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After the War: Visual Culture in Northern Ireland since the Ceasefires

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Suzanna Chan

'After Hard Times': Disjunctive Temporality and Ethics of Memory in Art by Aisling O'Beirn, Sandra Johnston and Heather Allen

Angel of anti-history: anxiety of time and a critical present in works by O'Beirn and Johnston

A Klee painting named '*Angelus Novus*' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹

Walter Benjamin found his dialectical 'angel of history' in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. The angel faces toward the viewer with his back turned on the future, to witness destruction as it happens. Instead of the progressivist view of history, where successive catastrophes are arranged in a sequence, the angel looks backwards and sees one huge and ever-increasing disaster. But the little creature is being irresistibly propelled forward in the futurist myth of progress, which can only be maintained by a historicity involving violent amnesia.

Until time is no longer out of joint, until a more ethical and equitable reclamation of our own moment in history is attained, the ghosts of Belfast's other histories, other possibilities and other voices will continue, rightly and insistently, to haunt the dominant discourse of progress and development.²

Writing about the current context of Northern Ireland, Aaron Kelly raises several themes, two of which I address in this essay in relation to contemporary artworks by Aisling O'Beirn, Sandra Johnston and Heather Allen. These are the questions of temporality and the marginalizations of historicism, interwoven with that of a haunting. For Kelly, Benjamin's critique implies a rejection of such supposed historical inevitabilities as the liberal discourse of development, with its attendant remarginalization of Belfast's working class, as inevitable alternative to the Conflict. In the drive to secure a 'market-led utopia', the liberal discourse of development is proposed as the attainment of an end goal and the outcome of progress.³ Progressivist historicity allows society to make a souvenir of history and

to use it in re-branding the city's spaces, its 'Cathedral' and 'Titanic' quarters – the latter named for what William J.V. Neill describes as 'the greatest of all 20th-century symbols of human hubris and the lost confidence of modernity'.⁴ History, Kelly argues, is fetishized towards commercial and market-led imperatives rather than manifested as a living and lived site of experience and contestation.⁵ Within this commodification, the realities and complexities of a past and present characterized by conflict are occluded. Peter Shirlow argues that tourists walking about Belfast are sequestered from the violence that continues in various forms, and the 'post-conflict' city witnesses continued periods of rioting, sectarian attacks both on individuals and on symbolic sites, punishment attacks, racism, intimidation and internecine paramilitary violence. While, Shirlow notes, 'most tourists are corralled into areas that have been made to look acceptable', the more adventurous can take a so-called 'terror tour' along the republican Falls and loyalist Shankill.⁶ Visitors are brought in special taxis to the 'terror' theme-parked sections of differently disenfranchised working-class areas, which the tour collapses into one or other of the 'two communities' so as to reinforce a polarity of opposites and eviscerate each of 'internal' heterogeneities and dissonances. The 'two sides' and their physical spaces are rendered a patriarchal spectacle of paramilitary and political murals with their own mythologizing of selected masculine heroes and selective historicism.⁷ Although these are vernacular cultural forms marginal to the 'official account' of history or the tourist facade, they too exercise an amnesiac and patriarchal force. They mirror the wider commemorative landscape in the post-conflict period where the roles women played during the Troubles are subjected to gendered stereotyping or go unacknowledged altogether, leading Sara McDowell to ask, what role will women be permitted to play in the present if they are written out of the past?⁸

For Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Benjamin's work is relevant to the problems of modernity and shot through with the metaphor-reality of the feminine.⁹ His *Angel* shows us the unconscious or non-visible of modernity, which is the reverse side of existing masteries and the self-willed humanist subject, while the fragmentary 'permits' disarray in his writing. Buci-Glucksmann reminds us of Benjamin's opposition to anything on the side of established masteries, filiations, identities, ruling violence and concepts of linear, empty time, and this opposition locates his thought as potentially feminist in application. Independently of Benjamin, the notion of a non-unitary subject has been deconstructed by feminists within a variety of disciplinary fields, variously anti-essentialist, which reject and seek to displace a Cartesian concept of an originary, unified identity. Moreover, Buci-Glucksmann's claim for Benjamin might correspond with Martha Rosler's statement regarding the feminine subject, 'There are no fragments where there is no whole'.¹⁰ In other words, the tropes of self-estrangement or fracturing are not necessarily adequate to conceptualize the specificity of a feminine subject already defined as 'lacking' from a phallogocentric perspective. Yet Benjamin's anti-historicity and emphasis on heterogeneous, fragmentary temporality is of interest in considering the artworks' critical engagements with the present, and in

