

# PERFORMING POLITICAL ACTS: PERFORMANCE ART IN NORTHERN IRELAND RITUAL, CATHARSIS AND TRANSFORMATION

André Stitt

## (I) ON YER DOORSTEP

*Each person is art (and can make what art is)*

*Real art resolves inner and outer conflict.*

*It heals wounds within and without the self.*

To HEAL is to make WHOLE.

Alastair MacLennan, *Is No* (Bristol: Arnolfini, 1988).

*My artworks seek to embody and identify with processes of transition, the resolution of conflict, community and communion. These elements constitute an evocation of the individual and communal body on a journey towards redemption. A treatment towards a new communionism.*

André Stitt, *Homework* (Köln: Krash Verlag, 2000).

For nearly 40 years artists have been creating performances, interventions and other time-based art in Northern Ireland during a period of traumatic civil conflict. However, their work remains largely confined to half-remembered anecdotes, rumours and hearsay. In the following essay I will explore through recovered documentation, memory and personal testimony how one might get a more insightful understanding of the vibrancy and importance of performance art that was happening on the artists' own doorstep.

With the recent reunion and performance of art collaborations by myself and Alastair MacLennan, I would like to take the opportunity to investigate how making performance art for us has continued to reveal through the legacy of those formative experiences an 'experimental exercise of freedom'<sup>1</sup> on our own doorstep.

In discussing context-specific examples of our work, I am interested in how and why radical art was made in an environment of political conflict taking place in a developed Western society such as Northern Ireland, and if remembering this art, produced through performance, contributes to conflict transformation.

The examples of our formative explorations using performance art in Belfast during the late 1970s, and simultaneous engagements by other artists, reveal the importance of performance art specific to the civil conflict in Northern Ireland. As a long-term supporter and advocate of experimental and interventionist art-making, Slavka Sverakova suggests that: "The North ... did not release performance from the severe grip of political and moral issues. It felt that the artists trusted performance to do the most difficult and sophisticated jobs in raising awareness to the public."<sup>2</sup>

## (2) PERFORMANCE AS ART?

**performance:** carrying into effect, to be agent of, task, operation, doing, execution, public function.

*A definition of performance as art: making art as a performed visual arts activity: Performance art is an action, designed and executed by an artist that takes place in real time and space with or without an audience.<sup>3</sup>*

The American academic Kristine Stiles has summarised the beginnings of performance art as taking place

After World War II, [when] performance by artists emerged almost simultaneously in Japan, Europe and the United States. The artists who began to use their bodies as material of visual art repeatedly expressed their goal to bring art practice closer to life in order to increase the experiential immediacy of their work.

Emphasising the body as art, these artists amplified the role of process over product and shifted from representational objects to presentational modes of action ... they also sought to reengage the artist and spectator by reconnecting art to the material circumstances of social and political events.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1970s, artistic responses to the viscosity of the developing civil conflict in Northern Ireland had tried to find a suitable language for political and social engagement. A number of early responses, such as the series by F E McWilliams, *Women of Belfast*, tended towards illustrative comment made through conventional media such as sculpture or painting. However, a generation of emerging artists felt an inability to adequately confront daily violence through these traditional means of portrayal and exposition.



Figure 1: F E McWilliams, *Women of Belfast* (1972-75), sculpture, bronze.



Figure 2: Robert Ballagh, *Bloody Sunday Floor Drawings* (1972).

Robert Ballagh's 1972 *Bloody Sunday Floor Drawings* was an early art-as-performance interface that used the artist's forensic outline to body-map a mass shooting in order to register a resounding act of military transgression: Bloody Sunday, Derry, 30 January 1972. Ballagh's work was literal, illustrative and only partially successful. The work's location at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin disconnected it not only from its source and location, but also from the aspirations of direct social and political engagement implicit in the artistic actions of performance art activity. It is, however, in early artistic engagements such as Ballagh's that we see a willingness to emphasise the body relative to a current public event and its subsequent trauma.

Although Ballagh's piece used the body as a template and as a signifier of traumatic public events, the act of drawing around the body was not promoted to the level of public spectacle and confrontation that may be observed in much performance art. An audience, or public, was not invited to see the 'live' manifestation of the act itself. The exhibited work constituted a 'trace' or document of the artist's action and was not, therefore, recognised as a performance artwork at the time.

