

Siting Belfast:

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Context, Audience and the Symbolic Economy of the City

Belfast recently played host to several high-profile touring exhibitions, as well as a season of prestigious contemporary opera, dance and theatre productions, all courtesy of the 'Festival at Queens'. The participation of Yoko Ono, David Byrne, Philip Glass and Bill Viola helped to secure the Festival's position in the "premiership of world class culture".¹ The international selectors of the 'Perspective Exhibition' (October/November 1998) at Belfast's Ormeau Baths Gallery also displayed a concern with the placing of the city on the 'world scene'.

'Perspective '98' was the first of the Ormeau Baths' proposed annual open submission competitions, aiming to "highlight the diversity and quality of contemporary visual art practice".² It was followed in November by the city-wide project 'Resonate' which in some ways functioned as the antithesis of the gallery-based exhibition; an artist-led initiative incorporating a website, a touring artwork and a series of site-specific interventions. Criticism of 'Perspective '98' has tended to focus on the paradigmatic opposition between the curated show and the artist-initiated project. Reviewer Derval Fitzgerald, writing in *Circa*, notes that the "artist-run project in Belfast was set up, at least in part, to supersede the kind of send-in competition/exhibition of which 'Perspective' is a (slightly) updated version".³

The 'Resonate' project, unlike 'Perspective '98', appears to privilege the local rather than the international context, through its emphasis on site-specific art practice. However despite the frequent labelling of artist-run projects as 'alternative' or 'oppositional' it is apparent that no model can be regarded as inherently unproblematic. In this article, it is perhaps more useful to address each in terms of its relation to what Sharon Zukin terms the 'Symbolic Economy of the City'; "[the] intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital".⁴ Zukin has focused primarily on the development of 'place entrepreneurship' in New York City but her emphasis on the role of visual culture and artists in framing urban space is increasingly pertinent in the European context.

Zukin emphasises that the symbolic economy operates at several levels. Cities, she claims, have always manipulated "symbolic languages of inclusion and entitlement", a phrase which clearly takes on particular resonance within the Belfast context. She suggests however that modern cities also owe their existence to a more abstract economy devised by 'place entrepreneurs' and the related activities of a 'patrician class' whose "ability to deal with the symbols of growth yields 'real' results in real estate development, new businesses and jobs".⁵ Within the national and global market this symbolic economy speaks for and represents, the city.

The redevelopment of Belfast's Cathedral Quarter by Laganside Corporation, like the transformation of Dublin's Temple Bar, provides an almost text book example of such 'place entrepreneurship'. Laganside (according to the official website) aims to secure the regeneration of the city with the participation of local communities, and to develop a "positive international image of Belfast" leading to "increased investment, visitors and tourists".⁶ Plans for the Cathedral Quarter include "residential accommodation, cultural facilities, shops restaurants, bars and areas of open

space". The recent Laganside-sponsored Fringe Festival 'Live in Cathedral Quarter' celebrated the corporation's role in the area's "cultural and artistic renaissance".⁷

Laganside's plans to redevelop the Cathedral Quarter may be linked to the fact that the area includes several 'alternative' exhibition spaces, such as Catalyst Arts, the Clear Spot Gallery and the Community Arts Forum. As yet however Laganside have no specific plans to build facilities for artists, focusing instead on the improvement of public space through the provision of 'street furniture'. In an examination of the gentrification of New York's Lower East Side, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan emphasise the fact that the presence of 'pioneering' artists in an otherwise economically depressed area places it on the road to gentrification.⁸ Their work has highlighted the art world's crucial role in the displacement of blue-collar communities from the city. The regeneration of the Cathedral Quarter cannot be categorised in quite this way but the work of Deutsche and Ryan does expose a relationship between the artist, place entrepreneurship and the increasingly symbolic economy of the city.

