

Art, Archives and the Public Space: Memories of Conflict

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Context

Decades of conflict have left Northern Irish society scarred with individual experience of suffering and pain through intimidation, violence, death and destruction. Coping with 'The Troubles' – to the very day there is no agreed nor shared terminology to describe and negotiate the three decades of a 'many-sided open conflict' – meant that people developed survival strategies. Such widely and deeply internalised strategies included not talking to others about traumatising experiences but to 'shoulder' them in silence. To carry on as normal, to preserve some kind of normality offered a stabilising framework in such exceptional, threatening and uncertain circumstances.

The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 marked the beginning of a complex, and ongoing process of reconciliation and civil re-generation. In this context a number of community-based projects have been set up to consider how to come to terms with the past, and how to promote the exchange between people from diverse community backgrounds and with different political alliances.

Healing through Remembering (HtR) is such an extensive initiative. In its initial report in 2003 it made six key recommendations in response to the question of 'How people should remember the events connected with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland and in so doing, individually and collectively contribute to the healing of the wounds of society?' (HtR, 2009). These recommendations, which have formed a framework for ongoing debates and initiatives, include a network of commemoration and remembering projects, permanent living memorial museum, and collective storytelling and archiving processes.

One example of collective storytelling is the Dúchas Sound Archive, a project of the West Belfast Falls Community Council. Oral history 'is often regarded as a radical redefinition of established forms of history. By these terms established history is rejected as based on a tradition of state-approved historical documentation undertaken by professional historians recording events and people important for the national story.' (Crooke, 2007:125)

The establishment of this archive, amongst others, sought to offer a grassroots counter strategy to official(ised) constructions of history by gathering and disseminating oral recordings of people recounting their individual memories of life in conflicted West Belfast since 1969, the year in which the open conflict broke out. This 'living histories project' has been seen as a way of enabling people, who were not entered into the records of state

history, to be heard and to share their experiences with their families, friends and the wider community/ies.

Likewise, the Prisons' Memory Archive (PMA) is an audio-visual collection of over 200 recordings to date. It comprises narratives from some of those involved with prison sites in Northern Ireland: prison staff, probation officers, prisoners, chaplains, teachers and visitors, who all played a part in the story of these historic sites. The PMA uses the actual prison sites to act as a stimuli for memories and individual storytelling.

These and other similar initiatives need to be located within a broader 'civil reclamation' process of the public domain' in present Northern Irish society that has to wrestle with the after-effects of decades of people's withdrawal into the private sphere of close-knit communities and the safety that this intimacy promised to offer.

The agency, the healing and transformative impact of such repositories of memories relies on acts of contributing, collecting, listening and sharing; in short: on strategies of dissemination, circulation, reception and engagement, or what could otherwise be described as public pedagogies. And herein lies the problem. To date, these emergent initiatives have struggled to sustain their activities as well as achieving a wider reach and recognition due to the scope and short-term nature of their project funding. This situation is in many ways comparable to the rich and diverse sector of community arts in Northern Ireland (and beyond). Creative activities driven from the 'ground of community' do not (easily) find their way into accounts of national and global art and their influences and histories. As an effect of infrastructural under-development and disadvantage, there has been a lack of documentation of those endeavors with resultant difficulties [a] in piecing together and retaining memories of such creative practices on the basis of which histories can be re/constructed; and [b] in building a dissemination network and public and media space of (critical) display and discourse through which, and that is [c], these forms of engagement can be validated in ways that offers an alternative to the post/modernist art model and its value hierarchies of creative excellence and aesthetic quality. In other words, for there to be an effective impact of personal memory or creative engagement, stories have to be told persuasively and heard pervasively.

It is this intersection of memory, agency and history in the social space of the public live and the media that in/forms the work of Interface, the Centre for Research in Art, Technologies and Design at the University of Ulster. It is premised by the idea of art as social transaction and the interrelationship and commonalities between artist and society, between the aesthetic, ethical and social responsibilities of art, rather than the separateness of these dimensions. By exploring and exploiting the potential of new information and communication technologies, which enable us to be local and global at the same time, Interface set out to contribute to new forms of creative and civil engagement and participation.

Interface

Interface was set up in 2004 as a major interdisciplinary and 'practice-based' Research Centre through a substantial external funding award. 'Art and its Locations', one of its two research strands, brings together a concern for engaged creativity in contested spaces and the relationship between art and its documentation. It deals with storytelling both literally and metaphorically, which shall be demonstrated through the following examples of recent projects.

I confess that I was there: Art, Archives and Locations

'I confess...' was held in November and December 2006 as a short season of programmed events, presences and prototypes of art production, distribution, documentation and experience. With the common thread of institutional and more informal archives and the potential for re/materialisation of such material repositories, these events were projected as negotiations in social space.