There is no doubt that Ballagh's work was a significant departure from conventional art-making; however, performance art as such did not become a recognised feature of the visual arts in Northern Ireland until at least 1974-75. This was due in part to several visits by the German multi-artist Joseph Beuys and his support of an artist initiative in central Belfast, the Art Research Exchange, as an art/social interspace. A conflation of possibilities also emerged during this period, with a significant shift in the dynamics of the pedagogical environment at Belfast College of Art (Ulster College of Art, now University of Ulster) with the recruitment of Adrian Hall in 1972 and Alastair MacLennan in 1975. The impact of these artist/teachers alerted, enabled, and encouraged young student/artists like myself to the possibilities of making, thinking, and doing outside the confinement of traditional methodologies. Implicit in their guidance was the intrinsic relation to real and lived events taking place in the contemporary climate of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Emphasis was also placed on working outside the confines of the institution and 'predictable' art-associated venues.

### (3) ARRIVAL

#### HOW AND WHY RADICAL ART WAS MADE: PERFORMANCE ART IN NORTHERN IRELAND AS RITUAL ACTION LEADING TO CATHARSIS AND TRANSFORMATION

*Skill in action, where skill is the resolution of conflict.*

Alastair MacLennan, *Is No* (Bristol: Arnolfini, 1988).

*Art requires a spiritual, ethical basis, free from dogmas. Real art has little to do with refined sensibilities gaining pleasure. Its power is transformative.*

Alastair MacLennan, interview with Linda M Montano, in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

The arrival in Belfast of the Scots artist and teacher Alastair MacLennan in 1975 introduced external performance art influences to an emerging generation of young artists. MacLennan proceeded to create a series of performance art interventions in Belfast city centre that had an immediate public impact. Crucial to these works was that they occurred in real time, in public space, outside of institutional visual arts centres. By their very nature they implied direct relationships between contemporary 'lived' experience, present circumstance and quotidian social and political events.

In making works of performance art in Northern Ireland, artists such as Alastair MacLennan have utilised elements of ritual activity to consider arts practice as a means for potential transformation, healing, and resolution of inner/outer conflict. In his work (and that of many others, including myself), elements of ritual relative to the social, cultural and political environment of Northern Ireland have also been used as structural devices and intrinsic references. Indeed, one can identify codes and signifiers in significant performance art from Northern Ireland as a reflection of the dominant ritual activities carried out within the country's sectarian divisions – for example, the use of coloured ribbons, distinctive clothing, hats, walking sticks, paramilitary garments and implements.



Figure 3: The annual Twelfth of July Protestant Orange Order marching in Northern Ireland.

Figure 4: IRA funeral.

From early on, in 'akshuns'<sup>5</sup> or 'actuations'<sup>6</sup> presented by myself or Alastair MacLennan, the influence of collective, social, communal and cultural ritual in Northern Ireland exerted a central role by means of their political and religious demonstrations and affirmations. These influences were utilised, converted and often subverted as a strategy in creating relationships between art and life. In many of these early performance or street actions, ritual repetition played an important part as a means to evoke demonstrative reaction or transformative outcome. In psychology, the term 'ritual' may refer to a repetitive, systematic, behavioural process enacted in order to neutralise or prevent anxiety. It may be a contention of these 'live' artworks that they could exert a subliminal or subconscious influence upon both artist and observer through the ritual enactments occurring within the transitional space of the performance. "Stitt began to experiment with ritualistic actions; his interest in utilising them was as part of a holistic process; to heal the psychological damage inflicted upon him by the violent situation he was living in."<sup>7</sup>

In my own performance, the ritual presented in 'akshuns' has its origins in the Protestant culture I grew up in, as exemplified in Loyalist iconography and demonstrations. "There were: religious, quasi-religious, paramilitary orders and sectarian groupings; the Church, Catholic/Nationalist, Protestant/Loyalist, all developed their own rituals to confer identity. These 'orders' integrated religion with politics along with social and cultural ideology through ritual to establish dependency. Ritual was ubiquitous, and used to affirm righteous power and control by being a conduit for dominant ideologies."<sup>8</sup>

For Alastair MacLennan, ritual emerged from his study of Zen and the communal discipline and meditation practice at a monastery in British Columbia in the early 1970s. I would emphasise the importance of ritual in these early developments, and how it has been used by both of us as a significant structural device when creating works of performance and as a reference to social conventions across the political and religious divide in Northern Ireland. I would also suggest that elements of ritual enactment and communal engagement in general had a direct correlation to lived experience and the life-as-art context which performance art provided to artists in Northern Ireland from the mid-1970s onwards.

