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Gagarin's Point of View: Memory and Space in Recent Northern Irish Art

COLIN GRAHAM

In 2008 Belfast City Council unveiled a new logo for the city. The branding of towns and cities in Britain and Ireland tends to have one continual and worn-out reference point – Glasgow's 1983 campaign 'Glasgow's Miles Better', which used nothing more than this phrase (plus Roger Hargreaves's' Mr Happy) to reinforce the miles/smiles pun, and to persuade citizens, tourists and investors that Glasgow was misunderstood. By 1989 Glasgow was 'Alive', rather than smiling, but the 'Miles Better' tag line was reintroduced in the 1990s and still occasionally makes appearances today.

Belfast's version at more or less the same time was 'Belfast is Buzzing'. Now Belfast has a 'B', designed by Lloyd Northover. The 'B' replaces the previous logo, a feeble extended 'f' in 'Belfast' which doubled as a mouth with two eyes hovering above, making it a sheepish grin rather than a Glasgow smile. The new 'B' is designed so that it is also heart-shaped (with connotations of 'warmth and vibrancy', according to Lloyd Northover's market research).[1] This in itself is not a very original moment in the history of city-branding, deriving from Milton Glaser's famous I ♥ NEW YORK campaign of 1977. Even less original is the 'B' logo as the initial letter of a town/city which is then made to look like a heart. As the Design Research Group point out,[2] Blackburn and Barrow both have a more or less identical 'B'/heart as their logo. All three were designed by different companies and all three were launched in 2008. Blackburn paid £60,000 for their heart.[3] Belfast City Council will spend £180,000 for their B/heart, with the overall cost (not all met by Belfast City Council) rising to £250,000 when 'rollout' is taken into account.

The new Belfast 'B' is not, then, very original. Lloyd Northover quotes sfeedback on its final design as saying, amongst other things, that the 'B' is 'optimistic, welcoming and lively'. In the company's first presentation to

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Belfast City Council one version of the 'B' (a non-heart-shaped model, with squarer font) was rejected because it did not convey a sense of 'heritage' or 'history'. However, the final version of the 'B' which was chosen is not meant to reflect directly on the 'history' of the city. Quite the opposite in fact. What it does instead is to package that history, de-particularize it, and then collapse and encompass the past into terms palatable for tourism: 'warmth' and 'friendliness' are two of the key terms which Lloyd Northover cites as resonant of what Belfast's image should be. All of which, of course, has the added side-effect of cleansing the past of all the obviously negative connotations of the city, while turning the city's self-image fully outwards, primarily to its potential visitors, and with the secondary implication and hope that its citizens will be persuaded of the indisputable naturalness of what the 'B' tells them about the city they live in. The resultant insensitivity of this branded future to the actual past is not just in its attempt to brand conflict out of the city's image, but additionally, for example, in its symbolic erasure of the wider memory of Belfast. One image which Lloyd Northover used in its final presentation to Belfast City Council was of the 'B' superimposed on one of Harland and Wolff's iconic cranes (one of a series of uses of the 'B' as a verb) in this case followed by the words 'on top', and further emphasizing that the future into which Belfast is being projected will have to be cast adrift from the whole of its past (including the history of its economy) in order to gamble on the security of service industries of various kinds. The new brand then pitches Belfast as a place of unspecified but all-encompassing 'warmth', its history bundled safely into a kind of distanced quaintness attuned to its function as a spectacle of and for tourism.

Little else but such vacuity might be expected from the process of corporately branding a city, but the 'B' does stand as metaphor for a wider failure in post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland to know what to do with or about what has come to be called its 'heritage' (a Peace Process euphemism, among many, which rolls history into unspecificity and veneers it with a neutralising gloss). If 'heritage' is encapsulated somewhere in the deeper structure of this anodyne and geographically repeatable logo, and is ratified by Belfast City Council in doing so, then the texture of Belfast's past is smoothed away, leaving visible in the process the traces of an anxious, economically driven desire to forget the past. The 'B' is certainly about selling the city in a marketplace but equally, in a way which is not intended in the business-speak, about 'future-proofing' the city, and doing so by past-proofing.

