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AT VISION'S EDGE: POST-CONFLICT MEMORY AND ART PRACTICE IN
NORTHERN IRELAND

The past is always present in Northern Ireland, structuring everyday experience to a degree not generally found elsewhere. In a society where historical events are continually relevant to contemporary life, both cultural memory and processes of memorialisation become significant means whereby people live out their identities. In turn, this level of awareness also informs aspects of the visual: artists are not separate from the culture they inhabit but are equally formed by its shared experiences of community, danger and loss. Much of the work of artists in post-conflict Northern Ireland bears the marks of this communality of experience, whether through an explicit engagement or through more subtly encoded traces. This essay tries to establish some of the key features through situating art practice in relation to aspects of cultural memory, and more specifically the presence of trauma, within a post-conflict culture.

In Northern Ireland, artists and photographers work in a context where the visual is deeply embedded in the formation of political identity that plays such a major role in determining lived identity for many people. During the years of conflict, commemorative murals in loyalist and nationalist working class areas acted not just as reminders of the past; they also provided an assertion of contemporary political allegiances. Yet the significance of icons honouring sacrifice and martyrdom was not just a matter of making the past relevant within the present: this imagery also helped to define other parameters, such as those of spatial identity, functioning as an explicit means of defining territory and a sense of belonging within a particular community. A further feature of life in Northern Ireland is that people tend to develop acute sensitivity to the nuances of difference, picking up the subtly encoded signifiers of Protestantism or Catholicism in ways that continually elude outside observers.

Although these behavioural strategies were already a feature of the divided society that predated the onset of the Troubles they became more vitally necessary during the years of conflict, when a precise knowledge of ones surroundings could be literally a matter of life or death.

Operating at a level beyond everyday awareness, the negotiation of political difference has become deeply entrenched at an unconscious level – something that has continued even though the conflict has ended. Significantly, however, it is an awareness of other knowledge that can also be regarded as unconscious, repressed from waking thought that is increasingly recognised as embodying a more disturbing sense of what has happened. The years following the signing of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement in 1998 were a period of economic growth and increased prosperity during which a significant part of the visual and material culture of conflict has been eradicated; yet the veneer of commercialism can still not smooth out the knots of past experience embedded within the surface of a now mostly peaceful society.

The term ‘trauma’ can refer to the effects of either physiological or psychological wounding or threat of danger in origin; both can have effects on processes of memory and the individual’s ability to cope with the consequences of the event. Traumatic experiences can be life threatening, or involving the proximity of the death of others, or they can also result, on a psychological level, in the unravelling of an individual’s sense of self and identity. All of these were characteristics of the experience of the Troubles for many people in Northern Ireland; even if they did not themselves have to confront directly threatening events, everyday life was for many years in the 1970s and 1980s imbued with a sense of risk and the need for continual vigilance that left deeply embedded scars. The effects of horrific and overwhelming experiences of this nature also extend far beyond the individual who actually experiences them, affecting family, carers and friends. Their reporting in the media and survival within a community’s cultural memory,

meanwhile, adds a public and social dimension to the private and individual experience of trauma. The knowledge of these events also persists through time as a form of what Marianne Hirsch has termed 'post-memory', whereby a subsequent generation acquires a deep sense of having experienced a past that took place before they were born (Hirsch 1997).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in 2008 a report published jointly by the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation (NICTT) and the Psychology Research Institute at the University of Ulster found that a significant proportion of the population were suffering from the after-effects of conflict related trauma (NICTT 2008, 63-65). This report aimed at an improvement of social health and welfare was also produced in the context of a post-conflict emphasis on the need to tell the stories of survivors and victims from different political perspectives. The advocacy of storytelling by cross-community groups such as Healing Through Remembering was not only because of the therapeutic and cathartic effects for the individual, but as a step towards the emergence of a more multi-faceted account of the conflict- particularly significance for those who 'felt their experience of the conflict had been ignored'(Healing Through Remembering 2005, 1). Yet the recognition of the validity of accounts from conflicting positions also has proved to be controversial, as community allegiances and recent history also play a role in determining the perspectives of listeners.