Ritual provided the fulcrum by which to pass from private experience to socially engaged art-making. In so doing, ritual activity enabled performance art in Northern Ireland to inhabit a liminal space that provided a subversion of social engagement in an environment that otherwise depended on socio-political group affirmation and loyalty.

"By temporarily separating participants from everyday social structure, ritual creates ambiguous social status. Liminality is inherent to ritual, since participants' former identities and obligations to social status must be removed before new identities and obligations can be taken on. Transition from an old social identity to a new one necessarily creates ambiguous social status .... Most important, liminality represents "the possibility ... of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements."<sup>9</sup> Thus liminality, inherent in ritual activity, is also essentially 'subversive' of everyday social structure; by association, performance art in the context of Northern Ireland, with its ritual associations, content, codified signifiers and mannerisms, can also be seen as inhabiting a liminal space 'subversive' of everyday social structure. It could be argued that this in effect corroborated and made real the aforementioned 'experimental exercise of freedom.'

The subjective and personal outcomes presumed and reportedly experienced by artists utilising performance can be said to be one of catharsis. Catharsis is the Greek word *Katharsis*, meaning 'purification' or 'cleansing'. The term has been used for centuries as a medical term meaning a 'purging.' The term catharsis has also been adopted by modern psychotherapy to describe the act of expressing deep emotions, often associated with events in an individual's past, which have never before been adequately expressed. Catharsis is also an emotional release associated with exposing and claiming the underlying causes of a problem.

It has also often been attributed to public observers of performance art that they may experience a form of catharsis, or – as has been reported to me personally at one of my own performance events – 'a second-hand catharsis.' Both Alastair and myself have often had experiences of catharsis by public observers being identified as an outcome relative to the process of incorporating elements of performing ritual activity or 'actions' in the work.

I started consciously exploring, inventing and developing 'personal' rituals that would, I hoped, lead me to some form of catharsis, understanding, and realisation, possibly a transcendence of my own conditioned identity. Through making these initial 'ritual akshuns' I identified ritual activity as a means of redressing the limitations of social structure. I identified it as a form of non-conformist art via 'ritual performance.'<sup>10</sup>

#### (4) MACLENNAN:ACTUATIONS

##### PERFORMANCE ART AS RITUAL AND CATHARSIS: TARGET

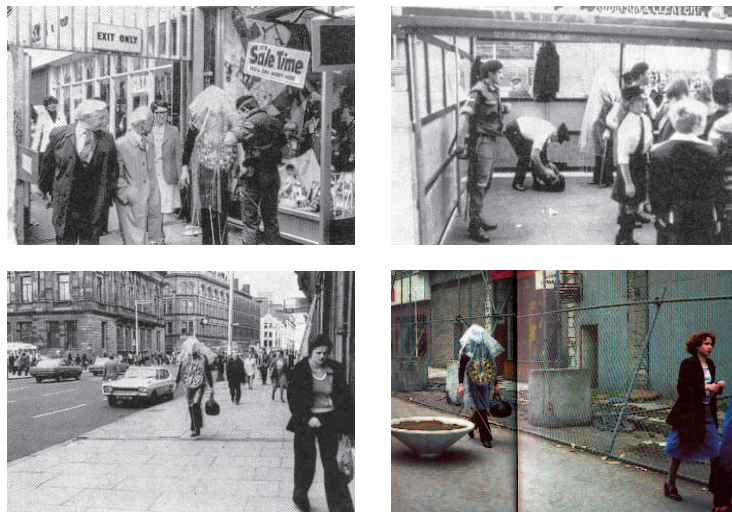


Figure 5: Alastair MacLennan, *Target*, performance piece, Belfast, 1977.



Daily throughout August 1977 MacLennan walked to and from work, dressed entirely in black with a plastic sheet over his head which reached to his waist. Bamboo canes attached to the bottom of the sheet held it in place and also acted as an 'auditory' signal or warning of his approach. Around his neck hung a dart board. He carried a black hold-all. The journey necessitated negotiating the city centre security barriers where the public were scrutinised, searched and sometimes singled out for interrogation by soldiers.