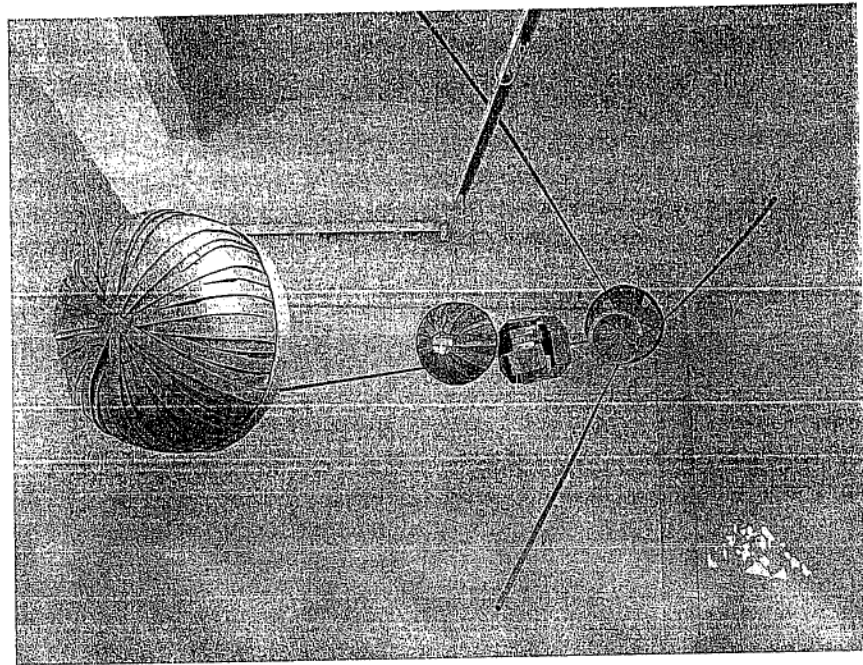
instances where the artworks focus on gendered marginality in the present.

While historians and historicism conventionally access the past from the present as a linear series of successive instants, Benjamin comes to the present by way of the past. The 'what-has-been' is an image 'suddenly emergent' in the time of the now, to form a 'constellation'.¹¹ The concept of empty linear time is to be opposed by the construction of now-times. The 'time of the now' is a constellation that yields a temporal heterogeneity that avoids the incorporation of the past by the present. Benjamin described 'now-time' in his later writings in apocalyptic terms, according to Peter Osborne, who suggests it can be understood to combine two apparently contradictory structures and radically different temporal perspectives, 'the Messianic and the immanently historical, as it opens up experience to the promise of fulfilment'.¹² The continuous possibility is that humanity is 'blasted' out of history's secular continuum by an act of political revolution. Benjamin does not try to 'discover progress in history longitudinally, but rather [...] in an upward direction at every single one of its points'; and the Messianic task is not to drag the new back into a discourse of the old, but 'to resurrect the old within the discourse of the new'.¹³ 'Now-time' is the present as a moment of possibility, and the dialectical image is its productive object, which functions to bring to consciousness those repressed elements of the past that put the present in a critical position. The present is the coordinate for the assembly of fragments, and the dialectical image is a way of seeing that provides the axes for aligning antithetical elements.¹⁴

Benjamin's heterogeneous and fragmentary temporality resonates with recent artworks by Aisling O'Beirn and Sandra Johnston, which were included in the exhibition *A Shout in the Street* (2008) in the Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast. Johnston and O'Beirn were the only women included in a show that featured the works of thirteen artists and the collective Factotum, data from Cain (the Conflict Archive on the Internet at the University of Ulster), an anonymously made and unlit Eleventh of July bonfire structure, and two 'street' murals painted on portable supports in the gallery by Dan Devenny and Mark Ervine.¹⁵ O'Beirn and Johnston engage with recurring preoccupations, such as O'Beirn's focus on the politics of cartography and Johnston's explorations of gendered social structures in unionism and loyalism, while each reflects in different ways upon the theme of history.

In her installation *Sputnik 1* (2008) (Figure 1), O'Beirn creates a celestial object that proposes an anxious and erratic relation of time, juxtaposing different registers of temporality inconceivable within conventional progressive notions of history. This is an angel of anti-historicity, a sculptural model of *Sputnik 1*, its components suspended as though arrested in mid-explosion from the gallery ceiling. Long thin strips of cardboard curve to form a dome and sections of the body of the satellite are fashioned from card rectangles, secured with sticky tape. The installation also has the audio element of a recording made by Washington of the radio signals transmitted from *Sputnik 1* after it was launched in 1957, and a projected digital animation. The latter, projected onto a wall near the sculptural

Figure 1. Aisling O'Beirn, *Sputnik 1*, 2008; sculptural installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist.)



object, is a rectangle of blue background patterned with white shapes, which gradually appears, beginning from the top and unfolding downwards until the whole rectangle has been projected, before it disappears and the process begins again. The white shapes in the projected image are derived from a photograph of plaster objects that O'Beirn made with loyalist and republican prisoners in separate workshops in the Maze prison during her residency there in 1999. This was organized by the Prison Arts Foundation, a charitable trust established in 1996 that runs programmes to promote access to the arts for prisoners and young offenders in Northern Ireland.¹⁶ During one workshop, republican prisoners arranged the objects into an illicit map of the prison and the photograph O'Beirn took of the assemblage was, more recently, processed to reappear as this digital animation.