A similar emphasis on a plurality of approaches informs the discussion of the work of artists and photographers considered in this essay. An important context for Aisling O'Beirn's socially-based, interactive projects is the necessity to remember, to retain a sense of the past in the face of post-conflict urban renewal. In the work of Paul Seawright the photographic image functions as a means of foregrounding other processes of remembering and forgetting, while in Mary McIntyre's landscapes evocations of sublimity also need to be viewed in the context of their relationship to issues of trauma. Yet underpinning all of this, in the very different practices of Sandra

Johnston or Willie Doherty, is still the need to address the legacy of pain and destruction, whereby the artwork becomes a site of catharsis and articulation of experience that would otherwise remain unspoken.

Art Practice and Trauma

During the years of the Troubles, the focus for many artists was the need to find ways of engaging with the pressures of the present, rather than the past, whose frequently horrific effects were generally denied in the interests of maintaining a fragile sense of normality in the face of ongoing danger. Currently, by comparison, art practice takes shape in Northern Ireland in a context where the presence of traumatic memory is increasingly recognised, even though the events that have produced this happened some time in the past. Before we consider some examples in more detail we need to first look at the ways in which trauma can be considered in relationship to art practice, and how the two can inform a more critically nuanced understanding of each other.

Cathy Caruth's formulation of the effects of traumatic experience draws on psychoanalytic methods to conceptualise the experience of cataclysmic events as a kind of psychic wounding, whereby the extent of what has happened is too overwhelming for the individual to comprehend or to begin to process at the time. As a result the knowledge is then repressed within the unconscious, only to emerge at a later date and often in a form that, although it may not quite resemble the original instance, is similarly disturbing, not least because of its tendency to recur. As a means of unravelling the oblique connection between the symptom and its underlying cause, Caruth suggests that the allusive processes of poetry and literature can help to understand the workings of traumatic memory; trauma is 'always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell of us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (Caruth 1996, 4).

Caruth's arguments, however, are developed primarily in relation to literature and film. Other writers such as Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas have taken issue with a focus on narrative alone in that it overlooks the iconic role of the artwork as a means of articulating traumatic experience (Guerin and Hallas 2007, 8-10). For Jill Bennett, moreover, it is art's affective power that enables it to do so much more than just document the effects of horrific occurrences; it is the form of the work itself that helps to convey a more elliptical means of understanding (Bennett 2005, 6-12). This is particularly significant in that it helps to address the issue of whether the artist themselves needs to have experienced trauma in order to create the work. Rather than being a question of the authenticity or otherwise of the artist's experience, the focus shifts to the ability of art to emotionally engage the viewer through a combination of both what is being represented and the means whereby this is conveyed.

Consequently, we can begin to regard traumatic memory itself as more than the subject matter for artists living and working in a post-conflict culture such as Northern Ireland. The forms of art practice themselves play a role in determining how cataclysmic experience is conveyed: the act of narration, or depiction, itself becomes part of the process of dealing with the past. And as Roland Barthes also pointed out, the meanings of the work of art are constructed at the point of reception; it is not just the act of telling or showing that is important, but of listening and looking (Barthes 1977).

Narrative, Witnessing and Representation

In many instances the memories of artists themselves become interwoven with a wider cultural experience. Willie Doherty, for example, has worked extensively with issues around the memory of conflict in his native city of Derry. For much of the last thirty years, despite the many other incidents that have taken place, one event has

dominated cultural experience in Derry; the memory of the British Army's shooting of unarmed civilians on Bloody Sunday in 1972, and the subsequent campaigns for justice for the dead and their families, finally resolved in 2010 when the report of the Saville Inquiry found that the thirteen victims had been unlawfully killed. As an adolescent at the time, the artist had also been a witness to the events in 1972, media coverage of which was later used to provide apparent evidence for the British state's justification for the shootings. The video installation 30th January 1972, (1993), however, goes beyond the realm of individual recollection to investigate the active role played by traumatic memory within collective experience and the formation of a sense of community (Fig.1).

