

Household, *Out in the Open*, 2015 Status Report

Household are a group of five curators and artists exploring the social and political context of Belfast. To date their work has manifested in annual small-scale festivals with multiple events taking place in numerous homes, together with artist residency programmes and projects utilising slack spaces within the city centre. This simple model has allowed them to explore their interests in commissioning, community, public and private spaces and in the 'event as artwork'. Now they are at a moment of reflection. In September 2015 they invited local artists, thinkers, international peers and friends to join them for an advocacy and research event entitled *Out in the Open*, focusing on the following questions:

"What constitutes a piece of public art? Should it be outdoors and monumental? Permanent and made of strong, durable materials? Or is it something that can be more fluid, intimate in scale and ephemeral in execution; operating in our constantly changing urban environment in new ways, inviting us to consider our surroundings in a new light and asking difficult questions about how city spaces are developed and controlled."

While this might feel like an outmoded conversation to some of those immersed in contemporary art, it became apparent to me throughout the weekend that commissioners in Belfast are not comfortable with the more relational approach proposed by the questions above. Indeed, Mary Jane Jacob demonstrated that social practice most definitely can constitute public art as long as 22 years ago with 'Culture in Action', her 1993 edition of Sculpture Chicago. Many have taken this mantle since, including Bristol-based commissioning agency Situations, who develop time-based and relational works across the world, to Theaster Gates, the poster-boy of a new form of practice in which the artist works as politically responsible architect, developer and social connector.

Many of the UK's commissioners and publics continue to be unaware of the issues presented by Household's questions. For the most part they are barely attuned to the idea that conversations, relationships and actions can constitute art. As the context specific, city-wide symposium progressed, conversations emerged around the following, more nuanced, honed and perhaps more useful issues:

What constitutes public space and public benefit, when much of the space we think of as public is privately owned and managed? What is the current cultural and political landscape in Belfast and what might the possibilities for commissioning public art in Belfast be? Who is the public? Who decides?

Out in the Open began with a trip to the suburbs. Travelling on a packed coach we drove from the buzzy bars and galleries of the Cathedral Quarter to quiet streets of dark houses in the east of the city. Piling out we flitted down the road towards our destination, a building from the late 1960s overlooking the city. Inside, the fusty smell, ridiculously cheap drinks, padded seats around the sunken, disco-lit dance floor and the feeling of abandonment gave The Maple Leaf Social Club place a Twin Peaks tenor. The perfect setting, then, for Bedwyr Williams' dystopian

video work, *Echt* (2014) which shows a near-future when current obsessions with ownership and consumerism have taken frenzied hold.

Lords pile stuff – in meaningless abundance – around their nightclub dwellings, while the rest of the population shiver in a state of poverty and terror caused by the reign of hoodlum gangs. These thugs, in a scene highly pertinent for the festival/symposium ahead, attack planning officers and encase them in bungalow-cum-coffins: “often, the officers’ heads were left rotting in the conservatory, while the rest of their bodies were walled and roofed in... and children would dare each other to look at the decaying heads of these once influential people”.¹ *Echt* is a powerful and timely parody of the decline of the UK’s welfare state and its increasing social stratification.

The use of novel buildings is a well known phenomenon in the art festival format: the cricket pavilion used for the 2012 Glasgow International; the pub in a cave on the beach at South Shields used by the 2014 AV Festival; the disused Greek School used in the 2015 Istanbul Biennial; the competition to use the most remote island at the Venice Biennale. Each offers the opportunity for an unusual exhibition or party environment for the urban exploring art crowd. But there was something particular about this place. Like much of what I experienced during *Out in the Open*, there was an undercurrent here connected to Northern Ireland’s contested political terrain. Once at the heart of a community, this building was now due for demolition.

In the 1970s the Maple Leaf Social Club was an important venue for emigrants taking some of the first chartered flights from Belfast to Canada. At that time only club members were given such tickets and The Maple Leaf offered access to flights, visa information and socials for the soon to be expatriates.² It was a Protestant club in a quiet suburb; the kind of place that each section of the city had while the centre was off limits and unsafe for nights out. Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement the way that Belfast is used has changed; bars have opened in the city centre and the flow of people has eased and loosened, rendering neighbourhood pubs and clubs unfashionable if not redundant.