If its elements are approached as references to those events and cobbled into a narrative, the installation offers a hypothetical scenario: having been propelled into orbit in 1957 to launch the space race, *Sputnik 1* receives and transmits a map of the Maze prison as fashioned by prisoners some forty years later. Yet the work's interest lies not in indulging any romantic 'what if' time-travel fantasy, but in the implications of its juxtaposition of antithetical fragments and its theme of erroneous temporality. For a critical present moment, *Sputnik's* absurd constellation assembles elements that are not from the same temporal period; it inscribes and aligns different events separated by over forty years, thereby rebuffing progressivist historicism. The elements of the work are to some extent like 'ur-images' that, in Benjamin's writing, are past myths and provide the motivation for future emancipation.¹⁷ But the elements *Sputnik 1* aligns in its time of

'the now' are irreconcilable, and as images of events or places they point to conflicting understandings and experiences. Currently the status of the former site of the Maze, where the last prisoners were released in 2000, remains unresolved in the Northern Ireland Assembly, while it awaits a post-conflict makeover. Although since 2002 the government has aspired to raise 'an internationally recognised beacon' on the site to symbolize Northern Ireland's transition to normality, the manifestation this might take, given the highly charged and conflicting significance of the Maze for republicans and unionists, has yet to be agreed.¹⁸ Broadly, unionists want it razed to prevent the possibility of a republican shrine that would deny a criminal characterization of the 'armed struggle' and mythologize the hunger strikers, while republicans want five per cent of the site to be dedicated to a museum, incorporating one H-Block, one internment compound, the administrative centre and hospital. In 2006 the cross-party Maze Consultation Panel agreed on a mixed-use concept for the site involving a new sports stadium and a carefully termed 'Conflict Transformation Centre' – the latter linked to local universities to facilitate marketing the Northern Ireland peace process to international audiences.¹⁹ The elements of *Sputnik 1* point to the un-reconciled and antagonistic nature of the histories and investments, which a consensual and marketable symbol of a post-conflict present would conceal. In so doing, the artwork's absurd assemblage, named for an era of competitive futuristic progressivism, does not presume to preordain a course of events in a mythic theory of historical inevitability, or in the name of a present, or a future utopian proposition or anticipation.

Unease with notions of the transparent march of progress and progressivist temporality also characterizes Sandra Johnston's *Allegiances and Assurances* (2008), a three-screen DVD installation with audio (Figures 2, 3, and 4). The DVDs are played on three monitors, wall-mounted in a horizontal row as though to be read in the usual linear sequence from left to right. Each monitor has its own set of attached headphones.

On the left-hand monitor a video loop is played, of contemporary footage of a Boys' Brigade engaged in a marching drill in what looks a small town community centre or church hall (Figure 2). The Boys' Brigade is a youth organization originating in the Scouts movement, with a strongly Christian ethos and attachment to churches of the non-conformist Protestant denominations.²⁰ Founded in 1883, its activities focus on drills, hymns, prayer and games. In some disadvantaged areas, it is one focal point that enables church members to provide boys and young men with an alternative to youth paramilitarism.²¹ The group in the video constitute a Senior Corps, ranging from early teens to young adults, who are verbally directed by an older man, while a few others stand at the back of the hall and watch attentively. The young boys and men are neatly turned out in uniforms, with shoes polished. Their holdalls on chairs at the back of the hall indicate lives outside and, implicitly, relations with others. I do not want to stereotype the roles played by such 'others' – that is, women in Protestant culture as, for instance, carers or 'uniform-washers' – but to extend the work's theme of 'allegiances' from the masculine formations

Figure 2. Sandra Johnston, *Allegiances and Assurances*, 2008; three-screen DVD installation with audio: left-hand monitor. (Courtesy of the artist.)



evident in the video to a wider network involving women who are absent from this display.²²

The looped footage played on the central monitor is of the spectators and supporters at a Twelfth of July Orange Order march, recorded within the past few years and in what again looks like a small town (Figure 3).

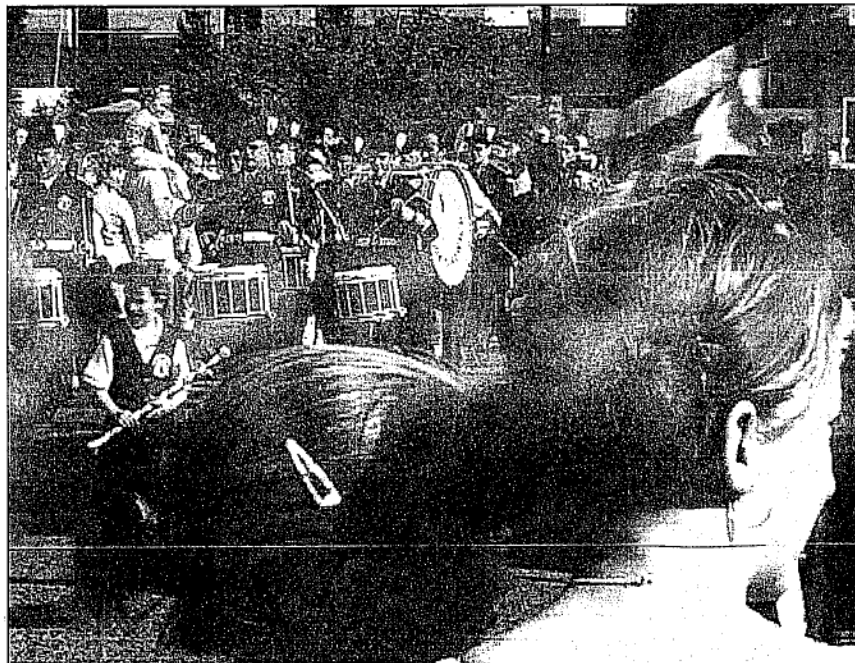


Figure 3. Sandra Johnston, *Allegiances and Assurances*, 2008; three-screen DVD installation with audio: centre monitor. (Courtesy of the artist.)

