



Dallas, Belfast

Author(s): Sarah Browne, Gareth Kennedy and Colin Graham

Source: *The Irish Review (Cork)*, Winter, 2008, No. 39, Contemporary Art (Winter, 2008), pp. 70-77

Published by: Cork University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29736395>

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SARAH BROWNE and GARETH KENNEDY
interviewed by COLIN GRAHAM

SPACE SHUTTLE was the title given to an experimental art project which took place in Belfast in the autumn of 2006 and spring of 2007. At the centre of six interrelated projects was a steel container (12m³) which travelled around the city according to the projects devised by six different artists or groups of artists in six 'missions'.

For their 'mission' Sarah Browne and Gareth Kennedy chose to site the shuttle in the industrial wasteland of the soon-to-be-redeveloped Titanic Quarter, within sight of the cranes of Harland & Wolff. Their project was entitled *Episode 306: Dallas, Belfast*. The Shuttle space was used to enact a fictional script of the 1980s TV show *Dallas*, with actors selected through open audition. Here they discuss the project and their work with Colin Graham.

COLIN GRAHAM: Your 'mission' sets *Dallas*, the place and the television show, in what might seem like the incongruous setting of Belfast. What attracted you to the idea of *Dallas* as a way to use the Shuttle?

SARAH BROWNE and GARETH KENNEDY: Our initial interest lay with the substance of the script, which doesn't refer to recognisable *Dallas* plot lines at all. We happened upon the script (only a three-minute fragment of dialogue) while watching *Dallas* reruns on RTÉ morning TV, so we had it in mind as 'material' before the opportunity to work in Belfast arose. As a text from 1987, it really prefigures the contemporary language of globalisation: 'There's one world, one country, one language, and that language is power'.

At the same time, when seeking participants, *Dallas* is very evocative of the luxurious and avaricious front of capitalism – it's a very effective 'hook'. It connects with a certain nostalgia in the UK/Irish context, where it was

used to vicariously experience the glamour of Sue Ellen, Bobby et al. This connection with a community of interest was an important tactic in enticing and eventually engaging with a group of participants and to develop a micro-audience for the project. Such a 'community' has bonds not based on class, gender or social background, but rather simply on a conscious decision to be interested in something. In this case, people's interest was threefold; either as fans of the TV series; aspiring or wannabe actors; or as people seriously interested in the city's redevelopment. Really, there were a mix of these interests at play for everyone.

We were interested in using a fictional text as a means to obliquely address actual issues of prosperity and choice, namely the city's ongoing redevelopment and efforts to positively 'rebrand' itself. The drama of the script itself involves an argument over a big deal in the city: within this an unwilling, 'patriotic' JR is given a masterclass in the new laws of capital flow across borders of nation and allegiance. In effect we were looking for a way to implicitly address the 'new' Belfast, a city 'reborn' in the model of so many other European post-industrial cities, and trying to establish a positive image to garner international investment, albeit belatedly.

Dallas, Texas, as a real place, was relevant only as a metaphor for a kind of American economic/cultural dominance, perpetuated by the TV show and exported worldwide.

CG: The initial incongruity of *Dallas, Belfast* would seem, then, not to be all that incongruous after all but to be a kind of lesson in itself. Was it important to you that the participants were aware of the irony, humour and seriousness of the project?

GK: We were familiar with a Belfast sense of humour that courts the absurd and accommodates farce. We anticipated the 'incongruity' of the unlikely twinning of Dallas and Belfast to marry well with this sensibility, and to garner interest.

Our initial contact with the group was framed through the audition in which we put out a citywide call . . . 'Who wants to be the Belfast JR?' Later there was an earnest need to 'shoot', and 'shoot' rigorously the script with three separate casts, in order to generate three different dynamics from the same source.

A few individuals took the concept of a *Dallas* re-enactment quite seriously, and earnestly, and saw it as a legitimate exercise in and of itself as an homage to the original – these were the bona fide *Dallas* fans. Others were serious early-career actors, who lent their professionalism to the characterisation at hand. Others still valued the farce or identified with what we were doing vis-à-vis the script's content and the location in the

Titanic Quarter. As mentioned before, each individual had these access points in different and fluid ratios which changed in the course of our time together. We were open and transparent about our ideas from the very beginning with everybody, but we never loaded our explanations with discourse on gentrification, PPPs and public/private urban space – there was no need for that.

SB: I would say that the project courted a certain sense of subversive humour . . . as Gareth says, people engaged with this on different levels, which is to be expected. I suppose it's also important to say that we didn't want the humour to exclude people or to feel as if we were laughing 'at' our casts. We wanted the process to be sincere and open, but maintain the potential for criticality.

CG: The Space Shuttle project in general, and *Dallas, Belfast* in particular, was based around intervening in the 'public space' of Belfast and drawing in people who wouldn't necessarily usually look at or think about contemporary art. There's potentially another incongruity there, one that you seem to find productive.

SB: That's true. It's not necessarily that we were averse to working with people well versed in contemporary art – it's not about the exoticism of a 'non-art' audience. Rather, we wanted our choice of site and the project itself to generate its own community of interest and let that be the beginning point of the discussion. The people that came to audition became both participants and the initial audience for the work.

