

Excerpts from “Northern Ireland 30 Years of Photography” by Colin Graham (pub. Belfast Exposed & The MAC, 2013) Chapter 1: The Troubles: 'unreliable witnesses'

...The photo-documentary mode has clear limitations everywhere in the world. In the case of Northern Ireland, as the Troubles wore on and the kinds of images made by even the better press photographers shifted from post-Vietnam-influenced riot snaps to a stance of general bewilderment at the internecine smallness of the conflict, frustration with and variation upon the photo journalistic mode encouraged -and sometimes it seems as if it forced - new work to come to light.

Seán Hillen, for example, began his creative career as a photographer in Newry and Belfast, accumulating a voluminous archive of images of the Troubles, most of which would fit relatively seamlessly into a photojournalist's portfolio were it not for the intensity of his curiosity and the persistence of his gaze.

Hillen's early photographs are like Magnum with added participation, since they often deliberately get the angle of the camera to imitate the point of view of a marcher. Or sometimes Hillen photographs like someone who has stopped and looked at slightly the wrong thing. Hillen's early photography became revived and of greater importance later, when he went to study art at the Slade.

Here his work brought together the two localities of his life, London and Newry, in a series of photo/postcard montages which led to his later, and celebrated, *IRELANTIS* series. His fictional Londonewry in effect addresses the same issue which *Camerawork* sought so earnestly to talk about - that is, in simple terms, the British presence in Northern Ireland. Hillen's merging of original photographs and postcards, however, says much more. The postcards signify tourism and living somewhere which is not home, while the original photographs might be thought of as 'authentic' versions of home.

But Hillen never allows such a straightforward dichotomy to remain in place. LondoNewry is a new, fantasy world, a vision held in place by one person's life experiences. It is also a way of seeing the collapse of the personal into the public realm of history. The fantasy, the creative act of dystopian fiction which Londonewry becomes, is a plaintive attempt to overcome the forces of history by making something new from them.

Constructed from the same basic materials as Chris Steele-Perkins's photographs of 'Catholic West Belfast', 'Londonewry' is a very different visual landscape, and an alternative thesis on the fate of the journalistic photograph in the context of the Northern Troubles. The art photography which emerges in the Troubles has, then, a close relationship both with the genre of photojournalism and, more importantly, with the conceptual issues which photojournalism finds itself facing when confronted with the North.

How to be 'authentic'; how to contain and convey the fabric of lives hurled into a time of ferocity; how, or whether, to account for the reasons why the Troubles are happening - all of these nag at the photographers who begin to photograph Northern Ireland in a new way.

Put simply, this mode is artistic rather than media-based. It is a photography not for sale to the newspapers, magazines or media corporations or syndications, but a photography which might end up on a gallery wall, in an art book, or with a collector - though the market for such photography was much smaller and less certain in the 1980s than it is now. Fine-art photography in the North largely continued to nod to a documentary mode, and in that it drew still on the 'newsy' element in photography, largely because its concern continued to be with history as a public event and with place as a site of the political life.

It is not surprising then that some of the early pioneers in this arena produced images that were similar to those they supposedly reacted against...

Second Excerpt: from Chapter.3: The Border: 'the idea of boundary'

...We have already seen how Seán Hillen's art evolved from a photojournalistic mode into fantastical montages. Hillen's 'Newry Gagarin Crosses the Border' uses his own photograph of the army base outside Newry which once looked over the main Belfast-Dublin road. Hillen places above that an alter-ego figure named Newry Gagarin, who appears in a series of images from around this time, sometimes with Hillen's face inside the cosmonaut's helmet.

Hillen explains that Yuri Gagarin (the first man in space) landed an hour before Hillen was born and in this work 'Gagarin' seems to be still in utero, floating above the border - getting perspective, perhaps, staying above the fray. The image is then a wish fulfilment (expressing the desire to rise back above the politicized ground) but it is also a recognition of the constant bringing together of disparate elements - which is what a border is. Here Hillen brings into contact the photograph and borrowed visual texts, Hillen and 'Gagarin', north and south.

Hillen's work from around this period uses a garish form of kitsch to make sense of the harsh politics in his original photographs. For all Hillen's humour, it should be remembered that he makes this work through the cutting up of pre-existing images and that in that method there is the recreation of something violent and lacerating.

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