

The Poetics and Politics of Shane Cullen's 'The Agreement'

The political Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968-1998) were the most significant political/cultural events in Ireland since the partition on the island of Ireland earlier in the 20th century. They challenged artists to reflect on contested spaces such as democracy, equality, Britishness/ Irishness, cultural identity, place (location/dislocation) and, as I will explore, the nature of language.

This year 2018 is the 20th anniversary of the Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, which was reached by way of local multi-party negotiations and the involvement of the British, Irish and indeed American governments after thirty years of civil protests and political violence in order to create a democratically elected government in Northern Ireland on the principle of power sharing. The original official document was circulated to every citizen in Northern Ireland to read and consider and ultimately to vote on. Some 70% of people on the Island of Ireland endorsed its principles.

Signed on the 10th April 1998 it has been the cornerstone of the peace process in the north of Ireland for the past twenty years. The Agreement put in place a framework which would ensure equality, impartial policing and transitional justice. It enshrined the principle of consent by the people as to any constitutional change in the status of Northern Ireland. According to an Irish government website it affirmed

'...the legitimacy of the aspiration to a united Ireland while recognizing the current wish of the majority in N.Ireland to remain part of the united Kingdom.'

(1)

In 2002 artist Shane Cullen, commissioned by Beaconsfield Contemporary Art in London, constructed a large scale installation titled '**The Agreement**'. In this work the artist transcribed the full text of the Good Friday Agreement (11,500 words) onto 56 large, heavy-duty polyurethane panels. Cullen had the text etched mechanically onto boards replicating the anonymous public language of a legal document. The artist sees the work as a celebration of reconciliation and the actual Agreement as aspirational and an example of what may be done elsewhere, as in the Palestine/Israel conflict. It endorses the power of language and its ability to persuade and enable.

In this paper I will analyse this discursive artwork together with another of his text based works, *Fragmens sur les Institutions Republicaines IV*, and scrutinise the nature of text, language and its presentation/re-presentation in the *polis* and in relation to the circumstances and condition of democracy and justice.

Working out of conceptual art's emphasis on ideas and language in Cullen's artwork there is no commentary nor imagery incorporated. There are, however, subtle re-framings at work, which is where the interaction of the artist resides. There is the monumental scale and sheer physicality of the installation. The work gains power by way of transcendence from the published brochure pages to the inscribed large (10ft high) panels which extend for 73 yards. The words are also enlarged, etched in relief and presented as a continuous unbroken text, perhaps emphasising the integrity and totality of its aspired democratic cultural outreach. We know that a serial presentation of a single unit can become more than the sum of its parts and register tremendous power, as for example in works by Christo such as his parasol project as displayed in Japan and California in 1991, or in Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982.

Cullen, in his serial and scaled up re-presentation of the text of The Good Friday Agreement, assists in allowing the principles encoded in this political accord to percolate both social and political spaces – that is to pervade the *polis*. As previously mentioned there is no incorporation of visual imagery as there is on the cover of the Good Friday Agreement brochure but a complete investment in the power and vagaries of language

The work was exhibited in various venues in Ireland – Dublin, Derry and Belfast among others. Associated colloquia also took place not only to discuss the cultural and political readings/viewings of the artwork but the interrelationships of art and politics in general. Given the registration of justice implicit in the text, one such venue was The Crumlin Road Courthouse in Belfast, another took place in the Houses of Parliament in London at which I was invited to speak.

It should be noted that The Good Friday agreement was never thought of as a final solution to the Northern Irish problem but as an apparatus for workable governance. Historian Marc Mulholland informs us:

'Part of the success of the peace process was based upon deliberate ambiguity. The British and Irish governments, assuming the tenacity on communal polarisation, saw it as a segregatory but cooperative and balanced settlement. Both harboured some hope of eventual amelioration of division, and the Irish government at least hoped for some form of united Ireland. (2)

The language then of the Good Friday Agreement document is based on purposeful ambiguity – fixity of language doesn't work in developing a working apparatus for joint government. As such its language is not fixed in stone as it were and in that sense it is not monumental – clever words resist fixity; language being often wayward and slippery. Cullen's re-presentation of the text of the original document as an artwork amplifies that ambiguity.

In an earlier and contrasting work Shane Cullen declared his interest in the more emotional, psychographic charge of language. Cullen's series of tabula-like texts, ***Fragmens sur les Institutions Republicaines IV*** began in Ireland in 1993 and were completed, while on residency, at the Centre d'art contemporain de Vassiviere en Limousin, France in 1997. The work represents secret communications or so called 'comms' written by Irish Republican Hunger Strikers and smuggled out of the Maze Prison (the so-called H-Blocks) during the highly charged period of the hunger strike in Northern Ireland in 1981. These hunger strikes, in which ten participants died, were mounted in an effort to establish political status for IRA prisoners.

In Cullen's re-presentation of these comms the emotional and fragile language of the private, was graphically and in a proclamatory way introduced into the public domain of the *polis* - that which pervades both the physical and political space. The programme illustrates all 96 panels in Cullen's serial presentation of ***Fragmens***. These comms, handwritten by the artist, have been monumentalised in the act of representation, paradoxically by the handwritten process, apeing a mechanical process. On one level interjection by the artist is located in this act of transcription. In the act of re-presenting these once secret letters like a monument with a 'formal' text in the public domain, the artist opens them up to public scrutiny. This creative act draws parallels with the process-centred ritual of the early Christian scribes or Chinese calligraphers in their activity of repetitive copying in which can be

detected a striving after idealism. As such Cullen's act of 'writing out', replicates the underlying ideal (national unity) sought after by Irish Republicanism. As such he textualises the body. The artist's performative and transformative act arises out of local circumstance but also registers with the wider international condition of what might be described as the universally violated body as the new and lingering anatomy.