'I confess...' opened up the exploration of forms of cultural archives by placing traditional archiving perspectives in tension to emergent approaches by practitioners in the field (artists/cultural activists), who are proactive in documenting their work, and those who are opposed to the concept of archiving and/or have thought of alternative approaches to preserve memories, construct narratives and facilitate value-shaping (trans/inter)actions. The project stimulated artists such as Bik Van der Pol (NL) and Dont Rhine of Ultra Red (USA) to engage with a range of communities and in the public space in Belfast.

'I confess...' also considered to which extent archivists/the structure of the archive interpret/s and change/s the meaning and intentions of the material. It brought together in one exhibition space Trace, the Cardiff based performance art initiative; Artpool Budapest with its documentation of oppositional/alternative art developments in Hungary during the Cold War era and beyond; City Arts Archive Dublin; The North West Visual Archive located in Londonderry/Derry, and DATA by Peter Haining, a collection of material on Neoist practices. This juxtaposition of approaches to preserving evidence of artistic experiment and communication was an early attempt to probe and document ways of working through local and trans-national networking and the realisation of ideas, which deploy but also disrupt inherited models of programming and relations in art/social space.

'I confess...' fostered speculative practices and relations whose evolution was driven by the pace and direction of a multi-vocal creative exchange and trust building between the different groups rather than being dictated by deadlines and defined outputs. It sought to exemplify

open and shared means of collaborative and engaged forms of communicating, materialising, documenting, disseminating and evaluating 'actual relations' between practitioners and communities. Interface was aware that this much needed way of speculative research could only happen outside of the constraints of traditional short-term, project-based and output driven funding or commissioning. Its work was made possible by a significant amount of seed funding as part of the Centre's external research award.

This programme of exhibition, performances and interventions, lectures and screenings, seminars and roundtable discussions incorporated the first out of five workshops on 'Performing the Archive – Providing Interrogative Moments' (PtA).

Performing the Archive

Over the period November 2006 to June 2007, Interface led a series of AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK) doctoral training workshops in collaboration with the University of Sunderland and in association with Locus+, an innovative public art agency based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Importantly, Interface has evolved its work through expanding the mutual relationship between teaching and research by providing models of practice, mentoring and integrating research methodology into pedagogy.

Based on the increased engagement of artists with the 'archive' and the growing culture of practice-based PhDs, the workshops brought together experts in the field to provide a sound understanding of a broad range of archival practices and resources from the perspective of art and design research and in(ter)ventions. It developed both generic and specialist skills and experience in working with institutional and private, formal and informal archives including the creation and handling of databases, and strategies and processes through which the 'historical record' can be subjected to different forms of meaning-making processes and access. The potential of archives as significant and powerful repositories of material marked by selectivity, fragmentation, taxonomies and voids have been explored. A particular focus was placed on the social and cultural situatedness of archives, the economic underpinnings of their resources and the power and stakeholder relations that mark their operations. Of interest was how their holdings can be accessed and how they produce value hierarchies through the deposition, selection, preservation, relating and interpretation of documents. The delivery of training for students from multiple perspectives and by experienced practitioners generated an awareness of the processual and dynamic, open and polyvalent character of archival practices including how narrative pathways, lateral connections and processes of meaning-making, i.e. how 'stories' are produced in the act of 're-materialising' of archival collections through exhibitions or by their digitisation and dissemination through the Internet. Contemporary critical approaches and creative strategies

for in(ter)ventions into archives were considered through life examples, in conjunction with new technologies and the lessons to be learnt from 'accidents' and 'failures'. PtA left a legacy through the development of an online learning resource and the book publication 'Arkive City'.

The question 'how are stories told, by whom and for whom,' informs Interfaces' work across a diversity of projects including the development of a Public Art Strategy for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area, network(ing) projects such as Creative Transformations and PhD research projects. Practice-based PhD research includes an AHRC funded investigation on the relationship between digital literacies and the construction of identities in young people in Northern Ireland; an exploration of the visual arts infrastructure in Northern Ireland between 1960 and 1990; and the development of archival foundations for the writing of a history of community arts in the region. Some of the current PhD projects aim at creative strategies and pedagogies to generate new publics/audiences for existing oral histories archives through creative art strategies.

All these projects have in common the building of trust and establishment of partnerships with organisations and individuals outside the university, and within conflicted social spaces. This is a delicate process of engagement that requires openness, sustained commitment and investment of time and resources as well as a delivery on promises made by all involved. It constantly challenges assumptions, value concepts and notions of authority that are so persuasively and yet often unconsciously instated through the institutional(ised) conventions of language and the formats of communications, transactions and their documentations. Interface, through its investment in public pedagogies, aims to promote an awareness that interaction and exchange are intricately connected to a place and the ways in which people live, work and socialise despite a rapid globalisation of social and cultural practices promoted by accelerated digitisation.

References

Crooke, Elizabeth (2008), *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*, London: Routledge

Healing through Remembering

http://www.healingthroughremembering.org/c_htrinfo/history.asp (19 April 2009)