[He] became aware of anxiety as a shared experience between the searchers and himself that he could control. As time went on he realised that many of the searchers, especially the younger ones, were more anxious about the situation than he was. This created a type of tension and energy that he was able to manipulate and control and so reverse the status and intimidation of the situation.<sup>11</sup>

The ritual of daily business, of going to and from work, is exposed as something more territorial, oppressive. The ritual of being searched that became a feature of negotiating Belfast, and the use of a dartboard, made the artist a 'target' or marked man; it created a tension in a social situation and disrupted a modified appearance of normality – that of people going about their daily business in a developed Western society. This in turn drew attention to a social and political context conditioned by the civil conflict. MacLennan effectively and simply demonstrates that appearances are deceptive. What appears at first normal soon delivers unexpected tensions and poses questions concerning control and authority. What makes MacLennan's simple public action all the more remarkable is the fact that he could have been viewed as a security breach (carrying a bomb in his bag perhaps?) and, at its extreme consequence, he could have actually been shot at. By making himself the metaphorical target he could well have become a real target.

This performance, one of MacLennan's earliest in Belfast, also acts as an affirmation of life by creating a cathartic destabilisation of power at the interface between life and death. Catharsis in this example, as in much of MacLennan's later work, is a subtle shift in the consciousness of both artist and public. He has noted that the 'purification' or 'cleansing' associated with catharsis "can be very subtle, subliminal, an alteration in mood or feeling, or a subsiding of tension."<sup>12</sup>

Through making art as ritual daily activity, and drawing attention to its possible cathartic consequences, MacLennan was reclaiming the physical and social habitat, using himself as a public statement and as an example through creating a work of performance art.

## PERFORMANCE ART AS MEMORIAL: *NAMING THE DEAD*



Figure 6: Alastair MacLennan, *Naming the Dead*, performance piece, Belfast, 1998.

In *Naming The Dead*, MacLennan confronted the legacy of the Troubles up to that point by exposing the public to lists of all those who had lost their lives through the Troubles in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1998.

He spent a day on the Ormeau Bridge in Belfast – a connective artery between Protestant and Catholic territories – tying pieces of paper to the bridge with the names of the dead, and placing small flowers along the bridge in an act of both remembrance and memorialising. A highly visible performance due to its location, the public engaged with it by stopping and reading through the lists attached to the bridge. The bridge, in effect, became both a metaphor and potential conduit for confrontation, reflection, and transformation.

## (5) STITT: AKSHUNS

### PERFORMANCE ART AS RITUAL AND CATHARSIS: *ART IS NOT A MIRROR IT IS A FUCKING HAMMER*



Figure 7: André Stitt, *Art is not a Mirror it is a Fucking Hammer*, performance piece, Belfast, 1976-78.



Throughout 1976-77 I daubed the slogan 'Art is not a Mirror it's a Fucking Hammer' on walls and buildings around Belfast. Intentionally crude, the slogans were a provocation that reflected the sectarian graffiti prevalent in Belfast at that time.

In 1978 the artist finalised these street 'actions' or 'performances' with a symbolic ritual immolation that consisted of the burning of his paintings outside the art school in Belfast city centre. Catharsis is expressed through a purging of traditional formulas and values associated with art-making (i.e., painting). The eradication of prior artistic concerns through the use of fire to cleanse and purge enabled the young artist to break free of traditional art-making and follow a more radical and social/political engagement through performance art. The processes of burning accompanied by a sloganeering manifesto converge in a brutal act of purification that draws direct relationships between making art and the physical and psychic environment of Belfast in 1978.

From 1978, I deliberately engaged in art-making that was specific to sites in and around Belfast and that reflected a number of concerns regarding territory, political power and the potential for ritual as a means of empowerment and for reclaiming or transforming identity.

## PERFORMANCE ART AS MEMORIAL: CONVICTION

"The akshun took the form of going on my hands and knees from my childhood home in Donegall Pass to the Duke of York pub on the other side of the city. A very tough and exhausting akshun. ... My head was covered in tar and feathers. An image from my youth when I saw people tarred and feathered and tied to lamp posts as a punishment."<sup>13</sup>

In *Conviction*, I confronted the legacy of the Troubles and my relationship to Belfast as an environment that incorporated a psycho-geographical personal history, and made a symbolic ritual journey that had a correlation to the lives lived and lost in the areas I travelled through. I negotiated divided territory on hands and knees in an act of penance and humility. The work became a cathartic act of transformation, redemption and healing. The performance activity incorporated elements of ritual relative to Catholic



Figure 8: Street kid with drum and 'King Billy' wall graffiti, Belfast.