Survey shows, such as 'Perspective', also play a part in the symbolic economy, contributing to the promotion of the city as a cultural capital. 'Perspective '98', as I have already suggested, positions contemporary practice in relation to the 'world scene'. Hugh Mulholland, exhibition director of the Ormeau Baths, acknowledged the importance of the international panel in his introduction to the catalogue; "having an international panel travel to Belfast to select Perspective is crucial if the exhibition is to contribute to a wider debate around contemporary visual art".⁹ The international curators were thus over-valued specifically for their perspective as outsiders. In his catalogue essay Paul Hedge expresses the hope that 'Perspective' "may contribute to the discovery and assistance of many artists that turned [sic] out to be important on the world scene".¹⁰ He goes on to compare Belfast with other regions which are "in geography and character NOT LONDON".¹¹ Dr. Slavka Sverakova, another selector, is even more 'cautious' in her definition of the regional context, acknowledging the "slippery character of the idea of a context".¹²

Overall 'Perspective '98' set out to celebrate variety; "a mix of work, which represents many of the ideas current within contemporary visual art practice". The curators set themselves the task of providing audiences with access to a broad spectrum of current art practice within the domain of the gallery. As Louise Dompierre states "many of the works that captured our imagination were intent on generating new, broader and perhaps easier dialogues between art and its audiences".¹³ According to Dompierre the curators "developed a non-linear narrative of forms, ideas and emotions".¹⁴ In practice however the exhibition format could be said to have encouraged a rather linear reading of the works on display. Many visitors followed the guidelines of the gallery handout, progressing from 'Gallery One' through to 'Gallery Four' in the correct order, reading the explanatory notes on each artwork.

Each of the numbered galleries appeared to display works which shared thematic or formal concerns. In



Graham Fagen

some instances this was a successful strategy; encouraging the interplay of ideas and extra-textual references. Eamon O'Kane's digitally altered 'Wederland' cityscapes, Russell Hart's pseudo-documentary photograph entitled 'I want to believe but...' and Andrew Vickery's model 'Theatre' all worked particularly well together. Many of the works in this section of the gallery explored the relationships between memory, fantasy and narrative, often utilising photography. In this context the snapshot documentation of Fiona Larkin's prize-winning performance piece 'The Sand-Bagged Arse' seemed somewhat out of place. Dan Shippides' 'The Stone Bridge', another performance piece, suffered from superfluous video documentation. Approaching the gallery as a hostile terrain, Shippides climbed across one wall, leaving a series of footholds and scrapes marks, exploring the notion of the artist as 'pioneer' or ground-breaker.

Works displayed in 'Gallery Three' were more concerned with the language of the museum. Mary McIntyre's large scale photograph 'The Grand and the Mean' foregrounded framing as means of fixing cultural value. Prize-winner Blaise Drummond's 'Untitled History Paintings' utilised the techniques of fine art to explore the common territory shared by imperialism and cultural tourism. 'Thoughts and Second Thoughts' by Mark Dale consisted of a series of painted fragments contained within two sets of ornate moulding, inviting the viewer, according to the handout, "to actively engage with the work, making

new compositions from the available sections". The critique of exhibitionary practices, evident in the work of Drummond, Dale and McIntyre, exposes the relationship between museum culture and the maintenance of class distinctions.

'Perspective '98' sought to display a full spectrum of contemporary art practice, within the gallery. The exhibition thus featured two installation pieces. Ruth Jones' 'On Mercury the Days are Longer than the Years', incorporated a drinking fountain and investigated biological rhythms. Susan Philipsz's atmospheric sound and light installation 'Alone is not Lonely', was positioned in the stairwell. Both pieces functioned effectively in their respective sites but the inclusion and the positioning of this work could be read as an attempt to incorporate 'site-specific' work within the domain of the survey show without any real degree of commitment to this type of art practice. Overall 'Perspective '98' succeeded in displaying diversity but the exhibition format tended to efface contradictions between the works rather than promote debate.

The 'Resonate' project, organised by Susan Philipsz and Eoghan McTigue under the title of 'Grassy Knoll Productions', featured a total of seven site-specific artworks at various locations throughout the city. The project, according to the press release, aimed "to raise questions relating to the profile of, and possible function for contemporary art beyond the gallery space, and ultimately to the role of the artist in the city". The brief for artists was simply to choose a functioning environment within the city and to make a piece of work in that context.¹⁵

In a discussion of several public art projects, including 'Resonate', Circa reviewer Aidan Dunne emphasised the usual problems associated with site-specificity; "weaving arts into the fabric of day-to-day life is a process fraught with problems... When you go into a gallery you know if it's in there it must be art but out in the wild, who knows?"¹⁶ Projects such as 'Resonate' often succeed in placing the issues of context and audience on the critical agenda for reviewers, simply through problematising access, despite the fact that these issues are sometimes side-stepped by the work.