Our choice of location for the project was important for this – we were working in a docklands site that, while in some ways iconic (the view of Samson and Goliath), is not a place that people actually visited. The journey to the audition, the attempt to locate a small silver box behind the paint hall, was in itself a challenging navigation of the city for most people. Then there was the situation where this group of potential actors and crew were waiting around, either outside or in a waiting taxi – it was pouring rain – practising their lines in Texan and Belfast accents. It was a unique situation. The construction of this 'situation' was our starting point.

Of course it's worth mentioning here that that 'public space' we were working in was actually private.

CG: And that space is about to be transformed into something resembling the landscape of the opening sequence of *Dallas*. The 'situation' which you created then would seem to be one which initially was spatially strange for everyone taking part; but from what you say it sounds as if the way in which the space is caught between two times was as much a focus of your interest.

SB: The question of time is a really astute observation, actually. We had considered the work as kind of a 'marker in time', poised between a particular past and series of possible futures for the city. My sense of what *Dallas, Belfast* is, or was, is evocative of a kind of holding space of sorts, which is again reinforced spatially: the Space Shuttle became a small, insulated space that framed particular views of the city (the old city centre; the new Odyssey entertainment complex; ferries and cruise liners passing). It becomes a kind of holding space to meditate on the city outside. This sense of 'holding', of suspension or irresolution, is reinforced in the final piece also: the same dialogue is repeated three different times, each time with a different cast of actors and with subtle differences in tone and group dynamic. There isn't a clear forward-narrative movement.

Svetlana Boym has written a history of nostalgia that I find very interesting: she speaks of it as an 'historical emotion', a sense of overwhelming longing. This longing is not necessarily for a place that exists, or a regressive past – it can be a potentially progressive longing whose movement is not forwards or backwards, but 'sideways'. This parallel sense of time is important for how I think of *Dallas, Belfast*.

GK: About the opening sequence of *Dallas* – there is a really uncanny similarity we were unaware of with the flash preview on titanicquarter.com. So it was interesting to actually locate the Space Shuttle in that vision. It's that shift in perception and realisation that every square metre of the terrain we occupied was undergoing an intricate and total marketing and redevelopment plan – a vision dependent on international investment and complex negotiations between the city council and private partners. Sarah talks about this 'holding space' that is between the city as it actually is, and how some envision it to be. It is in a Foucauldian sense 'heterotopic'.

The repetition in the final piece and deferral of a forward movement was also very important. I suppose we wanted key points from the script to rupture from the original dramatisation and context, and see if they could get any purchase on the changing face of Belfast and its famous shipyard . . . There is an irrationality to this of course. Both the repetition and the Belfast accent were essential here in trying to locate this text in contemporary circumstances.

CG: Is it fair to then see the final piece as using that nostalgia you talk about as a reflection on the shipyard itself and the variety of things it has come to symbolise for some people in Belfast? For the Titanic Quarter project it's an industrial past that is to become a post-industrial future, while as a replacement icon on murals in East Belfast it symbolises a sense of community in a nostalgic way.

SB/GK: There was a certain nostalgia utilised in the process of making the work, but we don't see nostalgia as being an important presence in the final piece. There can be a danger, too, in using the word 'nostalgia', as it connotes a memory or other experience that is somehow unreliable, or overly sentimental or insincere. That said, our starting point for this discussion was a fictional text, which reflects a certain ambivalence on our part towards the discourse of redevelopment and 'regeneration'.

The rebranding of the Titanic Quarter is particularly interesting as it represents an attempt at recuperating a failure of sorts (the ship and the voyage). This is even more complex now that the *Titanic* exists both as a Hollywood blockbuster film and the actual ship itself. Therefore the project was immediately implicated within a weighty cultural iconography: *Dallas* as the most successful TV serial in history and an exported symbol of US cultural hegemony; the Harland & Wolff shipyard and cranes – symbols of Belfast's former industrial glory, but also sites for sectarian employment biases; and the *Titanic* itself. (Within the locale, the Titanic Quarter as a backdrop is an explicitly loaded location that didn't require direct reference in the final piece.)

There are a number of important issues and representations here, and perhaps a certain slippage between ideas of the 'authentic': on a site visit to the Titanic Quarter, we noticed a promotional slogan for the Odyssey complex: 'the future is entertainment, and entertainment becomes the future'. This lodged in our minds as a remarkable statement.

Certainly there are many different vested interests looking to garner agency with regard to the past, from the locally endorsed community murals you mention, to the repackaging of this local history by private developers. In terms of a sense of community as experienced by Belfast people, this is a constituency (constituencies) that the work does not, and could not, attempt to speak for.

CG: In this, and in other work that you've done, there is a strong sense of trying to articulate visually the forces of economic, social and political change that seem to happen almost silently or without critical comment in current times. And equally your work seems aware that the channels of communication and the possible ways of expressing an alternative or dissenting viewpoint are themselves saturated with a monologic language. Is creating a 'situation', like that of *Dallas, Belfast*, then a way of interrupting space and time to find a moment and place in which to think differently?