The literary critic Seamus Deane has observed:

'A work of art does not fill a prescribed space. It invents the space which it fills....It uses social and political conditions to reflect not them but its own estrangement of them, its capacity to de-familiarise them so that they might be seen free of the bigotry of conviction and yet within the consolation of form.' (3)

In a close analysis of both ***The Agreement*** and ***Fragmens*** Declan Long perceptively picks up and expands on this concept of 'de-familiarisation' of the referent texts and their instigation of a more active reading:

'De-familiarising the familiar subtracts a multiple from what has been included in the situation as a document of history, politics or bathroom convenience. For Cullen these documents properly belong to the situation, what may be instituted by these works is a more active kind of reading, but which also refuses or at least sets the work at odds with culture, this is properly speaking its utopian project in the real.' P 35 (4)

The title of the ***Fragmens*** is itself taken from a series of political ideological texts written by Louis Saint-Just at the height of the revolutionary period in France. In 1793 – 1794 Saint-Just wrote a treatise which was posthumously titled '**FRAGMENS SUR LES INSTITUTIONS RÉPUBLICAINES**'. The Saint Just text is formally laid out in sections, separately presented but interrelated. In this way it offered itself as a model of how society could be structured both socially and politically. It offered a utopian vision of society. What appears to be an orthographical error in the spelling of the word *fragmens*, is in fact an accurate detail of the original Saint-Just manuscript. It is, actually, an archaic spelling of the word *fragments* in common usage prior to the standardisation of the French language. Cullen adopts the formal layout of the Frenchman's

text for his artwork and thereby sets up ideological correspondences between the respective Republican texts – Irish and French.

The work begs questions not only about the representation/re-presentation of text but its location in the 'polis'. The work looks like a public monument but is anti-monumental and as fragile as the language it represents. The strategy of mediation at work here is that it brings the public domain of the city monument into the contemplative domain of the art gallery. It is also body related -not only to the bodies of those on hunger-strike but also to the body of the artist. Mike Wilson draws our attention to this in his catalogue essay on Cullen's project.

"This work, this monument which is more a representation of a monument than a monument proper, is marked by the trace of a particular body, the body of the painter. It is further marked by the absent bodies, bodies reduced, erased and superceded by text. It is marked by their words, the words of dead men negotiating the terms and conditions of their death. (5)

Fragmens then relates to, but contrasts with, **The Agreement** where the text is etched mechanically on to boards replicating the anonymous public language of a legal document, Whereas the text in **Fragmens** was that of the secretive and personal, handwritten onto panels with the trace of the artist's hand. Mick Wilson continues:

*'In the **Fragmens** we find monumental rhetoric split and compromised. The texts of the 'comms' are interrupted by bracketed insertions which seek to explicate the text. Thus the authoritative voice of public address to the citizenry is divided between primary text and the text that seeks to direct and inform the construction of this prior text's meaning. The form of the monument is conflated with the format of the news media, the columns of text and the fragile material (styrofoam) suggest the throwaway of news print and the unreliable biases of editorialising. The sometimes subtle interventions by the artist into the mode of presentation of these texts in combination with the actual choice of text is the transformative element in Cullen's practice.'* (6)

While The Good Friday Agreement allowed for the establishment of a power sharing government between the political parties in Northern Ireland, in 2017 however, its Executive was temporarily stood down. The two largest parties, comprising Sinn Fein who seek Irish unification and wish to remain within the European Union and the DUP who defend the union with Britain and who voted to leave the EU, are in dispute over a number of issues. The principle stumbling block in their dispute is a demand by Sinn Fein for an Irish language act (like that which obtains in Wales, also part of the UK) to protect and sustain the native Irish language giving it parity with English in Northern Ireland. This has been resisted by the DUP, who see it as an erosion of British identity.

Consequently It has to be acknowledged that where there is cultural conflict questions of language always seem to come to the fore. Writer and critic Tom Paulin, in his essay 'A New Look at the Language Question' reminds us that:

'...the history of a language is often a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture.' (7)

Despite this temporary impasse The Belfast Agreement document reflected divergent community and political opinion distilling a workable programme for acceptable government. During the past 20 years Northern Ireland has been largely free of political violence. Shane Cullen's artwork **The Agreement**, which is multi-authorial, in my opinion perfectly registers within our congress's sub-theme relating to art and democracy. It demonstrates how art and related discourse can play an enabling role in the collective representations, challenges and imaginary and of the democratic process. In conclusion I would claim Cullen's achievement is that he conceived his artwork **The Agreement** as facilitating a democratic 'becoming' of a landmark document in

the public domain where cultural identity, tolerance and difference can be located and accommodated without recourse to violence and inequality.



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References

- (1) See <https://www.dfa.ie/our.../the-good-friday-agreement-and-today/>
- (2) Mullholland, Marc, Northern Ireland – A Very Short Introduction, Oxford University Press, 2003.
- (3) Deane, Seamus, The Longing for Modernity, Threshold, Winter, 1982
- (4) Long, Declan, Ghost-haunted Land – Contemporary Art and Post-Troubles Northern Ireland, Manchester University Press, 2017
- (5) Wilson, Mick, 'Fragments and Responses' Shane Cullen Fragments Sur Les Institutions Républicaines IV, ed. Dr Liam Kelly, Orchard Gallery/ Centre d'Art Contemporain de Vassivière en Limousin, 1997
- (6) op cit.
- (7) Paulin, Tom, 'A New Look at the Language Question', Ireland and the English Crisis, Bloodaxe Books, 1984