The 'B' appears in the wider context of the Peace Process and how it imagines Northern Ireland's new dispensation in relation to the Troubles,

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an issue that has nagged away at the political process in many ways since its beginnings in the early 1990s. In the political parlance which has developed in the Peace Process the weight of the past is ethically measured, and then placed at a manageable distance by terming it a 'legacy', a word used early on in both the Downing Street Declaration (1993) and the Good Friday Agreement (1998), and elsewhere.[4]

Daniel Jewesbury, reviewing the state (and concept) of 'Northern Irish Art' in 2005, centres his discussion on the turn from 'Troubles art' to a nascent, post-Good Friday Agreement set of developments, and sees this still undefined and evolving period as characterized by the changed political and social circumstances of the North since the early 1990s and by changes in the structures of artistic production in Northern Ireland in the same period (particularly through collective ventures such as Catalyst Arts).[5] Most immediately these new artistic forms and practices, as Jewesbury suggests, are notable for the ways in which they have partially, and critically, distanced themselves from the weighty expectation that they will somehow 'address' the Troubles. Instead they have, for example, manifested an urban art which registers Belfast *as a city*, both in its particularity and its mere urbanness, as if the changed political scene has suddenly allowed for the city to be understood as an ordinary, lived-in place, over-written by its past and present. This apropos licence to see the city anew, combined with a recent tradition of 'didacticism', which Jewesbury, following Liam Kelly, identifies in 'Troubles art', gives post-Agreement art in the North a particular set of characteristics:

> The most crudely denotational or representational aspects have been stripped away, so that what remains is a diagnosis – a willingness to focus – but no clear prescription. The most successful work balances this desire to 'investigate', to hold a subject up as worthy of investigation, with a subtlety and contingency in the subsequent treatment that then instigates a dialectical relationship between artist, artwork and viewer. In this way a kind of 'ethical aesthetics' could be said to be operating in much contemporary Northern work.[6]

The interrogative ethics which Jewesbury describes almost inevitably mean that the unfolding political process in the North is ghosted into the structure of artworks, and most often in ways which investigate the silences of politics as they affect the ethics of the everyday, whether that be, for example, urban change and redevelopment, or the cauterization of specific issues which might be seen to threaten the stability of the peace. When this imperative is combined with trends in international art practice, the result has often been a set of artworks which register the burden of the moment and the necessity to note and critique, if not to give voice to, the unspoken elements of the new Northern Ireland.

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One of the most contentious notions of recent years in art theory has been Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics', a set of ideas which sits dubiously between a description of certain artistic practices and a prescription for art of the future. Bourriaud's pithy formulation that modernism 'was based on conflict, whereas the imaginary of our day and age is concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences'[7] looks, initially, like a nicely apt way to understand the putative switch from the Troubles to the Peace. Equally Bourriaud's insistence (when discussing the work of Félix Gonzáles-Torres) that the 'idea of *including the other* is not just a theme'[8] but a formal part of the 'relational' artwork is appealingly appropriate to a post-conflict era, and, superficially at least, equates with the formal structures of some recent artistic ventures in Northern Ireland. However Bourriaud's belief, briefly put, in contemporary artistic practice as inherently built on 'a relationship with the other',[9] while potentially involving a radical and unsettling version of alterity, tends to fall into an 'emphasis on conviviality rather than antagonism',[10] and, in its assumptions about the sociability of art as it reflects the same sociability in postmodern culture, to lack a stringency in its sense of the texture of geopolitical differences. So while some contemporary artistic practices in Northern Ireland may, in form and theme, parallel Bourriaud's structural alterity, the 'dialectical relationship' which Daniel Jewesbury identifies in recent Northern art involves a continual and self-conscious awareness of art as critically engaged with a particular time and space, of Northern Ireland post-Good Friday Agreement as a place undergoing change in its social, geographical and intellectual formations directly as a result of a new and uncertain politics. It is in these murky, unclarified spaces, including the still and perpetually unresolved issue of the past and its future, that some recent Northern Irish art has found its purchase.

