

Intervention & Imagination in the Fragmented City: Luna Nera in Belfast

Rediscovering the city as urban playground and dispelling the anomie of urban life is one of the tasks and responsibilities of the contemporary urban artist, to involve and invoke the relationship between the citizens and their city. This is particularly important when the urban landscape has been scarred and rendered unusable as genuinely public space.

Belfast like all cities boasts a number of what Ivan Chitchevlov in *Formulary for a New Urbanism* (1953) called “magical locales” that deserve to be explored. The locale which interested Luna Nera was the “Titanic Quarter” on Queens Island, the area of the harbour where the great ships were designed and built.



With the idea of “urban playground,” we set ourselves the task of challenging the widely recognised image of Belfast as a sombre strife ridden city. We directed our sojourn in Belfast towards analysing the relationship between the remains of this area, its buildings and waterfront, with the city centre’s grand structures and the remarkable landscape overlooking the city.



However, in Belfast Luna Nera confronted one of the hugely problematic issues confronting the contemporary artist: the difficulties of “nomadism” when the perspective of the artist comes up against deeply located traditions and attitudes of the host population.

Luna Nera is an international group and the artists who participated in this event hail from Canada, Italy, the USA, Germany (East and West), Egypt and England. Each artist always brings his or her own cultural baggage along on any sojourn. In previous projects we came face to face with the relics of Nazism, Sovietism and the chaos of post-Soviet systems. Dealing with the issues these situations brought up was and remains part of the artistic process.

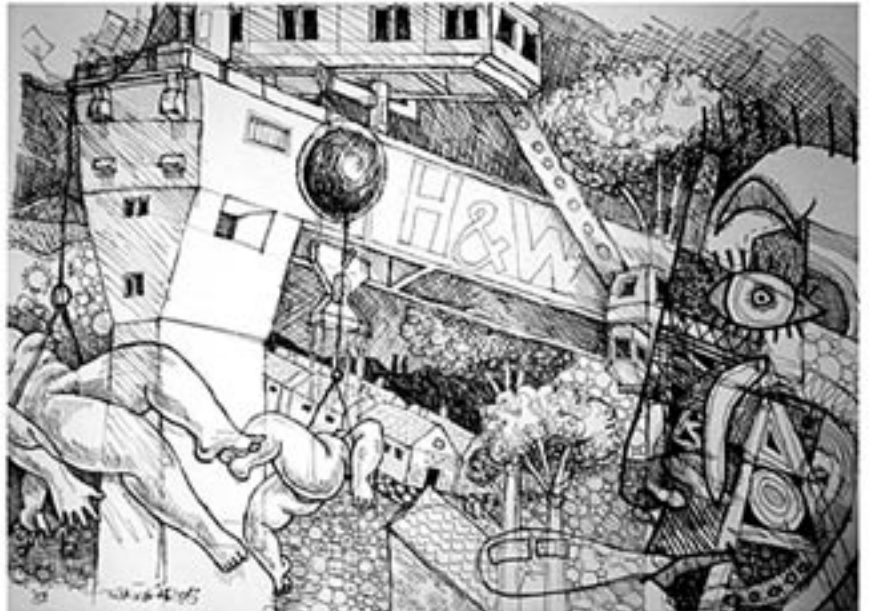
However in Belfast we were immediately aware that we were not dealing with the humming remains of past processes, but with conflicts, attitudes and structures which are very much active. We came up against the reality that present-day British government and a society is completely blinded to the existence of Northern Ireland. We in the UK are vaguely aware of it as a “problem” but the region, its people

and its history are things we do not deal with. It is completely off the radar.

If the majority of British people ignore Northern Ireland, most of the rest of Europe and beyond are totally unaware of its existence. For most of us, European religious conflict is something that belongs in the history of the 30 Years War. It was difficult for us to know how to address the unfamiliarity and closedness of a region where people identify themselves and each other as belonging to one of two religious allegiances, where every part of the city is portioned into territories - many demarcated by flags, murals and in the most shocking case, a “peace wall” dividing the territories. The “peace wall” is just one of the many scars that remain on the landscape of a damaged city.



Today the physical beauty of Belfast is emerging, as the fragile settlement has ensured that the armed conflict is essentially over. However the segregation endures, and internecine fighting still ravages the city’s suburbs and occasionally spills into the city centre. Although the trouble is not so visible, it is still a dangerous place. We cannot pretend that our own brushes with the situation were not uncomfortable. However, the experience of being in Belfast were extremely valuable and forced us to think deeper about our practice and what we hope to achieve with our site responsive work.



