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The Doubled Space of Willie Doherty's *Re-Run* (2002)

Re-Run (2002) is a silent video installation by Willie Doherty, featuring two looped projections of a lone male figure, endlessly running across a bridge. The setting is the Craigavon Bridge, over the River Foyle in Derry, a location that recurs again and again in Doherty's work. It is the subject of *The Bridge (Diptych)* (1992), a photographic piece that marked a move away from his signature combination of text and image, and also features in video installations such as *Same Old Story* (1997) and *Control Zone* (1999). Craigavon Bridge provides a physical link between two sides of a divided city but also serves a metaphorical function, underscoring the impossibility of constructing a neutral 'middle ground' between opposing viewpoints.

Given its familiar setting, and thematic exploration of memory and repetition, *Re-Run* is perhaps a particularly apt choice for Doherty's second Turner Prize exhibit (he was short listed in 1994 but the prize was awarded to Antony Gormley). Doherty first came to prominence in the mid 1980s, with a series of black and white photographs of Derry city and the surrounding landscape, overlaid with text. Early works such as *Stone Upon Stone (Diptych)* (1986) recall the work of Richard Long or Hamish Fulton but Doherty's use of text is deliberately loaded *and* ambiguous. In *Stone Upon Stone* and *God Has Not Failed Us (The Fountain, Derry)* (1990), he reproduces statements that are borrowed from nationalist or loyalist sloganeering, undermining the documentary claims of his images. This critique of photographic 'objectivity' is often extended through the use of a diptych structure, a doubled image, echoing Derry's East/West divisions.

It is possible to trace a recurring emphasis on the relationship between landscape, memory and media representation in both Irish art practice and Irish cinema. A considerable number of films set in the North, including Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1981) and *High Boot Benny*, (1993), Margo Harkin's *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (1989) and Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1981), explore the role of memory and media representation in

shaping the experience of place. In much of Doherty's work, however, references to cinema tend to be second-hand. The 'cinematic' is, on occasion, filtered through political communications such as the 'Confidential Telephone' advertisements produced by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO).

As Martin McLoone has noted, the NIO campaign of 1993 was characterised by high production values and a heightened sense of drama; McLoone even points out that a Canadian friend, visiting the North, misread one advertisement as a trailer for a new feature film entitled *Confidential Telephone*.¹ These 'micro-narratives' also employed voiceover, and careful cinematography, to disrupt the usual signifiers of nationalist or loyalist identity. Doherty's video installations borrow many of the same conventions, extending the exploration of subjectivity and spectatorship instigated in the photographic works through the juxtaposition of image and sound. His exploration of synchronisation, in several works, also recalls the censorship procedures instituted by the British and Irish governments in order to restrict broadcast coverage of 'proscribed' organisations.²

The Only Good One is a Dead One, a video installation from 1993, features two projected 30 minute sequences, both unedited and presented simultaneously on opposite walls. One sequence is a point of view shot from the interior of a moving car at night, the other is a point of view shot from a stationary car. In a separate soundtrack, which seems to reference both video sequences at different points, a young man describes his fear of assassination and his desire for revenge. This soundtrack repeats at shorter intervals than the projections, so that the relationship between image and sound shifts continually.

McLoone's analysis of the 'Confidential Telephone' advertisements (first published in the Belfast journal *Fortnight*) is reprinted in the catalogue accompanying Doherty's

¹ Martin McLoone, "The Commitments", *Same Old Story*, Exhibition Catalogue, London/Derry/Colchester: Matt's Gallery/Orchard Gallery/Firstsite, 1997, 15.

² As a consequence of the Broadcast Ban, in Britain, and Section 31 in the Republic of Ireland the voices of well known political representatives were often dubbed. For further details on the issue of censorship in relation to media coverage of the North see Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003: 207-211.

1997 exhibition *Same Old Story*.³ In an editorial strategy that seems to mirror Doherty's own juxtapositions, McLoone's text is printed in parallel with a series of detailed technical specifications for various installation works, complete with diagrams and instructions. This layout calls attention to an opposition between two different contexts of reception (the gallery space and the space of local media discourse), an opposition that has shaped Doherty's work.