Johnston has focused on the bodies of the supporters, particularly those of women and girls, rather than the militaristic masculine self-regulation of the predominantly male marching bands.²³ Their flirtatious enjoyment of the marches is legible in the expressive bodies of women and girls whose support and assurance, as the artwork's title suggests, gives the event a vital frisson of excitement and flirtation. According to Neil Jarman, women, children and the elderly may appear to be excluded from the actual marches but they are more than a passive audience. Their support is crucial and they confirm the men's role and bear witness to 'their men's courage and fortitude', while defining the meanings of masculinity and femininity, adulthood and childhood and reinforcing the gendered division of labour.²⁴

The third monitor plays footage of the aftermath of an Eleventh of July bonfire on a small site close to residential housing in inner-city east Belfast (Figure 4). Johnston was living in the area in the mid-1990s and this was recorded from her bedroom window. Lit in loyalist areas throughout Northern Ireland on the night before the Twelfth of July Orange Order marches, numerous bonfire stacks are built in the preceding days and weeks from pallets, old furniture, tyres and other flammable debris. As traditional sites are increasingly being lost to redevelopment, others are used that can be perilously close to houses and roads. Localities assemble and build their own stacks, over which young boys stand guard in the period prior to their lighting. The bonfire building is masculine work, with assistance provided by boys of all ages and the youngest content to play with small smoky fires that are a feature of the sites. Girls, Jarman contends, are rarely attracted to them or encouraged to join in.²⁵



Figure 4. Sandra Johnston,
Still from *Allegiances and
Assurances*, 2008; three-screen
DVD installation with audio:
right-hand monitor.
(Courtesy of the artist.)

On the night of the Eleventh of July, people of all ages gather at the bonfire sites and young men and women bring drink to a celebratory atmosphere. While women and girls might not participate in the bonfire building, they are certainly actively present for its lighting as midnight approaches, to welcome the Twelfth of July.²⁶ At many sites, the culmination of the fire is reached once the Irish tricolour, frequently placed at the peak of the stack, is aflame. Johnston's footage is of the remains of smouldering embers in a small site in a housing estate. Compared with the footage on the other two monitors, the image quality is poor and out of focus. The sound is diegetic in source but the high levels of microphone feedback mean that its amplification yields not clarity but a soundtrack of electronic distortion. The artist's spectatorship is here clandestine, unlike the other footage where she exercises a relatively authorized gaze. Here, there is a sense of her insecurity and estrangement in electing to film from a distance and a sense of the vulnerability of having been corralled indoors while the bonfire had taken place outside. This ambivalent and estranged position is a gendered one, but it also mirrors that of many from Protestant backgrounds or of those who live in loyalist areas and avoid the bonfires and marches. The footage on the monitor shows the site littered with debris. Although the bonfire is over, a few celebrators remain. At a closer view, these turn out to be teenage boys and some very young children. As they play amongst the remains of the fire, it can be seen that the older children are looking out for the little ones. This is another of the title's 'assurances'.

Any linear reading or temporality initially suggested by the row of monitors, of a before/during/after – that is, of preparation for a parade; the Twelfth of July Orange Order march; and the bonfire's aftermath – is entirely untenable. For a start, the parades organized by the Boys' Brigade cannot be conflated with the Twelfth of July march; these are distinct events and there are no formal connections between the Boys' Brigade and the Orange Order.²⁷ The bonfire footage was filmed at least a decade before the contemporary footage of the Boys' Brigade drill and that of the Twelfth of July Orange Order March. To different effect than O'Beirn's *Sputnik 1*, Johnston's *Allegiances and Assurances* also inscribes a disjunctive temporal constellation. The footage on each monitor displays radically dissimilar formal aesthetics, inimical to a reading of progressivism. Any notion of tradition as a continuum of unchanging, venerable practices is eschewed. The work offers a way of seeing 'allegiances and assurances' that might initially attend to masculine loyalties within and towards a number of distinct organizations and events associated with Protestant culture or with loyalism and unionism. The gendered division of labour in the Orange Order marches, in the bonfire tending and building, and in the militaristic drills and parades of the Boys' Brigade, all construe and articulate a public display of masculine identity as loyalist, unionist or Protestant.

Equally, however, Johnston turns attention to ordinarily overlooked gendered roles within their structures, or in relation to other neglected structural factors. What is visible, in the footage played on one monitor, is the centrality of the support of women and girls to the Orange Order

marches. Apparent at the spent bonfire-turned-harsh-playground for working-class teenagers and children, is the class basis of the marginalization of those who pay dearly for the absence of a non-sectarian political movement of class rather than 'communities', and broadly, too, the correlation between the violence to which working-class areas are subjected and their material impoverishment. Concurrently, the gaze is self-directed on the role of the artist as witness to structures, affinities, and alienations, from a position of both insider and outsider to aspects of unionist and Protestant culture.