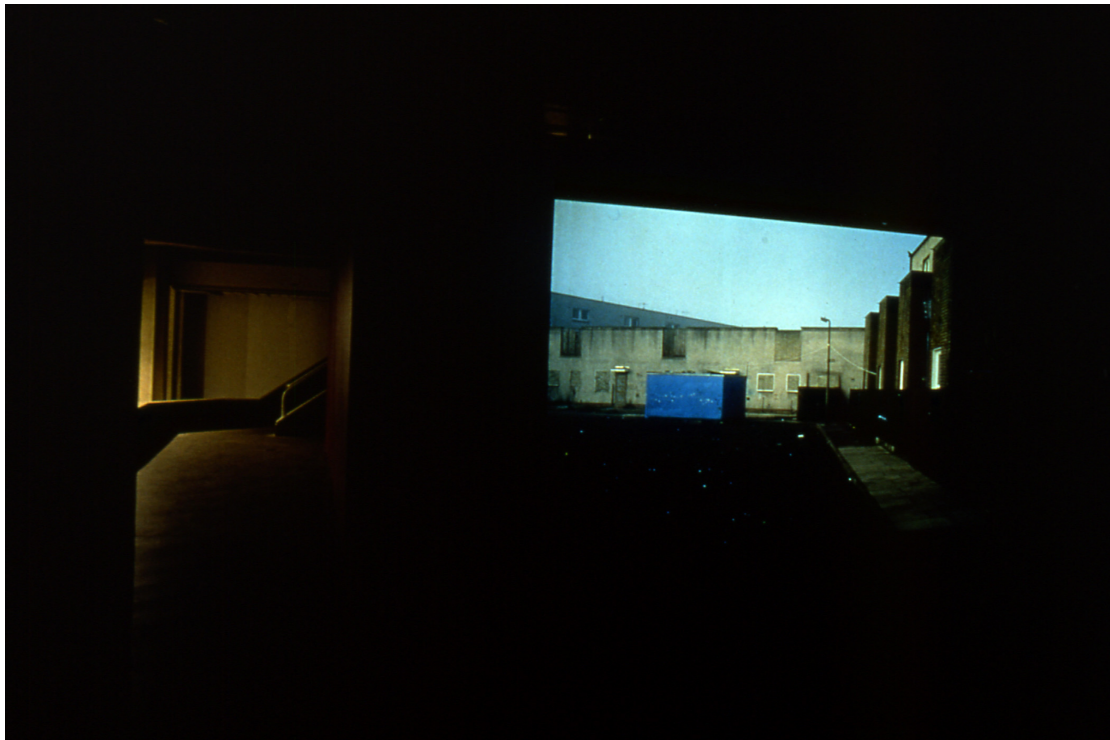


Fig. 1. Willie Doherty, 30th January 1972, (1993) Installation with slide projectors and sound. Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London

Although it dates from the early stages of the Peace Process, 30 January 1972 is also a work that suggests ways of engaging with the unsettled past characteristic of a range of reflective art practices that began to emerge

subsequently. The work consists of two video projections with an accompanying soundtrack; one screen shows a news still of a crowd scene filmed on the actual day, while the other shows Glenfada Park, the site of some of the shootings, as it was when Doherty was making the piece. Yet the visual juxtaposition of past and present is also reinforced by a similar temporal relationship between a soundtrack recorded during the shootings and the reminiscences of people recorded in Rossville Street – where some of the killings also took place – in 1993. And although the installation's title denotes the precise date of the event, it soon becomes clear that these verbal accounts of what happened, evocative and disturbing though they may be, are much more subjective. The recorded testimonies included those of people who had not been present at the events, but who had instead been asked to describe a photographic or broadcast image that epitomised what had taken place. Yet there is also no attempt in the piece's presentation to distinguish these from the accounts of actual eyewitnesses. Rather than attempting to recover the 'truth' of that day, Doherty instead posits a sense of the fluidity of individual memory in relation both to collective experience and to the determining effect of media representations which, despite their apparent authority, are also highly contingent.

Willie Doherty's installation 30 January 1972 also raises questions about the role of witnessing, and the ability of both visual and verbal means to adequately represent the experience of the survivor. The affective role of the visual was also the subject of some distrust in the early development of trauma studies. As Guerin and Hallas argue, a concern for the sensationalisation of what is depicted derived from the reactions to the widely circulated photographs taken within the newly liberated concentration camps towards the end of the Second World War (Guerin and Hallas, 7). Significantly, much post conflict art practice in Northern Ireland works to problematise the process of representation itself, to make us as viewers aware that, like the act of remembering, the making of visual images is a process that is highly selective and partial. It is often that which is omitted or repressed that is as significant

as that which is included. This is a legacy from the years of conflict, when artists were faced with the need to develop visual forms that could attempt to engage with the subtleties of experience overlooked within the predominance of sensationalist and reductive media imagery, yet it also suggests strategies well suited to the communication of allusive and displaced traumatic memory.