The examples of artistic practice discussed below exist in and register the strength and potential of individual and collective memory, and do so in a political context dominated by the hope of forgetting (or at least directed towards the exigency of not remembering). Broadly, and differently, they tend to critique that politics of forgetting as part of a wider and problematic shift, post-Agreement, towards a corporatization of Northern Irish society which is as empty and as geographically transferable as the new Belfast 'B'. These artistic projects engage in this questioning of memory, commemoration and history as an alternative form of knowledge to that dominating the high politics of the Peace Process, and they often do so at community level. The power of mainstream political discourse to contain the past means that such ground-level, interventionist work often looks simultaneously at the past from within and without, and in doing so employs a form of nostlagia which wishes to inhabit the past (as place and time) while

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simultaneously registering its own estrangement from a 'true' knowledge of the past – that is, it effectively laments a lost knowledge of the past and wonders about the effects of this erasure in the present and future. Thus, there is often an emphasis on a fleeting moment of understanding, or belonging, or the creation (or re-creation) of community; and occasionally the fragility of such work means that it finds itself thrown into a kind of orbital perspective, that of the local spaceman.

It is not only in the visual arts that such concerns have been registered. In their 2007 book *Toward an Architecture: Ulster*, Alan Jones and David Brett pose the question:

> How should we be living together, not solely with our contemporaries but with our interlocking, overlapping and contentious pasts? . . . How shall those concerned in and with architecture and building respond to this new situation?[11]

They find tentative and complex answers within an architectural vocabulary of the select vernacular; of using local materials, of building small scale, village-like settlements. Such an evolving architecture they see as setting itself against 'a persistent theme in contemporary thinking which stresses the "placelessness" induced in modern culture by the speed and universality of technology and electronic communication' (the very features, it might be argued, which Bourriaud, for all his apparent qualifications, takes as givens on the path to relational aesthetics).[12] Jones and Brett argue for an architecture of commonality, and logically within that, of shared civic space. Such aspirations in many ways hark back to what now sometimes seems like a pre-Good Friday Agreement liberal idealism, but they are also in contrast to the politics of the Agreement and the ways in which it functions. This is, effectively, the same critique which is articulated by Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson, who discuss the erosion of the consociational basis of the Good Friday Agreement as a failure to lead towards a model of a shared civic culture.[13]

Jones and Brett's argument for a recuperation of the local, and their delineation of an architectural 'third way', points towards what seems to be a relatively familiar mode of conflict resolution: 'In a thoroughly modern spirit, the antinomy between opposing inheritances: the diagrammatic and the imagistic, the individualist and the communal, the shared and the separated. The settler and the indigène.'[14] The syntactical strains here perhaps reflect the difficult parturition of such a third way, a logic of lost inclusivity which is itself a polemic. However their impulse to describe knowingly nostaglic versions of potential contemporary Northern Irish spaces of locality is understandable, and is given definition by a peculiar

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post-political version of politics in Northern Ireland which has increasingly turned to the shibboleths of the global economic spectacle as its saviour.

The most obvious artistic response to dealing with the silences around the past in contemporary Northern Ireland would be to construct a version of the memorial to the dead of the Troubles, which Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, in his much criticized report *We Will Remember Them* (1998) thought should occur after 'common ground' had been found, and even then only after a 'seemly interval'.[15] Shane Cullen's *The Agreement* (2002) plays with such memorialization, but more recently Seán Hillen's *Omagh Memorial* (2008) has become the artwork most directly engaged with creating a monumental remembrance of the victims of political conflict.