A question of the ethics of bearing witness is a recurrent feature in Johnston's practice; for example, in *Composure* (2004), which was performed in the gallery of Catalyst Arts Belfast. Johnston slowly drew patterns on two large glass windows using her index finger, which she dipped into a cup of clear saline liquid. She then blew chalk dust onto the drawings and rubbed it into their surfaces to render them visible, engaging in this activity for six hours before the performance opened to the audience. A video monitor repeated a looped extract of footage, originally broadcast in 1976, of Jane Ewart-Biggs delivering a testimonial to her husband Christopher Ewart-Biggs, the recently appointed British ambassador to Ireland, killed by an IRA land mine in Co. Dublin, while travelling in his official car. The chauffeur and Brian Cubbon, British Permanent Under Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, were injured and another passenger, Northern Ireland Office Private Secretary Judith Cooke, was also killed. Managing to temporarily stifle her distress for the duration of her address, Ewart-Biggs articulates a tribute to her slain husband, then collapses inertly into her seat, as though unaware at that point that the camera was still recording.

Throughout the performance, the artist's gestures maintained an indistinct relation to the footage, which she had edited. Present alongside the monitor, within the gallery space, Johnston made no claims to a mythic objectivity or transparent subject position and took responsibility for her re-presentation of the grief-stricken memorial of Ewart-Biggs. *Composure* gets to the present through the past, through footage that was, at the time of the performance, almost three decades old. Johnston's work presents and addresses the problematics of engagement with the footage. The past is not digested by the present, aesthetically the elements of the artwork are too distinct. Instead, the work explores relations of melancholia and mourning in its structure.²⁸ Although prior to her collapse Ewart-Biggs delivers a relatively composed testimony, the repetitiveness of the video loop intensified a sense that what was being witnessed was the other's trauma, rather than providing a resolution or a means for passing through it. The repetition of Ewart-Biggs's distress reflected melancholia as a ritualized repetition. In contrast, the process of drawing using the metaphorical saline of mourning inscribes some kind of narrative and resolution that implies closure, yet cannot resolve the other's trauma. Oscillating between melancholia and mourning, the work approaches an ethics of memory and refuses to wrap up the trauma of others, while Johnston retains engagement with mourning without usurping the place of the other.

'After hard times': memory and the uncanny in artworks by Heather Allen

The theme of memory and its ethics also arises in Heather Allen's *Klub* (Figure 5), which she performed at the temporarily housed Benny's A1 Press Bar in Belfast in late April 2001, as part of an event entitled *The International Language*.²⁹ At the time, the original bar had been demolished but, while awaiting the site's redevelopment, the licence holder continued to trade in a Portakabin on the site. This has since been re-developed beyond recognition into a hotel, bars, restaurants and serviced artists' studios in the re-christened 'Cathedral Quarter' of Belfast, named after St Anne's Cathedral, which stands in the area. The performance took place in a transitional social space, a makeshift bar, when the intensive regeneration of the area into a 'cultural quarter' by Laganside Development Corporation, which was established by the government in 1989, was in its earlier stages.³⁰ The development of the area as a 'cultural quarter' had capitalized on its recent history and status, which in turn had arisen from the relative abundance of cheap commercial premises in this disinvested area. Hence the area had become home to artist-led spaces such as Catalyst Arts, after its foundation in the early 1990s, or the Proposition Gallery and studios in North Street Arcade, which also operated in the late 1990s.³¹ Both organizations would soon no longer be located in the area. Unhappy with the managed commercial arts space offered by Laganside, Catalyst Arts relocated to a building in another part of the city now earmarked for redevelopment, and in 2004 North Street Arcade, built in 1936, was

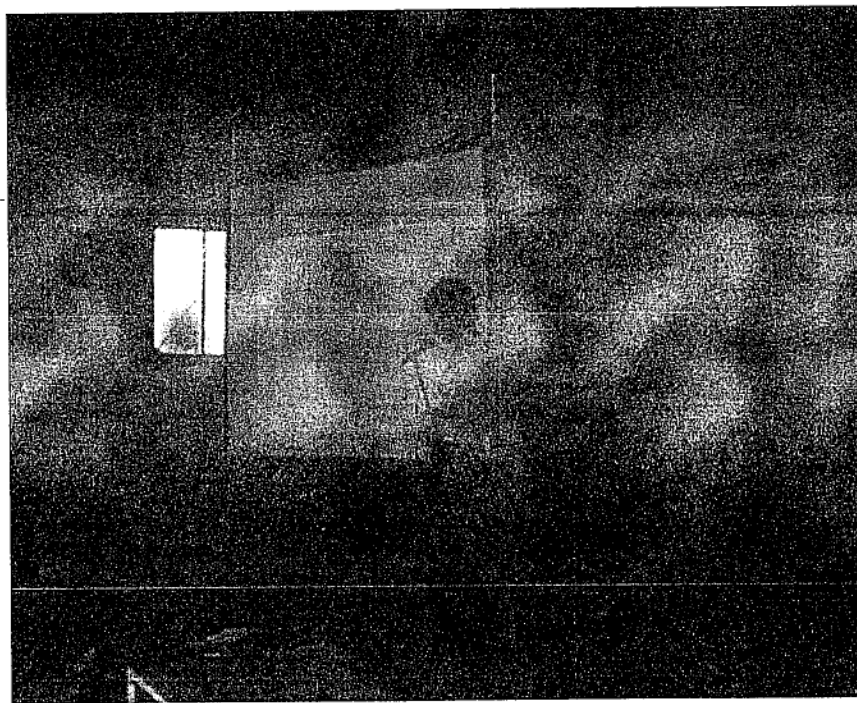


Figure 5. Heather Allen, *Klub*, 2001; performance in Benny's A1 Press Bar Belfast. (Image courtesy of Seamus Harahan.)