So if the struggles and conflicts in Belfast are closed and unreachable to us as outsiders, we had to find a way to work in such a way that what we could create something which would reach out to all the of the city and not address one or another group. In our initial research we were told that while it was possible to work with local groups to access the local history, these groups tend to serve one or the other sectarian population. The alternative was to work alone, under the guidance of PS2, the organisation which invited us. PS2 is concerned with bringing contemporary art to Belfast and regenerating the “Cathedral Quarter”

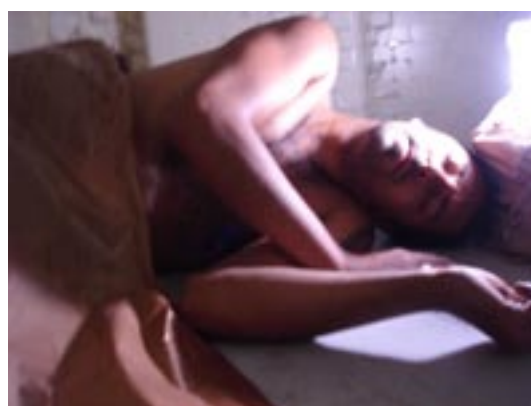


of the city as an arts district.

In discovering the spectacular remains of the Harland and Wolff Drawing Offices, where the Titanic and other great ships were designed, we believed that we had found a forgotten and hidden jewel of the city's history. However we were soon disabused of that notion. Harland and Wolff, we were told, was a segregated place. It H & W was dominated

by one sectarian group and less than 10% of workers belonged to another group. Therefore, Queens Island was a territory unknown to a large sector of the population. This was not the city's history we were exploring but the history of one group. Even though subsequent research showed us that the situation was complex, it is part of the popular conception of how things were. The city and its history live in a permanent loop of "them" and "us", of "we" and the "other".

Luna Nera took this as a challenge. No one person, one group, one race can entirely own a city or a nation. It became our task to create a project that would in some small way restore the forgotten site on Queens Island to the whole of Belfast, and invite everyone to look and claim for themselves a part of the city's history.



The opening of a site as historical artefact (a museum, stately home, visitor attraction and so on) means that the narrative that



accompanies one's entering is a specific historical narrative, a claiming of "heritage". History is not "objective" - it is simply a collection of things that we think we know. The telling of history is certainly not objective, filtered as it is by the unconscious baggage that the tellers are carrying. It is not an accident that in English the word "history" contains the word "story". It is a story, how we understand the past: the different academic theories, the conflicting belief systems, the impact of politics, ideology and religion on how we understand "fact" and the elusive "objectivity" is impossible.

The opening of a site to art, however briefly, is something else. In this case the artists are able to subject the grand narrative of history to a different kind of examination. For us, we wished to open the closed history of Queens Island, not to "educate" - replacing one set of propaganda with another - but to allow people to see and feel the place mediated by creativity and not authority. In a city that has



already too much history, where the city's many murals portray conflicting historical narratives, we presented instead the deceptive innocence of artwork. Painting, performance, video, an installation made of paper, all allowed the visitors to feel that the site had been neutralised and made available for imagination.

The artwork we presented invited the audience to forget the official narrative of the site and re-look at the site in a new way. The issues of society, community, history, memory and public space that arise as a result are for the people of Belfast to address, not the artists.

We did not offer any solution to the tragic sectarian reality of the city, nor to the question of what to do with the beautiful but very decayed Harland & Wolff building. We don't advise that the site be turned into a art gallery, museum, hotel or car park. It is not our role to fly in to a place and tell the people of Belfast, Russia, Berlin, Weimar, Zurich or anywhere what to do with their own place and how they must think about it. Luna Nera's opening of a site to art is a temporary intervention, not a permanent condition. It frees us and our audiences of prescriptive directives that serve authorities and institutions, and allows the consideration of hitherto unimagined possibilities.

Gillian McIver 2005

Works presented:

Performance:

Agnes Domke: Black Water/white water: Act of Forgetting

Julian Ronnefeldt: Titanic Dead

Painting/printing:

Derek Sztleiga 3 pieces: Koenigin (Hubris), I Create my Own Reality, Snowflakes (No Two Alike)

Drawing and Installation:

Nazir Tanbouli 2 pieces: White Star Line; untitled

Audio / Video installation:

Gillian McIver: offshore

Street Projections:

Valentina Floris & Ben Foot, Donegall St