Hillen's *Omagh Memorial* has been politically contentious within Omagh, and amongst the groups representing the victims of the Omagh bombing. Equally its scale and ambition, a direct result of Hillen's wish to cross and connect spaces within the town, have lead to technical problems which can sometimes appear to be an extension of its difficult political status. The piece places thirty-one mirrors in the Memorial Garden in Omagh and uses these to track sunlight, each individual mirror reflecting onto a single large mirror on a building which then turns the light around a corner and into a heart within a glass obelisk at the site of the bomb. The use of light from the sun and the obelisk refer back to ancient monuments, and most obviously the channelling of the sun at Newgrange (a site which appears in Hillen's *Irelantis* montages[16]). The central metaphor of light as hope may seem rather predictable, but its double-reflection and recapturing suggest a qualification, and Hillen's usual irony is twisted with a near-maudlin poignancy in the fact that Omagh records the least sunshine of any town in Ireland. The work's upward glance to a transcendent perspective, its origins in the sun, runs the risk of a weak and apolitical universalism, but if set in the context of Hillen's other work (which may not be the intention) then it makes a different kind of sense. Throughout Hillen's early montage work, his alter ego figure of 'Newry Gagarin' circles the earth, and more particularly, constantly crosses the border. Hillen's Gagarin, as is more literally the case with much of his montages, is a joke on perspective, but the joke is a serious one, describing the need to find a way to make ridiculous, and to configure the shapes of sectarianism, violence and the Troubles.[17] The skyward beginnings of Hillen's *Omagh Memorial* are not simply about finding a common point outside of and beyond the world. That aerial perspective is a comment on the impossibility of untainted knowledge, of clarity of image, in Northern Ireland.

The *Omagh Memorial*, like Hillen's other work, borders on and plays with kitsch, and thus brings with it the possibility of an uncontrollable irony, in

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which kitsch becomes primarily understood as a meta-reference to the 'high' art which it is not.[18] The heart in the crystal, while appropriate to Tyrone, courts a sentimentality which might be seen to try to circumvent the political, as a kind of common denominator of emotion: Hillen himself describes it as 'a universal symbol of compassion'.[19] Commenting on the memorial, Fintan O'Toole writes that Hillen is 'an artist whose métier has been the subversion of literal realism'.[20] Hillen's displacement, Gagarin-like, may echo the difficulty of monumentalizing collective, traumatic memory, but its ironic and potentially fragile, even collapsing meanings and exteriority of technology recognize the impossibility of fixing historical memory, its story and its loss. Hillen's piece then arguably has within it a *critical* transcendence of space and time, using light as a symbol of hope at the same time as recognizing light as an immateriality which is the only possible alternative to the materiality of an exhausted history.

The public and official status of Hillen's memorial gives it a very particular resonance, and potentially delimits its meanings, pulling the piece back (despite its own ambitions and the well-known developments in memorial art in recent decades) into a set of public expectations about war memorials which are derived from the nineteenth century, and which cannot cope without partisanship and heroism as their central ethos. Hillen's glance to the skies in the memorial, and the traversing of Omagh by the reflected beams of light, suggest other ways to understand space (a pun continually enlivened by *Newry Gagarin*). This rethinking of spatial geopolitics (and the playing on words and ideas which it gives rise to) is also evident in the *Space Shuttle* project, carried out around various sites in Belfast in 2006–07. In describing their work for this project, most of the artists deploy the term 'intervention' as a description of their art's intentions. While the term is understood in a variety of ways, the common connection is to the notion of urban interventionism popularised in the 1990s, and exemplified in the work of City Mine(d). In the book published to accompany the *Space Shuttle* projects, City Mine(d) describes its practice:

> Urban interventions are created in 'cracks in the city', where they manage to draw in the most diverse group of participants. Besides, escaping the traditional regulating forces of the city allows for the work to become full-scale experiments in new forms of governance, education and participation as well as in the arts. The experimental quality is strengthened by the ephemeral nature of both the work and the public space it gives rise to.[21]