Although the 'Resonate' organisers/ participants are mostly Belfast-based, there was an international dimension to the project. French curator Guy Tortosa, who has widely espoused this type of public art practice, was invited by the organisers to give a public talk during the Belfast Festival, Tortosa's speech, which centred on his experience of curating 'EV+A' in Limerick in 1996, explicitly promoted the regional or peripheral context as an appropriate site for experimentation by established international artists. Tortosa categorised the relationship between the 'provinces' and the mainstream as a process of 'exchange', thus problematising the construction of the peripheral as a 'pure' or 'alternative' space.



Careful choice of environment was arguably the key factor in the success of the project as many of the interventions were decidedly modest in scale. Graham Fagan's drawing of 'Belfast as World Garden', a rather child-like map of the city could easily have been mistaken for a school project. However its placement in the Victorian palmhouse at the Botanic Gardens linked the process of mapping with both imperialism and contemporary tourism.

Susan Philipsz's 'Filter', accapella versions of pop songs played over the sound system at Laganside Buscentre, was both evocative and eerie. Philipsz succeeded in creating a tension between those positioned as the audience for the piece as many of those listening to the 'Filter' were unable to determine its source. Mary McIntyre's mobile billboard piece 'Home', which toured the city, featured ambiguous domestic images. This work played with conventional definitions of private and public arena, and functioned as an antidote to the slick billboard images of Yoko Ono and David Byrne (displayed in Belfast during the Festival).

Karen Vaughn's 'Untitled' was a barely noticeable intervention, consisting of a grey painted band, painted at waist height on the facade of a building on Castle Street. This work (which drew attention to the subsidence of the building) hinted at the complex relationship between the artist and the city. The notion that cycles of decay, redevelopment and renewal are somehow 'natural' has been critiqued by several urban theorists, including Deutsche and Zukin.¹⁷ No one could mistake the destruction of sections of Belfast city centre, occurring at various points during

the last thirty years, as a 'natural process' of urban decay. However the role that artists and artists' initiatives, even those which appear to function outside the 'mainstream', play in the re-imagining and re-presentation of the city, still requires critical interrogation.

The 'Resonate' project, incorporated into the Belfast Festival, formed part of a series of high-profile events designed to promote the city as a world-class cultural capital and several of the 'Resonate' sites were well-known tourist landmarks (such as the Botanic Gardens, Queens University and the Linenhall Library). 'Resonate' was thus ideally positioned to explore the re-construction of the city as tourist destination but, although the project placed the role of the artist in the city on the critical agenda, many of the works stopped short of addressing problematic issues, such as urban regeneration.

Cultural practices such as 'Perspective '98' and 'Resonate', although they appear to function as opposing paradigms, play a significant part in the re-presentation of the city. Several of the artists participating in both projects did attempt to investigate the workings of, and their place within, this process. It is apparent that both the site-specific project and the survey show provide opportunities for contextual art practices. Work which actively engages with the production of meaning, whether inside or outside the gallery, can contribute to a much-needed critical interrogation of the artist's role in the symbolic economy.

Mary McIntyre



Susan Philipsz

notes

- 1 'Belfast Festival at Queens' Programme introduction, p. 1.
- 2 Ormeau Baths Gallery Programme, July/October 1998.
- 3 Fitzgerald, Derval, Circa 86, p. 59. Fitzgerald notes the fact that many of the selected artists have participated in the activities of 'Catalyst Arts, Orchid Studios et al.'. Three Belfast-based artists (Theo Sims, Mary McIntyre and Susan Philipsz) have contributed to both 'Perspective' and 'Resonate'.
- 4 Zukin, Sharon, 'The Cultures of Cities', (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell) 1995, p. 3.
- 5 Ibid., p. 7.
- 6 Laganside website.
- 7 'Fringe Festival' (November 10-28) Programme Foreword, p. 1.
- 8 Deutsche, Rosalyn and Ryan, Cara Gendel, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', October 31, 1984.
- 9 Mulholland, Hugh, 'Perspective '98' Exhibition Catalogue Introduction.
- 10 Hedge Paul, 'Perspective '98' Catalogue Essay.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Sverakova, Slavka, 'Perspective '98' Catalogue Essay.
- 13 Dompierre, Louise, 'Perspective '98' Catalogue Essay.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Interview with Susan Philipsz and Eoghan McTigue, SSI Newsletter, January/ February 1999, p.11.
- 16 Dunne, Aidan, Circa 86, p. 5.
- 17 See Deutsche, Rosalyn, 'Evictions', (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996) and Zukin, Sharon, 'Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change', (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982)