destroyed in an arson attack.³² Having been evoked in a nod to the artist-led activity that vitalized the area in the preceding years, as is typical in processes of urban regeneration, in the stylization of the Cathedral Quarter 'culture' is eviscerated of any radical or dissenting agency. As Kelly contends, culture becomes a codeword for commercialization and consumerism and the creation of a fantasy regenerative space to which all are ostensibly welcome, but which essentially functions to conceal social and economic disadvantage.³³ Belfast's quartering was to create new spaces for moneyed residents, tourists and investors by way of producing 'neutral images of the past', and with 'the policy enthusiasm and resources' in short supply when it came to regenerating the city's disadvantaged residential interface areas.³⁴

For Allen's performance, the roof of the Portakabin bar was festooned with the sign 'Klub' and the interior customized with disco lights and a mirror ball. Outside in the cool April night, Allen performed in the large yard to the side of the Portakabin, accompanied by three dancers, a DJ and two musicians. She danced quite awkwardly and read a text *Let's Have*, from which I quote an extract:

[...] let's have a love affair
 let's have a fight
 what colour's your
 uniform
 purple and blue
 purple and blue
 I'll leave the
 only way
 purple and blue
 sweat on your face
 I gave it to you
 boy
 you're hard
 but I'm harder
 and Margaret
 I'm thinking of you
 hoping for the best
 getting the worst
 and it's another
 day where
 everything
 means nothing
 and time's still
 in mid-Ulster
 nothing's moved
 outside all day
 [...].³⁵

The DJ played anodyne, commercial pop songs intermittently, which punctured the intensity of the reading and the text's landscape of desire, fear, melancholia and brutality. But the songs also provided a trellis for memories of other experiences and events. For Sandra Johnston, Allen's *Klub* articulates, amongst other things, aspects of a teenage girl's attempts to have a social life in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s. The text recounts

the ambivalent thrill of flirting with a lad in a loyalist marching band who wears a uniform of purple and blue. Commercial pop songs were played in discos while kids tried to decipher which 'side' others were from. The songs played during the *Klub* performance heightened the sense of paradox of the attempted normalcy of discos within a low-grade civil war zone. Were anodyne pop songs the soundtrack in clubs where the most brutal acts were planned and, in some cases, executed? 'Margaret I'm thinking of you'. Allen dedicated *Klub* to the memory of Margaret Wright, who was murdered in an illegal loyalist drinking club in 1994, having been mistaken for a Catholic.³⁶ The club was housed in a hall used by the flute band The Pride of the Village, linked to paramilitary organization The Red Hand Commando.

Like all acts of cultural recall, as Mieke Bal insists, *Klub's* act of narrative memory performed a social construction that enabled memory and attempted to situate past events in the present. If there is a need to integrate the events of the past then, according to Bal, the need is of the present. Bal writes that, to be committed to memory, a traumatic event needs to be 'made narratable'.³⁷ It is this question of how to render trauma or the brutality inflicted upon others 'narratable' that Allen labours with, but narrative cannot function, as it should, to produce temporality. It is the text's 'now-time', its jarring rhythm and fragmentary, halting temporality that mirrors trauma's temporal unruliness.³⁸ According to Martin Jay, Benjamin preserves the dissociation between past and present, the temporal delay of the trauma itself that made 'a constellation – and not a collapse – of the two possible', in order to prevent the representation of the other in conscious memory that might render it a disposable object.³⁹ The constellation leaves open the possibility of achieving a 'benign hypermnesia' (an abnormally strong memory of the past), without exclusion or incorporation.⁴⁰

'Time's still, in mid-Ulster'. When lives are robbed of any significance, progressivism is a deceit and, instead, stasis and atrophy prevail against a myth of empty linear time. It is another day when unspeakable violence rules. 'Nothing's moved, outside all day': everything has come to a standstill and the landscape is beset with rigor mortis. Another of Allen's performance texts, entitled *Small Objects* (2002), further engages the pathetic fallacy, where estrangement from a landscape gone askew is to be embraced.

after hard times
get up
and look for
another
hard time
because
being lost
is right
and the park
is swimming
i can see
water where
there should be

trees
and everything
is returning
to me
I can't explain
Why
[...].⁴²

Make a habit of adverse circumstances, the text advises.⁴² Be secure in dislocation and in a world where everything is displaced, be at home in estrangement. Allen's text conveys an experience of isolation and of a haunting recurrence, 'and everything is returning to me', which is not so much incomprehensible as inarticulable. And as much as the returning itself is inexplicable, neither is there a position from which she can assume or claim to enunciate traumatic history. On the theme of memory and the transmission of trauma, Homi Bhabha proposes that while there is conscious production of a form of speech that at one level has the cause and the explanation, there is another level that cannot articulate it.⁴³ The space of enunciation resists making the statement and creates another temporality, according to Bhabha. The question arises of producing a discourse that stays with that moment of the 'now' and its inarticulacy, and which gives it an ethical status, rather than producing a knowledge that repeats what happened. In Allen's text, no enunciation or elucidation of what is returning is forthcoming, but instead the caesura of inarticulacy is indicated: 'I can't explain why'. Towards the end of the text, Allen makes a reference to 'Small objects', which are at the artist's feet and then, 'falling away again/they make a whoosh'.⁴⁴ This 'falling away' reorients the text from a traumatic temporal constellation towards a conclusion. Here, it is as though undesirable or painful things or feelings might be transformed into or reduced to minuscule objects at one's feet and, if not discarded, repressed. But for how long before they surface again? As Freud tells us, the uncanny is what ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.⁴⁵ The uncanny theme of haunting recurrence at the beginning of the text is brought into play again to conclude it in the haunted house, crowded with ghosts in the midst of which is the isolated self:

[...]
you're still there
even though
the house is
noisy at night,
and I'm, alone.⁴⁶

The insistent ghosts of other histories, voices and potentialities, which Kelly contends haunt the present moment's dominant discourses of progress and development in Northern Ireland, might find their homely moments in the kinds of critically heterogeneous temporalities artists are engaging and creating in their works. In their own terms, as works of art, they reinscribe the critical present/s of 'now-time' and revoke progressivist historicism for divergent engagements with ideological and experiential shifts, issues of memory and its ethics, and the politics

of place. Commenting on artists based in Belfast, curator Hugh Mulholland observes that many of the same concerns have prevailed in their works over the past decade and a half, but it is possible that some might now be more confident about commenting on a situation relating to the Troubles. Artists can take stock of recent history, he proposes, which might not have been so easy previously.⁴⁷ The artworks I have considered by Johnston, Allen and O'Beirn reference contemporary events and very recent histories of the Troubles, and self-reflexively explore how they can be narrated or re-presented – questions the artists have consistently explored throughout their practice.

Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin in Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason. The Aesthetics of Modernity* (London: Sage, 1994), 41.
- 2 Aaron Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse. Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland', *Third Text* 19 (2005): 553.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 550.
- 4 William J.V. Neill, 'Return to Titanic and Lost in the Maze: The Search for Representation of "Post-conflict" Belfast', *Space and Polity* 102 (2006): 115.
- 5 Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse', 550.
- 6 Peter Shirlow, 'Belfast. The "Post-Conflict" City', *Space and Polity* 10 (2006): 104.
- 7 Male narratives, as Sara McDowell argues, continue to be privileged and perpetuated in the commemoration of the Conflict, in murals, memorials and street plaques, as well as in civic infrastructures, such as community and sports centres. See Sara McDowell, 'Commemorating dead "men": gendering the past and present in post-conflict Northern Ireland', *Gender, Place & Culture* 15 (2008): 345.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 351.
- 9 Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason*, 88–89.
- 10 Martha Rosler in Rosi Braidotti, 'Refiguring the Subject', in *Enlightenments. Encounters Between Critical Theory and Contemporary French Thought*, ed. H. Kunneman and H. de Vries (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 319.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 462.
- 12 Peter Osborne, 'Quasi-Messianic Interruption', in *Walter Benjamin. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 318.
- 13 Benjamin in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), 243–244.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 15 Curated by Declan McGonagle, this was part of a wider project of exhibitions programmed for the Golden Thread Gallery under the heading *Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art*. For a perceptive critique that identifies the problem with McGonagle's juxtaposition of art with non-art as his elision of their divergent intentions and functions in order to reassign elements of vernacular visual culture as art, see Daniel Jewesbury's review; Daniel Jewesbury, 'Shout in the Street Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, September–November 2008. 127th Annual Royal Ulster Academy Exhibition, Titanic Drawing Offices, Belfast, September–October 2008', *Circa* 126 (2008): 98–101.
- 16 See the Prison Arts Foundation website for more information about its stakeholders and objectives; <http://www.prisonartsfoundation.com>.
- 17 Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 116–117.
- 18 Neill, 'Return to Titanic', 118–119.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 20 See Andrew Finlay and Natalie McDonnell, 'Pluralism, Partitionism and the Controversy Generated by a Proposed Orange Parade in Dublin', *Irish Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2003): 30.
- 21 See Duncan Morrow, Derek Birrell, John Greer and Terry O'Keefe, *The Churches and Inter-Community Relationships* (1994), published online at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/csc/reports/churches1.htm#social> (accessed 27/01/09).
- 22 For an analysis of the continuing under-representation of women in Northern Ireland politics, focusing on pro-union politics and stereotypes of the roles of unionist women, see Rachel J. Ward, "'It's Not Just Tea and Buns': Women and Pro-union Politics in Northern Ireland", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6, no. 4 (2004): 494–506.