SB/GK: We are interested in how the changes you mention are present, and typically unquestioned, within popular culture – for example, this remarkable *Dallas* text where a character proclaims 'There's just one world, one country, one language – and that language is *power*'. How can these

narratives be made visible in order that they be questioned? For us, it's a challenge of how to be an active 'reader' in culture, something like de Certeau's idea of the renter who dwells in the apartment, making it his own by rearranging the furniture. Perhaps for these reasons, a lot of our work involves appropriating existing popular narratives and forms.

The idea of an 'interruption' is very useful here, as much of our work, in one way or another, attempts to rupture or alter time, for example through the use of meticulous editing, repetition and loops in the video work. Sometimes this has involved a kind of archaeology of recent popular culture; for example, an 'artist's cut' of *King Kong* (1979) that forefronts the protagonist's avarice for oil – the source film is unrecognisable in the finished piece, as it becomes a frustrated and unsatisfied quest for a secret island of huge oil reserves. Another work, in a related vein, examines 'Big Oil's' relationship with Bantry Bay in west Cork in the Sixties and Seventies, through the re-presentation of an advertising jingle performed by Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers. This was commissioned by the Gulf Oil Company in 1971. This work touches upon the mythology of the *Universe Ireland*, the largest ship in the world at the time, which actually did exist, and also examines the state's strategic oil reserve, which few of us ever really think about in our oil-enriched everyday lives.

However, our intent is not to retrospectively uncover 'hidden histories'; it's more like a playful attempt to generate a different sense of the present. Tim Stott has discussed how it is necessary to play with the stuff of the world to become historical creatures – a sentiment which resonates with us. We are particularly drawn to the confluence of popular culture, actual events and possible futures in the past thirty-or-so years.

A sense of the 'popular' is very important to our practice: not only as source material, but as a field of agency within which to act.

CG: *Dallas, Belfast* gives over the agency of the 'situation', to some extent, to the actors and participants and reflects this in its three versions. The multiplicity and open-endedness of the situation would seem to be important to you.

SB/GK: We recognise that it was not a collaborative process, as participants had no authorial control. But it was certainly important to us that we addressed participants as actors within society, rather than as passive mouth-pieces. We had actually intended to use the *Dallas* script as a starting point to develop three new 'site-specific' scripts with the three different casts, but unfortunately there wasn't the time or resources to develop this within the time frame of the project – this potential is still there though, and we do have in mind a 'sequel' to the original work.

With *Dallas, Belfast*, the sense of multiplicity related not only to the production, but also the distribution of the work: screenings were presented at the end of filming on location at the Titanic Quarter; as part of the concluding Space Shuttle exhibition (with *Belfast Exposed*); as a programme on Northern Visions Community Television; and as part of our solo exhibition at Pallas Contemporary Projects, Dublin. These different streams connect with different audiences at different times, and generate their own distinct interpretations and meanings.

CG: You both each work individually as well as in collaboration with each other. How do you find that collaborative practice differing from your solo work?

SB/GK: The collaborative practice is a rich and surprising kind of space that sits between our individual practices – sometimes it feels almost like something that can be observed happening independently, at more of a distance than solo work. There is certainly a different sensibility at play.

Although it's possible to trace some shared concerns from our solo work, the shared authorship of the collaborative practice allows us different freedoms. It has its own particular energy and dynamic. We've recently adopted the name 'Kennedy Browne' to emphasise this 'separateness' and to define it more fully as a distinct practice and body of work in its own right: that these three practices (two solo and one collaborative) have their respective autonomies, particularised concerns and distinctive strategies is very important to us. We hope that 'Kennedy Browne' can continue to develop a separate identity as an individual practitioner.

CG: A kind of serious playfulness seems to be the distinctive strategy of *Dallas, Belfast*. Are the strategies of *Dallas, Belfast* something which you can see yourselves extending in future work?

SB/GK: This 'serious playfulness' is very important to us. We're not interested in reactionary humour but a sense of humour that has the ability to be disruptive and challenge rather than reinforce the status quo. Humour can also be culturally specific, and as such relates to our growing interest in processes of translation . . . in this context, we see it as a way of highlighting, rather than diminishing, some of the processes associated with globalism and flows of capital that our work typically investigates. The sense of 'playful seriousness' is something we share and would expect to extend further in future work.

Further details of the Space Shuttle Project can be found at <http://www.spaceshuttle.org.uk/mission2.htm>

The casts of *Dallas, Belfast* were: Liam O'Carroll, Stephen Angus, Carly Young; Kelly Anne Flynn, Olivia O'Kane, Hugh McIntyre; Adrian Cooke, Jim McGookin, Andrew Higgins. The artists wish to thank all the actors who came to audition; Alison Moore for additional footage; Acorn TV & Film; Queen Street Studios; White Mountain Spring Water; Sonic Arts at Queen's University; and the crew: Graham Davidson, John King, Anderinna Gooch, David Baxter and Brian Greene.