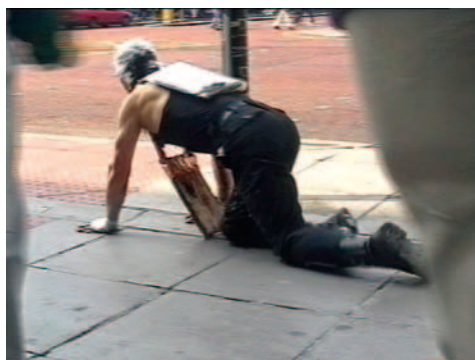


Figure 9: André Stitt, *Conviction*, performance piece, Belfast, 2000.





Figure 10: Tared and feathered victim, Northern Ireland.

culture – acts of penance – and to Protestant culture – ‘tarring and feathering’ as an act of public punishment and humiliation.

## (6) RECALL

### DOES REMEMBERING THIS ART, PRODUCED THROUGH PERFORMANCE, CONTRIBUTE TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION?

By concentrating on societal ills such as conflict and imbalances of power, it might be suggested that certain performance artists attempt to evoke trauma inherent within their observers’ psyches and elicit a purging of these repressed memories. I would suggest this to be the case in general concerning performance art produced in Northern Ireland, and as regards the particular works cited above by myself and Alastair MacLennan. In these performance works, ritual and catharsis are utilised as a means whereby public artistic testimony, context, time, space, repetition, codified enactment, recall and memorialising can be converted into acts of transformation.

Our means of recall relative to the works discussed is through witness, testimony, personal retrieval, memory, and collected documentation. However, it is also through our lived experiences and those of numerous other artists like us in Northern Ireland, who engaged in performance art as a political act of protest and empowerment under extreme circumstances. These ‘acts,’ and their attendant recollection through memory, recall and physical documentation, can also be transmitted through time to the present and therefore renewed. I would contend, and with the examples cited as evidence, that without the power of recall we are unable to summon images of past traumas that are evident in these performances and are needed to evoke the catalyst of recovery.

Conventional art mediums failed at a specific time in a specific location – Northern Ireland in the 1970s – because conventional practice separated art from everyday experience by operating in traditional terms in neutralised spaces such as galleries and art institutions. From 1975 onwards, performance art in Northern Ireland gained momentum because it placed the artist at the centre of art-making and evidenced the ‘live’ or ‘living’ process of making art as it actually

took place. In so doing, it created focus for the artists' actions and their placement in relation to a landscape of civil conflict. This in turn allowed artists, and by extension the public, to inhabit a liminal space where conflict might be converted into its opposite through performance art that utilised ritual and catharsis as a means for transformation in an 'experimental exercise of freedom' on their own doorstep.

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- 1 A phrase coined in the late 1950s by Brazilian critic Mario Pedrosa who applied it to a range of artists motivated to abandon traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture for a new aesthetic that connected directly with political, cultural and social concerns through a performative practice.
- 2 Slavka Sverakova, "Performance Art in Ireland 1975-1998," in *Art Action 1958-1998*, ed. Richard Martel (Quebec: Editions Intervention and Nouvelles Editions Polaires Nepe, 2001), 412-44.
- 3 I have tried for many years to simplify the answer to the question that won't go away. This is what myself and my students have come up with. It's as much to do with how they see performance art as it is to do with how I have problems of definition. It's a bit like the performance art joke: "Q: How many performance artists does it take to change a light bulb? A: I don't know, I left before the end."
- 4 *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).
- 5 'Akshun' or 'akshuns' is a term I have used since 1977 to denote the 'type' of performance art I make. It is basically a Northern Irish phonetic translation of the word 'action,' as in 'live action' or 'action art.'
- 6 MacLennan uses the term 'actuation' for his work: "an 'actuation' activates a space ... it activates energy latently lying there ... it effects demonstrative interfusion of energies lying seemingly dormant." Email from Alastair MacLennan, Wed 1 June 2011, 11.37 p.m.
- 7 Neil Jefferies, "On through the not so Quiet Land," unpub. dissertation, UWIC, Cardiff, 2008.
- 8 André Stitt, "Early Akshun 1976-1980," in his *Substance: Residues, Drawings & Partial Objects 1976-2008* (Exeter: Spacex, 2008), 204-27.
- 9 BC Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited: Ritual As Social Change* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), 17.
- 10 Stitt, "Early Akshun 1976-1980."
- 11 Andrew Pendle, *Beyond Art* (Dublin: Theatre Ireland, 1984).
- 12 P Babot, unpub. interview with Alastair MacLennan, Belfast, 2009.
- 13 André Stitt, *Small Time Life* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2002).