- 23 Most of the marching bands are independent of the Orange Order parade, and many flute bands are hired for the day. They tend to be critical of the loyal orders and many are closer to the paramilitary groups, although not all. In a march that, despite an appearance of unity, is an array of dissonant elements, their presence is an affirmation of support for the general unionist position, according to Neil Jarman who focuses, as a sociologist, on the function of the Twelfth of July Belfast parade. He considers it an act of commemoration in which 'an imagined Protestant community' in Belfast is made coherent, visible and physical, 'in total and uninhibited control of the public spaces of the city'; see Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts. Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 108.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 26 Julie Healy's report cites from interviews with girls living in working-class areas with a loyalist identification whose affiliation to traditional Protestant culture is expressed through 'Orangeism'. The girls frequently articulate accounts of their participation in bonfires, the Twelfth of July marches and celebrations, as well as outings organized by the Orange Order. See Julie Healy, 'Locality Matters. Ethnic Segregation and Community Conflict – The Experience of Protestant Girls in Belfast', *Children and Society* 20 (2006): 105–115.
- 27 See Finlay and McDonnell, 'Pluralism, Partitionism', 30.
- 28 Marianne Hirsch draws attention to how Dominick LaCapra's work on Holocaust memory distinguishes melancholia and mourning. The former is acting out based on over-identification and repetition, and self-constitution as surrogate victim. It stops the wounds from scarring over and results in 'retraumatization'. Mourning is a working through, a goal and not an end, which involves an element of distance, self-reflexivity and responsibility. Marianne Hirsch, 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy', in *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 16.
- 29 This event was organized by Eoghan McTigue of Grassy Knoll Productions in association with freelance curator Annie Fletcher and artist Phil Collins.
- 30 Laganside Corporation takes a property-led approach to regeneration, focusing on securing and development of individual sites, major infrastructure projects, and image and marketing promotion. See Geraint Ellis and Stephen McKay, 'City Management Profile. Belfast', *Cities* 17, no. 1 (2000): 51.
- 31 Modelled on the Transmission Gallery in Glasgow, in the absence of a commercial art market and infrastructure, the artists and projects associated with Catalyst Arts have treated the city, according to Daniel Jewesbury, as their subject and site, with particular emphasis on performance and live art. See Daniel Jewesbury, "'I Wouldn't have Started from Here' or the End of 'the History of Northern Irish Art'", *Third Text* 19 (2005): 534. An interdisciplinary drive, innovative uses of the various spaces occupied by the organization, and a strong international programme of artists are a feature of the programming.
- 32 The fire was started in several parts of the arcade by blast-bomb devices beloved of paramilitaries. Its glass roof was listed as an historic artefact and was the target of the arsonists. Faded and run down since its heyday, the arcade housed several small independent and alternative businesses and arts organizations at the time of its destruction, for which no police charges have been made. See Henry McDonald, 'Paramilitary Link to Arcade Arson Attack', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/aug/15/northernireland.arts> (accessed January 29, 2009).
- 33 Kelly, *op. cit.*, 548.
- 34 See Brendan Murtagh, 'New Spaces and Old in "Post-Conflict" Belfast', *Divided Cities/Contested States*, Working Paper Series, 2008, <http://www.conflictincities.org/workingpapers.html> (accessed January 29, 2009).
- 35 Heather Allen, 'Let's Have', *The Day's All Mine*, ed. Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt (www.salon3.org, 2003).
- 36 Allen has published an artist's book *The Day's All Mine*, which is also dedicated to the memory of Margaret Wright. It includes an extract from David McKittrick's book *Lost Lives. The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died Through the Northern Ireland Troubles*, which details Margaret Wright's murder. The text recounts how she had been drinking with friends in Belfast's Golden Mile and went to the hall for a late drink with a woman she met in a taxi queue. It is reproduced on the verso as a newspaper clipping to reference a form of archiving, and on the recto is the archive's mediation through the text of 'Let's Have'. The texts I refer to by Allen are all published in the artist's book. See Heather Allen, *The Day's All Mine*. Sandra Johnston's *To Kill an Impulse* (1994) also works in remembrance of Margaret Wright, in outrage at her murder.
- 37 Mieke Bal, 'Introduction', in *Acts of Memory*, ed. Bal et al., x.
- 38 Freud noted that the irreconcilability of trauma lies in what Cathy Caruth terms its 'refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single space or time ... trauma is not simple or single experience of events but ... events insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay'; see Cathy Caruth in Martin Jay, *Refractions of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2003), 23.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 195.
- 41 Allen, *op. cit.*, u.p.

- 42 For Freud, it is the protective buffer of consciousness that trauma pierces. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he writes of repetition-compulsion, where he observes that shell-shocked soldiers were traumatized by having witnessed horrific events. They were unprepared for what they experienced and he postulated that in their recurrent nightmares they repeated the trauma of witnessing in order to build up a sort of defence after the event. If anxiety can actually be a form of defence that prepares us for shock and thus mitigates it, the recurrent nightmares were to induce a retrospective anxiety, which is ineffectual.
- 43 Homi Bhabha, 'On Global Memory: Thoughts on the Barbaric Transmission of Culture' (lecture, University of California, Berkeley), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp6j9Ozpn4>.
- 44 Allen, op. cit, u.p.
- 45 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', *Art and Literature* (London: Penguin, 1990), 347.
- 46 Allen, op. cit, u.p.
- 47 Mulholland here refers to his selection of artists for *The Nature of Things. Artists from Northern Ireland*, an exhibition of works by artists from Northern Ireland as part of the collateral events at the 51st Venice Biennale, in 2005, which included works by the artists I discuss except Allen. He rightly contends that the works can both be translated internationally, while also viewed with a sense of the politics of place. The latter might be an important aspect of the works, he suggests, but need not constitute their prevailing element. See Hugh Mulholland and Suzanna Chan, 'A Conversation on "The Nature of Things"', in *The Nature of Things: Artists from Northern Ireland*, ed. by Suzanna Chan (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the British Council, 2005), 160.