Since the early 1990s, the work of Sandra Johnston – mainly time-based pieces involving performance and video – has involved a recognition of the role of processes of representation in its engagement with issues of traumatic experience. In Johnston's work, the role of media coverage of the Troubles became significant not just for its *mis*representation of events but because of its insidious voyeurism, manipulating and exploiting the emotional experience of victims. To Kill an Impulse (1994) included media footage, however, that also demonstrated how people who are the subjects of the camera's gaze can also actively resist its intrusions: when a young woman in a public space is told of her father's assassination, her family use their bodies, in Johnston's words to 'swell to cover her' - to shield her from the unexpected and voyeuristic presence of the television camera (Johnston 2005, 84).

The artist's selection of this small but deeply significant act of denial can also be legible in terms of a feminist politics of the refusal of female objectification, and indeed Johnston's work around trauma and the experience of conflict in Northern Ireland has developed subtle strategies within which the ethics of witnessing, and their relationship to issues around visibility, have become paramount. Interview (2011) is derived from the filmed testimony of one of her relatives who witnessed the IRA bombing of the restaurant of the La Mon House Hotel in 1978, during which twelve people were killed and numerous others injured. Yet this work would initially appear to deny visibility altogether, consisting of a series of black screens on which is projected a sequence of terse written descriptions of both deliberate gestures and involuntary bodily movements accompanying the telling of what happened. The management of extreme emotion, rather than being depicted, is instead indexically

linked through the written statement to the events taking place in front of the camera lens and indicated by the running order. At 30:59:06, for example, the 'lower jaw is levered across to the right side, pause mid-sentence, head jerked swiftly again to the left before offering a name', while a little later, by comparison 'thumbs are pressed down hard, straightening front seam of white shirt, speech slow, muted'.

On one level, the removal of the viewer's ability to witness the testimony in Interview also suggests processes whereby the cataclysmic experience of trauma tends to resist direct representation. Yet both the visual and the corporeal are actually fundamental parts of this work, not just with regard to the presence of the narrator, but in relation to the story that he tells to the camera. It is the visual experience of the horrific event itself that becomes lodged within the survivor's psyche and cannot move further; trauma remains irreducible. In a similar manner, in discussing the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, Ernst van Alphen has argued for an understanding of the visual 'more like the unmodified return of what happened (--) instead of being the raw material to be processed into understanding'...(t)he image is there; it refuses to budge' (Van Alphen 2011, 359). Johnston's video deploys methods analogous to the mechanisms of traumatic memory, displacing its presence onto the denotation of gesture rather than verbal expression. Yet the denial of the viewer's expectations also, in this case, opens up uncomfortable questions around the ethics of the re-enactment of the traumatic past as spectacle.

Sandra Johnston's Interview points to the impossibility of visuality ever providing a complete account of trauma; there is the sense of the past in Northern Ireland as incomplete and subject to question. In a similar manner Paul Seawright's photographic series Conflicting Account (2009), addresses the means whereby divergent narratives of history and memory work to construct identities in the present. In this series, photographed in schools and around housing estates and other public spaces, Seawright's strategy is to focus on individual details isolated from the rest of the image – the fragment of a memorial or a word on a blackboard. In Between, for

example, the word appears twice in what appears to be the remains of a discussion of history and conflict. Emerging from the chalk-saturated background in two different handwritings there is the suggestion of different versions of the formation of the past, incomplete and partially erased.



Fig. 2 Paul Seawright, *Memory* (2009). Photograph courtesy of the artist

Yet a dark thread of trauma runs continually through these interconnected photographs, suggesting the inescapable past in the present, as in Memory (Darke 2009, non.pag). One of several images engaged with processes of memorialisation (Fig.2) , the oblique camera angle focuses on the word 'Memory' at the top of a plaque. The effect is more complex than it at first appears. The focus on the single word ruptures the seamless spectacle of commemoration, alluding to a more disturbing sense of the past that underpins the public role of these memorials in the construction of a sense of community and identity. Both the performative rituals of funerals and the material culture of graveyards provide a means whereby the

memory of the dead, particularly those killed as a result of political conflict, works to reinforce a sense of collective identity. Yet in Northern Ireland's binary culture, this can be far from a unifying experience: Graham Dawson, for example, has written of the role played by funeral eulogies for victims of violence in recalling the acts of injustice perpetuated against one community or another (Dawson 2007, 295). In Seawright's photograph Memory by comparison the obliteration of all other words erases any further context that would claim this stone for one side or another; beneath history, beneath the specificities of individual acts of atrocity, the festering presence of trauma still 'refuses to budge'.

