the motifs that you find in classical friezes and sculpture and architecture. Mid-1960s, he put American army uniforms on those figures. And they became American soldiers in Vietnam. So he moved from an idea of universal warfare to the specific. In his early career, his work was being collected, he was being written up. The minute he became specific, including references that everybody understood to be political, he was dropped off the circuit. Collectors stopped buying his work. He continued to work, a studio at La Guardia place in New York, him and Nancy Spero worked. And Nancy Spero is another political artist who used classical culture to do it. But if you track the trajectory of Leon Golub's career, you will find there's a break in the validation of his work once he was overtly political in the subject of his painting. It was still figures and it was still virtuoso painting, but it was deeply political.

It wasn't until the early 1980s until the critical apparatus had returned to reconsider painting, in this sort of post-conceptual period, to what was called New Spirit in Painting, New Image Making. All these names are used to cover what was a reconnection with the idea of painting as being valuable in a contemporary sense. Then Leon Golub was collected and came into prominence and had exhibitions in London. I did a couple of exhibitions with him at the museum here and in Derry.

That's a specific example of how there was no means available in the 70s...to make political art that would not then be marginalized immediately on its intention to be political. Part of the problem there is that the drama was so great, and I think this was an issue in Leon Golub's work as well, the danger is that you simply report the phenomena of a political situation. So you have soldiers on the street—that's very dramatic. The question for me is not how to you represent politics through art—how do you embody politics through art? The debate for me around this whole question is representation or embodiment.

That is why I think performance art developed the way it did in the late 70s and early 80s. Performance wasn't named as performance. It had a number of different names through the 70s until about '76, '77, '78 until it started to settle on a collection of activities under the name of performance and artists started to use that term. That became literally a process of embodiment—that the body was political. Certainly when you take a feminist discourse into account in relation to that, it was clearly an issue of embodiment. They saw the body as a site of contest.

My generation went through art college in the 70s and we found it very difficult, although our motive was there...our opportunity was there. But we did not have access to the critical means. We had material means, but we did not have access to the critical means to validate attempts to find a way to process... And that left us, as a generation I would say, very confused of Northern Irish potential artists. It was not until another generation came along for whom the Troubles had been so much a part of their normal lives that they had internalized the issue. I was 16, nearly 17, when the Troubles started, so I had an understanding and set of experience that was pre-Troubles. A generation came along afterwards who just grew up with the Troubles. So Ballagh would have had experience pre-Troubles.

The generation that I think was doing important work are they generation that emerged from art college in the early 80s. And with the Belfast context, you could say it was with the setting up of the magazine called *CIRCA*. It coincided with the Orchard Gallery. And it's not like we said, great, we're going to do politics now.

There's a saying in Irish and I can't say it, but it has stayed with me. On dark night, in a rural context where there's no artificial light, if you look at an object, you can't see it, because it's too dark, your frontal vision can't receive the signal. If you look out of the side of your eye, you can see it because peripheral vision requires less light than frontal vision. Apparently it's scientifically true. And that for me is a description of the way that that generation started to look at political issues and the Troubles in particular. They didn't look at the phenomena. They looked to the side at the Troubles. They looked underneath the Troubles. They looked at fundamental issues of identity in order to clarify the thing that was going on. So they didn't look at the graphic idea of soldiers in the street. They didn't make propaganda. They started to explore the reservoir of meaning that had created the phenomenology of the Troubles. So Willie started to deal with images and text. Other people did it through performance. Some people did it with paintings. But the underlying issue they were addressing were the fundamental issues of identity, which of course is that identities are contested in the North. There are some artists who represent the phenomena, rather than addressing the issue of contest though.

Literary culture seems to have faced the same challenge. Writers and playwrights and poets, and this is where Seamus Heaney comes from, went at it in a very oblique way, but actually revealed more about what was actually going on by not going to the phenomena. They started to reread history. They started to question some of the historical presumptions in which the contested identities were based.