Such urban interventionism is often seen as a form of neo-Situationism. While *Space Shuttle* and interventions like it are neither dogmatically

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Situationist nor Neo-Situationist, it is arguable that current 'interventionist' art practices, such as *Space Shuttle*, carry forward a practice inflected by the political aesthetics which are left over from Situationism. In the particular case of the *Space Shuttle* projects, and the Belfast they imagine, we can see the remnants of Debord's assertion that late capitalism activates 'an intra-historical rejection of history',[22] a critique which points to the saturation of ideas of time by necessities of production and in the specific context of Northern Ireland gives voice to the paradox of a society which was perhaps once suffering from an overreliance on history suddenly finding its history made anodyne and replaced by signs of the global market. Debord's writings, and his earlier, and largely unfulfilled suggestions for political action, might seem to point to a radical reinvention of time and history. However, Alastair Bonnett points out that Situationism in general, and Debord in particular, is drawn towards history in a nostalgically utopian as much as a radically reshaped form. Bonnett finds, in Debord, nostlagia in 'a free-floating sense of loss that presents permanent marginality and the "alienated life" as a political identity' and 'a tendency to nostalgic form and object . . . that evokes specific places and particular experiences and memories'.[23] And there is perhaps an inevitability about this nostalgia in 'interventionist' art in contemporary Northern Ireland.

The hollowing out of the past in the present, and the devaluing of potentially meaningful historical concepts such as 'community', leaves little alternative other than a form of historical knowledge which is particular and local, and which is reactivated by nostalgia. Thus, Aisling O'Beirne's *Space Shuttle* 'Mission', 'some things about Belfast (or so I'm told)', collected 'unofficial place names that people commonly use for places, streets or local landmarks, but which do not appear on city street maps or other official, formal state or city documents'.[24] The result is the creaton of an alternative, participative, linguistic psychogeography of Belfast which points to the gap between the ways in which the city 'officially' knows and describes itself and how its citizens talk of and understand it in everyday life, the alternative names for places often pulling with them a linguistic energy or implied story which animates the place. The contrast is between a real, living city and that which can be subsumed under the letter 'B'. *Space Shuttle*, in each of its six projects, finds ways to intervene through art, not in the naive hope of giving the unspoken a voice, but rather in letting alternative ways of being echo against the solidity of 'official' ways of understanding Belfast.

Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern note that 'memory politics has emerged as an important arena of popular action, struggle, resistance and support in the North of Ireland today'.[25] Lundy and McGovern refer specifically to ways of remembering the violence of the Troubles. Artists such as

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Hillen, and those involved in the *Space Shuttle*, create work which points to a wider malaise, one in which the inability of the political process to remember victims and their past has meant not just an erasure of the traumas and violence of the past but also of all of its complex and awkward social and historical fabric. The Healing Through Remembering group published a report in 2007 with suggestions for a Living Memorial Museum. *Without Walls* is deliberately inconclusive, but it does question whether such a museum should be site-specific, and, apart from the diversity and inclusivity which might be expected, it stresses the need for visitors to undertake a journey and to engage in reflection rather than affirmation. This museum which is not a museum is most aptly understood through the report's insistence that any memorial is 'intentionally unfinished'.[26] In trying to deal with the politics of commemoration and memory through fluidity and community, *Without Walls* echoes some of the assumptions which are behind interventionist art forms as they are taking shape in Northern Ireland (and new thinking on curatorial practice), bringing notions of the deconstruction of the museum space to bear on the specific politics of remembrance in a way that neither the Bloomfield Report nor any other state-sanctioned form of retributive justice (such as the Historical Enquiries Team of the Police Service of Northern Ireland) or restorative justice (such as the Consultative Group on the Past) could. This unfinished, unsited museum is a logical meeting point of new forms of artistic practice with the politics of memory in the North, its existence necessarily spectral.