Place, Amnesia and the Sublime:

The meanings of place have long had a considerable importance as formative of identity within the binary definitions operative within Northern Ireland, both in urban and rural terms. Despite the significance of representations of the rural in relation to aspects of traumatic memory and experience, it is helpful also to identify some aspects of the play of memory and its visualisation within Northern Ireland's post-Agreement urban space. Urban and rural are both closely intertwined within lived experience in Northern Ireland and as such the definitions of urban space help to define and identify parameters for representation of landscape.

The economic prosperity that accompanied the Peace Process had considerable consequences for definitions of urban space, and the associations it holds for those who inhabit it, particularly in relation to the role of memory in defining the present. Belfast's urban geography beyond the city's central commercial area has historically been a mosaic of small communities, sometimes only comprising a few streets. Yet these areas have also been fiercely outspoken about their political identifications, embodied through paramilitary murals decorating wall surfaces in the available public space, such as the gable ends of houses. In the years following the Good Friday Agreement, however, external investment resulted in both the

development of commercial real estate and a regeneration of existing housing stock on a scale unprecedented in Northern Ireland. This was also accompanied by the development of new privately owned building schemes, including apartments whose location involved the attempted gentrification of long established urban communities, such as the loyalist enclaves of Sandy Row near Belfast's centre, or the nearby area of the Village.

These processes of urban renewal were also overlapped by a post-Ceasefires drive to establish a distance from the sectarian politics of conflict represented within the murals. The result was the whitewashing of images of paramilitary prowess and their replacement with other more affirmative assertions of protestant identity, such as the commemoration of the footballer George Best, or (somewhat incongruously) the birth of C.S. Lewis, author of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, now installed just off the Newtownards Road. The apparent eradication of the image, or even the buildings on which they were painted, have been fertile subjects for photographers in Belfast, often, as in examples by Eoghan McTigue or John Duncan, framed in such a way that their blankness works only to suggest meanings not quite erased, material that resists reconstruction in new definitions of public space (Graham 2003, 152-167).

Aisling O'Beirn's Some Things About Belfast (or so I'm told) (2006) by comparison suggests the process of remembering localised urbanised identity as a dynamic, ongoing process (Fig.3). This is also a very different type of art project from Duncan or McTigue's photographs installed in a gallery, involving viewers as active participants in the continued development of the work. As part of this project, a portakabin-like structure – the 'Space Shuttle' - was installed in Donegall St in the centre of Belfast, additionally going into orbit to other locations within the city. Outside, above the door, a digiboard displayed a different, daily changing urban myth about Belfast while inside were some of the artist's hand-drawn maps and collections

of nicknames for different parts of the city: 'the egg – Eglantine Inn, bar bottom of the Malone road' or 'eggy tunnels – sewer tunnels under old egg factory, Ardoyne,



Fig. 3 Aisling O'Beirn *Some Things about Belfast (or so I'm told)*, detail from nicknames in "Space Shuttle: Mission 3" (2006), curated by Peter Muscheler as part of Space Shuttle Project. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Belfast'. Visitors to the Space Shuttle were invited to collaborate in the project by contributing new material in the forms of nicknames or stories. Some Things About Belfast is indicative of O'Beirn's wider concerns with vernacular language and the role of storytelling as formative of a sense of community and identity, part of a 'politics of how place is described at a local level' (O'Beirn n.d., 97). Yet in the context of a city at the time being rapidly being reshaped by urban development this archival collection of 'unofficial' names is also a defence against officially sponsored amnesia. It is in the stories told about a place that it acquires its meaning; yet the surreal humour of many of these names is also on another level a defence against the existence of other more disturbing memories associated with specific locations in the city.