What also happened was—and this is where the material possibilities change—lens-based media started to come into fine art much more. I don't just mean fine art photography. To make a video in those days, you had to carry around a camera the size of this printer. [Gestures to printer on desk.] So there's a consonance of things happening. There's that generational thing in there—ownership of the reality in which they lived, which was different from my generation.

And that sense of things is one of the reasons why, right up until we have the Agreement, most people believed that it would take generations for the violence to stop. They believed that it had been so internalized...so much a part of generations. So that generation of artists in the 80s, differently from my generation, had motive, opportunity, and critical means. Because the situation was so dramatic, there was a developing interest on the outside critical apparatus about what was going on in Northern Ireland. How could you deal with that as an artist? And that generation went through that process. And many of those artists are validated internationally. And it's not just a bit of missionary work. Because we see with Paul Seawright's work in Afghanistan...it's completely non-referential to Northern Ireland, but because it's dealing with the principle, an underlying principle, a reservoir of underlying issues, the images are just sad. He was a war artist about six years ago in Afghanistan. It seems very indirect, but it's saying, this is complex, it's not simple. It's a subterranean process.

When the fault-lines appear in that, that's when you get the phenomena of political violence. To understand political violence and be part of a process of transforming people's understanding of it, you don't look at the effects of political violence itself...you don't look at the drama. You look at the meaning and causes of the drama. I would argue that it was not until the politicians also got beyond the phenomena of the Troubles—the parades, the shooting incidents, the bombings—and dealing with that as crisis management, that they were forced by international pressure—America, Europe, UK government eventually and the Irish government, once they got together on it—forcing the politicians to touch base. How do we share the territory? It's when that discourse became central. So the political process happened in parallel with the cultural/visual art process. You can only address this meaningfully and effectively in art terms if you get beyond...go to the fundamental issues of contested identity. And you explore that through visual media.

The development of the accessibility of lens-based media, not just photography, but increasingly in the 90s, digital media, that has allowed artists to take on those sorts of issues. It's a journey over a period of 30 years or so of the Troubles and why the art sector had such difficulty in 1970 to dealing with the Vietnam War in that case...

Now when an artist comes along and says, oh I'm interested in that, at least there's an understanding that it will be critically validated or critically addressed. The critical apparatus is there.

[Talks about the locus of the energy being around discussions of what's art capacity is...what art can be.]

EM: I would like to check my understanding of what you've written. From what I've read, you seem to be saying that Irish contemporary art used to be about landscape in the 50s or 60s and then it transitioned to this notion of national identity. Then art was about a changing Ireland, a changing notion of what it means to be here. Do you think that Irish contemporary art has to do with national identity anymore?

DM: It's dealing with it in a different way. There's a thing in Irish society and Irish history called the National Question. Which is always a question of the border. So you were for or against the border. And it was as black and white as that. Politics in the Republic and in the North, for a very long time after Irish independence, when it came time to elections, the debate would be your attitude to the border. We have changed that discourse to say, the border will disappear when people are ready for it to disappear. The interesting thing about the Good Friday Agreement is that, and this was voted in with a huge majority, you can choose. You can be Irish, British, or both. And that's for you to choose. The language that was used was parity of esteem. And that for me is a cultural process. I don't think people are upfrontly assert ideas of national identity here, with a capital N and capital I.

You could argue that the landscape tradition in Ireland is about politics of identity. There was a period where to paint the landscape or to paint the culture of the West of Ireland was marginal, something you shouldn't do. It wouldn't be validated by late nineteenth century, early twentieth century art discourse. Unless it was done in a paternalistic way. You could argue that the landscape tradition was indirectly concerned with national identity as well. The west of Ireland, for a very long time, was seen to be where the soul of Ireland, in the Irish language and Gaelic culture and in those extreme landscapes. That has to do with where the plantation of Ireland took place. It took place in the East Coast. Protestants came in and took all the good land in the East and all the Catholics moved to the West where they had bad land. But they had the Irish language and the Irish music and traditional culture. They did not have visual culture to great extent because they were carrying culture in their heads. In modern Ireland, that mythology was extremely powerful right up until the 50s and 60s, that the soul of Ireland resided in the West. Until you had a generation like Ballagh come along...who has written and said, that was all bunkem...I learned Irish in school but I didn't speak it. I listened to British radio stations and the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. That's Bobby Ballagh talking.