Notes and References

1 This information plus design mock-ups for the 'B' were received in reply to a Freedom of Information request lodged with Belfast City Council by Daniel Jewesbury. I am grateful to Daniel Jewesbury for kindly sharing this information.

2 http://designresearchgroup.wordpress.com/2008/07/31/belfast-develops-a-new-logo-and-so-does-blackburn-and-barrow/ (accessed on 11 Feb. 2009).

3 See the *Lancashire Telegraph* report at http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/3546041.Blackburn_s_new___60_000_logo_almost_same_as_Barrow____branding___/ (accessed on 11 Feb. 2009).

4 The Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement) uses the term 'legacy of suffering' in paragraph 1.2 and the Joint Declaration on Peace (Downing Street Declaration) of 15 December 1993 in paragraph 1. See Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 460, 485.

5 Daniel Jewesbury, '"I Wouldn't have Started from Here' or the End of "the History of Northern Irish Art"', *Third Text*, 19:5 (2005), pp. 525–34.

6 Jewesbury, '"I Wouldn't have Started from Here"', p. 531. Jewesbury's discussion of new trends in Northern Irish art arises from his critique of Liam Kelly's *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in Northern Ireland* (Kinsale: Gandon, 1996).

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7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon-Quetigny: Les Presses du Réel, 2008), p. 45.
8 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 52.
9 ibid., p. 85.
10 Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', *Third Text*, 21: 4 (2007), p. 11.
11 Alan Jones and David Brett, *Toward an Architecture: Ulster* (Belfast: Black Square, 2007), p. 6. Jones and Brett's book acts as a counterpoint to the wider consideration of an architectural tradition in Ulster in the twentieth century, one with broadly similar, if less explicitly polemic, aims, to be found in David Evans, Mark Hackett, Alastair Hill, Paul Larmour and Charles Ratray, *Modern Ulster Architecture* (Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 2006).
12 Jones and Brett, *Toward an Architecture*, p. 8.
13 Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson, *The Trouble with Northern Ireland: The Belfast Agreement and Democratic Governance* (Dublin: TASC/New Island, 2006).
14 Jones and Brett, *Toward an Architecture*, p. 54.
15 *We Will Remember Them: Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield KCB* (Belfast: Stationery Office Northern Ireland, 1998), p. 53.
16 Hillen's montage *The Island of Newgrange, Co. Meath, IRELANTIS* uses vortices of light and perspective to frame an imaginary Newgrange. See Seán Hillen, *Irelantis* (Dublin: Irelantis, 1999).
17 Oscar McLennan's review for *Artinfo*, 'Can a New Memorial Bring Light to Northern Ireland?': http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/28298/the-art-of-peace/ (accessed on 27 Oct. 2008).
18 For a conservative argument against kitsch's intrusion into 'art', see Thomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996).
19 Interviewed by Eimear McKeith, 'The Small Picture: How Can a Memorial Present Hope for the Future?', *Sunday Tribune*, 10 Aug. 2008.
20 Fintan O'Toole, 'A Monument That Casts a Human Light', *The Irish Times*, 22 Sept. 2007.
21 City Mine(d), 'Urban Interventions in Economic, Political and Cultural Citizenship', in *Space Shuttle: Six Projects of Urban Creativity and Social Interaction, Belfast* (Belfast: PS2, 2007), p. 62.
22 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel, n.d.), p. 85.
23 Alastair Bonnett, 'The Nostalgias of Situationist Subversion', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23:5 (2006), p. 23.
24 Aisling O'Beirn, 'some things about Belfast (or so I'm told)', *The Irish Review*, 39 (2008), p.120.
25 Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, 'The Politics of Memory in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland', *Peace Review*, 13:1 (2001), p. 32.
26 Louise Purbrick, *Without Walls: A Report on Healing Through Remembering's Open Call for Ideas for a Living Memorial Museum of the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2007), p. 32.

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