Outside Belfast and other urban centres the rural environment underwent fewer of the transformative processes identified with regeneration that provide a context for the strategies of resistance embodied in O'Beirn's interactive projects. Yet beneath the spectacle of a landscape apparently less liable to change, the memory of cataclysmic events remains deeply embedded in rural communities. Its unearthing takes place in different ways, intruding on representations of the rural in ways that not only utilise aesthetic categorisation but press upon its edges. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries landscape painting evolved through classifications that shaped and determined the representation of an observed vista according to aesthetic categories of the picturesque, the beautiful or the sublime. These categories had a profound effect on the representation of landscape, even though the range of artistic processes has changed and evolved considerably.

Mary McIntyre's photographs of rural locations make explicit reference to historical conventions of European landscape painting, more specifically the work of the seventeenth century Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael or the nineteenth century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. Although separated by nearly two hundred years, the work of both Ruisdael and Corot embodies a poetic response that manifests itself through the sensitive observation of light falling on often depopulated rural scenes, a source for McIntyre's evocative depictions of misty loughsides or boglands.

The unbounded quality of many of these photographs also evokes the aesthetic category of the sublime. In the writings of Burke or Kant, it is the impact of nature and its representation that imposes such overwhelming sensations of awe and wonder that appear to take viewers out of the context of their own surroundings (Burke 1998, Kant 2004). Yet, conversely, it is the accompanying awareness of terror and danger that, I would suggest, help to situate these photographs within very specific conditions of time and place. McIntyre's photograph Mound I (2009), perhaps more than some of the more romanticised rural images such as her series Veil,



Fig.4 Mary MacIntyre *The Mound* (2009). Photo courtesy of the artist and the Third Space Gallery.

grounds its subject matter firmly within a context where the experience of landscape resonates with much more sinister levels of meaning (Fig. 4). In common with many of her photographs, the hazy atmospheric conditions blur the horizon and disturb the viewer's sense of space. Yet McIntyre's more familiar motifs of trees and water filtered through soothing tonalities of bluish-gray and green are replaced by a more desolate scenario of upturned brown earth, punctuated with unidentifiable detritus. Even here the composition of the image leads the viewer's eye into the centre of what appears to be an enclosure similar to the ring forts and other prehistoric monuments that inhabit the Northern Irish landscape.

As Simon Schama has observed, we read contemporary landscape in terms of the earlier antecedents that it suggests for us (Schama 1995, 5). In Northern Ireland, however, both these ancient sites and rubbish tips that the image also suggests have been the locations of assassinations and the dumping of bodies. Both of these types of location, in turn, also featured in an earlier photographic series by

Paul Seawright, Sectarian Murder (1988), based on specific events. However unlike Seawright's photographs where the precise location was identified in a short text accompanying some of the images, in Mound I the very anonymity of the site suggests something more amorphous, a threat that lurks just outside of language. Gene Ray, in a discussion of the relationship between trauma and the contemporary sublime, has noted that it is social forces – the application of systematic annihilation in the Nazi death camps, or the consequences of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror – that 'displace nature as the site and trigger of the sublime' (Ray 2009 139). Perhaps the level of human intervention that is always present in Mary McIntyre's landscape photographs is evidence of this. The turned earth in Mound I suggests not only the presence of something that awaits exhumation, a reading that becomes even more compelling in the context of the ongoing search for the hidden bodies of victims of IRA assassinations that still takes place in remote sites in Ireland's border counties. In an era where our awareness of trauma itself increasingly functions on a global level, this is an image that also evokes other killing fields elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Despite the years that have now passed since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement ratified the Peace Process and brought an end to widescale violence, the ongoing presence of trauma is still an important issue in Northern Ireland. As psychic damage, trauma resists attempts to remove its presence, yet it still finds its way into consciousness within a culture that is still permeated by loss. Within this context the ways in which art works to produce its meaning – through metaphor, symbol and suggestion – become means whereby levels of destructive experience can be glimpsed, even if only obliquely. The almost unrepresentable lurks there at the edge of vision, within events remembered in a city's streets some years ago, or even beneath the need to retain in language the character of a community's collective identity in the face of imminent change. Yet representation itself, whether visual or

verbal, continues to be only partial and mediated, even when it suggests the absolutes of the sublime. Art maintains a degree of its own autonomy, as indeed does the experience of trauma. Yet it is within an understanding of the role of memory and the ongoing presence of the past that there may be the hope for a better future.

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