Which would be very much like my education in the North. I was education in the British system, although I was culturally Catholic. We would watch BBC TV, we couldn't get Irish TV. So we were imbued with a British sense of things and our own sense of being a Northern Catholic. So what we had going on, and sociologists in the 90s called it this, we had a collision culture. A collision of identities.

There's the short story is the recent economic boom. And the modernization of the economy. The long story is the ancient sense of our identity as Irish people. [Talks about ancient Celts]

Our identities for a long time were defined by a sense of purity. I am an Irish republican nationalist Catholic. Or I am a loyalist British Northern Protestant. It's much grayer now. There's much more dissonance about those presumptions. Those are foundation myths that are being renegotiated. I would argue that they are being renegotiated culturally primarily. And that the political process is following the cultural process. Visual arts was a late starter in the immediate past in getting into that debate, but it has done so now. Mainly on the back of a lot of artists using lens-based media. Because of the way it relates to the media's representation of what was going on in the North. I don't think there's a range of artists whose concern is as one dimensional as national identity, with a capital N and capital I, especially not as much as the past. But I think we have a collision between a short story and a long story. And we are trying to work out who we are. We're having great difficulty doing that. And one example of this in a societal sense is that we're having great difficulty dealing with immigrant communities. The Irish went everywhere as economic migrants. And if you can think of one country in the world that should understand the necessity and the conditions for economic migration, it should be the Irish. And we have been very unwelcoming, with few exceptions, hosts to new communities that come here, particularly, non-white communities.

You could say our national identity at the moment involves huge contradictions. Our inherited sense of identity, that ancient, long story, has been revised, by people who are described as revisionists. They say—no, no, it's more complicated than that...there aren't straight green lines that go back to the sixth century. There isn't a pure national identity line which is then broken by the English in the seventeenth century. It's more complicated. The English occupation of Ireland was only successful when then translated the language. [Speaks about the Anglicization of Irish words and places.]

These artists are trying to negotiate assumptions about Irish national identity. The function of the artwork at the moment is discursive and questioning, rather than saying, I know what my national identity is and here's a representation of it. I can't think of work that does that, but when I see it, I think it's weak art. The best art has always been about putting its finger on the problematic and fashioning new understandings of who we are in relation to the problematic. The dramatic occasion for this is when there's a conflict or a war going on because of the issues that the conflict throws up. At the moment, we're in a very conflicted world—economically, socially, and politically—in terms of the wars that are going on. We're in a post-conflict situation in Northern Ireland, but we are not post-conflicted. We're still a heavily-conflicted society. Sectarianism among 17 year olds is greater than it was during the Troubles. There are more requests for peace lines in Belfast and parts of Northern Ireland.

EM: And there are increases in violence once the peace walls go up.

DM: A certain type of violence. There's an intimate undramatic violence that goes on. And sometimes it's just division. In those circumstances, it seems to me there's a great responsibility for artists to take a position in relation to that. I have no problem with those artists who say, No thank you, my job is to make beautiful things. As long as they acknowledge what they're doing. They're still adopting a position in relation to an unavoidable issue in society. There are other artists who say, my work is about the problematic. I think that's where the new art will come from. That's where the great art will come from. Rather than those who look at art as an alternative to reality.

EM: Do you think there's a difference between Northern and Southern art?