Although he has worked consistently within the gallery context, Doherty's practice can be read as a sustained investigation of 'site-specificity'. In a recent interview, Doherty acknowledges the emphasis on 'local knowledge' in his early images of Derry. He notes, "It's very specifically Derry in the earlier pieces, and you'd almost need a detailed local knowledge to pick up the references. And as it came to be exhibited more and more in different places, it seemed to me that you'd almost need to provide the audience with a crash course on the history of the North. But I think its more open now".⁴ He also acknowledges that the meaning of certain works has shifted over time. Many of his photographs "have become documents despite themselves" because, he notes, "Derry just looked so different at that time, so they have become documents of place".⁵

Elsewhere, Caomhín Mac Giolla Léith has categorised the evolution of Doherty's work during the 1990s in terms of "a movement, or rather a series of movements, from the specific to the generic".⁶ Perhaps most notably, Doherty has reconsidered his exclusive focus on Derry, extending his exploration of place and identity to other locations in both *True Nature* (1999), a video installation exhibited and partly filmed in Chicago, and *Extracts from a File* (2000), a series of photographs documenting Berlin at night. In *Re-Run*, however, this apparent shift in Doherty's practice finds expression in an overt parallel between the physical space of the gallery and the metaphorical space of the bridge.

³ *Same Old Story* was initiated by Matt's Gallery in London and subsequently presented at the Orchard Gallery, Derry and Firstsite, Colchester (co-commissioners of the publication).

⁴ Willie Doherty, interviewed by Aidan Dunne, "Exposing Memory's Limitations", *Irish Times*, November 11, 2002.

⁵ Willie Doherty, interviewed by Aidan Dunne.

⁶ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, "Troubled Memories", *Willie Doherty: False Memory*, London/Dublin: Merrell, in association with Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2002, 23.

Re-Run features two seamlessly looped thirty second sequences, projected at opposite ends of a darkened room. In one sequence a man in a dark suit, with an expression of fear and distress, runs towards the camera, which tracks backwards rapidly. In the other, the same man runs away from the camera and it follows him at a distance. The bridge is otherwise deserted and illuminated by street lights that produce an ominous red glow. Both sequences are composed of multiple wide and mid-shots of the figure, filmed from a low angle and with cutaways to his feet running on the bridge and his head and shoulders. As the action on the two screens appears to be simultaneous, the viewer is tempted to shift attention between the projections. They are, however, positioned in such a way as to make simultaneous viewing impossible. Constant shuttling between the two further obscures the seam in the loop and, as a consequence, the narrative seems to extend over minutes rather than seconds.

A similar approach is employed in a companion piece, entitled *Drive* (2003).⁷ Filmed on the Craigavon Bridge, *Drive* features the same actor and employs the same editing techniques to extend its duration. In this piece, however, the figure is *driving* across the bridge at night, with his eyes open in one sequence and closed in the other. Both sequences are punctuated by extreme close-ups of one eye (open and shut), as well as peripheral images of the bridge, seen through the car windows. It could be argued that *Re-Run* and *Drive* articulate a concern with *spectatorship*, as opposed to the construction of place. While the more recent piece includes minimal sound (the noise of the car engine) *Re-Run* is one of a very small number of silent works produced by Doherty. The absence of a structuring opposition in *Re-Run*, between sound and image, or between image and text, seems to focus attention onto the interaction between the viewer and artwork. The absence of sound and the overt use of a diptych structure (although by no means a new strategy) seems to situate *Re-Run*, in particular, in relation to a wider exploration of cinematic spectatorship, a project associated with Douglas Gordon and Stan Douglas among others.

There is perhaps nothing new in this emphasis on spectatorship; Daniel Jewesbury has suggested that the “key ethical relationship” in Doherty’s work is that which exists

⁷ I am indebted to Robin Klassnik, of Matt’s Gallery, and Willie Doherty, for providing me with documentation of *Re-Run* and *Drive*, and to Patrice Molloy at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. My thanks to Valerie Connor also, for providing information on earlier projects.

between artist, artwork and viewer.⁸ But *Re-Run* seems to constitute an overt reflection on this dynamic, and upon Doherty's practice as a whole. It was first exhibited at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in 2002, within the context of Willie Doherty's first major Irish retrospective. The deliberate return, in *Re-Run*, to familiar themes and settings suggests a self-reflexive commentary on Doherty's own changing modes of address. But the reception of this work is also structured by IMMA's institutional memory, as an exhibition space formerly headed by Declan McGonagle and widely associated with the exploration of site and specificity. It is perhaps in this context that the parallels between gallery space and represented space in *Re-Run* acquire further meaning, as evidence of a shift in practice that extends beyond Doherty's work.

⁸ Daniel Jewesbury, *How it Was* Belfast: Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2001(unpaginated).

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