DM: It's very hard to pinpoint a faultline between Northern art and Southern art. I think the drama of the Troubles gave those artists an edge because it became necessary to deal with things. Because it was to obviously going on in society, it became unavoidable to take a position in relation to it. There were obviously artists in the South who were extremely interested in what was happening, but there was still a curious distance between the South and the North. There was revulsion to the violence. There was empathy for political issues. Indeed, there was a lot of support for the republican side of the debate. But in terms of the art sector, there was ambivalence about engaging with the North at all. For instance, for a time in the Republic, it was difficult to fly the tricolor at nonpolitical events as just the flag...because it was so associated with republicanism. That did not change until Ireland was in the world cup in 1990. Only then did people feel that you could fly the tricolor without feeling like a Provo supporter.

One of the things that does come through, and it's one of the hallmarks of visual arts in the Republic, was a focus on another site of contest—which was woman. The role of women in society. The marginalization of women and issues of contraception, abortion, divorce, and so forth...right through the 70s and 80s. The locus of the contest here was in terms of participation in society, or not, on the part of women. There's a whole clutch of artists who address that, not only women artists.

Where this all meets up is issues of power. In the end, the fundamental question for Northern Ireland was not religious, although it was cast in religious terms. It wasn't even political in the sense of party political, though it was cast in party political terms. Who has the power? How is it exercised? On whose behalf is it exercised? And with what sort of means? And if I were thinking of a difference over that span of time between the North and the South...I think it connected in addressing issues of power, for me the most interesting art did that, but it was cast in completely different terms. There was a drama and an edge attached to work that came out of Northern Ireland within a specific generation. That's a critical point. There are differences you can point to—the approach... But where they connect was the issue of who had the power.

EM: Given that artists are trying to reach as large an audience as possible, do you think Irish contemporary art with political message is aimed more at an Irish audience or an international audience? Who was the primary audience at the Orchard Gallery?

DM: A gallery that's publicly funded, and this is crucial...that I've always worked in the public sector...whenever public money becomes involved, it should not be a selfish process. It needed to be a conversation. When the Orchard Gallery started, there was no art constituency in Derry. It's hard to think of what there was in Derry. Certainly no arts infrastructure. It was a temporary space, but it was the first professionally staffed art facility in the city. I believe my job was to do great things for that city. And the way to do great things is to position yourself to be able to call the best material. Therefore, the gallery had to speak to the world in a Derry accent. That's a colorful way of saying it, but it's true. So it was about both of those constituencies simultaneously. Because in every other aspect of our lives, we live in the world. You live your life in the world and then you go to a gallery space and it's just going to be Irish? No. Or it's just going to be local? That just didn't make sense to me. It wasn't international for the sake of being international. These completely spurious debates seem to emerge about—well, it's an Irish gallery, it should be showing Irish art. I had that debate in Dublin thought, not in Northern Ireland. I think that's because people in Northern Ireland had such a low ebb about their own self esteem that they could only look outwards. You needed to look outwards otherwise you'd die with the sort of depression if you kept looking inwards. And I thought the way to do the best job for the both the Irish art sector and the constituency in Derry was to access international art. We did things that were incredibly local at the same time—showing local amateur artists whose work had no resonance beyond the families of the artists. And I wouldn't take out an ad in *Artforum* for the local art show, but I would take out a half-page for Leon Golub because it would speak to that constituency. The focus was on the spectrum on local amateur artists all the way through to Leon Golub. That balance between local Irish and international is very important to get right. They're actually not separate fields, it's a continuum. Jack Yeats should be connected to Central European Expressionism rather than other aspects of Irish art, because that was the discourse he felt he was part of. It's obvious from his works.

We're transnational. I try where I can to use the word transnational rather than international. Because the inherited thinking is that international is great and Irish is weak. Or from another perspective, Irish is great and international is irrelevant to us. But if you think of transnational, you think of a horizontal field. And we're all players in that field. We're all connected by that field. So I think the issue is, how do you negotiate the field? How do you bring things together that create a dynamic and a discourse? When you do that, that's when the Northern art public enters the field and becomes part of the conversation. That's what I was trying to do in the Orchard.