The Maple Leaf stands in for much of Belfast’s development: to an outsider like myself the veneer of the fast-paced change reads like any other European culture-led gentrification routine, but lurking under the surface is another layer, more oblique but still tangible. The Troubles. It would be foolish to ignore such a place-shaping political context when so many visual clues of territorialisation are apparent. There are no police cars, only reinforced ‘meat wagons’ vans; the political murals are a huge tourist attraction; and perhaps most striking is the constant use of flags and logos as repeated motifs of allegiance.

As guests hosted by Household, my fellow visitors and I saw the most liberal side of Belfast, but one only has to slip into one of the multiple Troubles-based tourist attractions to gain small insight into the very recent past. The conversations one might have elsewhere about defining the public or publics are more complicated in Belfast. Different constituents operate in areas of the city, and boundaries – often imperceptible to the visitor – are still felt by those who inhabit it. The concepts and histories of ownership and public space, for many, carry antagonistic undercurrents here.

¹ Bedwyr Williams, *Echt*, (2014)

² <http://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2015/07/27/news/historic-meeting-place-for-canadian-bound-emigrants-to-be-demolished-203118/>

The next day began with a coach trip that cleverly subverted the bus tour taken by so many of Belfast's tourists, eager to witness the heritage of The Troubles. The journey situated Household within the city in which their work is located and by which it is informed. It took our conversations beyond the spaces of art and put the city's environs to the fore. The tour enabled artists to talk about projects in the sites where they took place and for academics to indignantly point out the soft corruption and political failures of the redevelopment around us. It meant that when we sat down later that day for talks and discussions on international projects we felt rooted in the place that was hosting us and aware of some of its particular political, cultural and economic issues.

Artist duo Brown&Brí discussed two projects that challenged a prescriptive understanding of the role of the artist and of the planner: a café and a work in which for 18 months, the pair attempted to find a way to live in the centre of Belfast. While the first of the projects led them to understand how complex the city's public spaces really are (negotiations about ownership of land around the riverside development hindered progress) the second revealed the politics of the de-territorialisation of Belfast's centre. As this process-led piece formed an intelligent and challenging public art work, I was disappointed to hear the artists talk about marking the end of the project with an exhibition.

The eloquent refrain of journalist Anna Minton's 2012 book *Ground Control* is the sad and duplicitous story of how parts of Britain's cities have been parceled off, bought up by private firms and yet continue to masquerade as public space. The private ownership of, and influence over, large areas of our cities is not new: think of the Quaker philanthropists who built Bournville in Birmingham and Port Sunlight in Merseyside, or the Victorian businesses which owned swathes of property and commissioned statues and adornments for cities. Neither is the idea that those managing important parts of our towns do not necessarily have our best interests in mind, but are servicing other economic and political agendas.

I think it is the insidious nature of more recent developments, the wolf-in-sheep's-clothing feel of privately owned spaces in British cities and the legislative complicity, that is so unsettling and confusing. As Minton points out in a more recent text: "[a]s the role of the public interest and the public good waned, the definition of the public interest was quietly altered in planning legislation, becoming instead intertwined with economic benefit."³ Artist, writer and lecturer Daniel Jewesbury exposed the Belfast equivalents of Minton's narrative in a vehement exploration of the development of the riverside area, a galling story of corporate interests ruling the planning, development and use of public space.

Where does this leave art? In a complicated and compromised situation in which commercial decisions instruct the development of an area and influence public art commissioning and artists struggle to live and work in their cities. A section of Jewesbury's talk perfectly crystallised the idiocy of this situation. He pointed out that the triangle of ground on which the 'Beacon of Hope' (2007) (a terrible heavy-handed symbolic statue) sits, is public space in an otherwise privately owned and managed place.

³ Anna Minton, *Common Good(s)* — Redefining the public interest and the common good, London: How to Work Together, page 2

The area around Belfast Cathedral has been heavily redeveloped in recent years, with (as is often the case) a cultural venue as part of the development. In keeping with the widely-accepted positioning of arts venue as leisure facility, the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), a multi-art form venue which opened in 2012, sits in a new square alongside other venues including a gym, hotels, restaurants and bars.

The loop of gentrification is well-known: developers seek to emulate and own the 'vibrancy' of the arts and in doing so they quash an area's character by pricing out artists and cultural workers. In this economic perversion of culture the flats next door to the MAC are on the market for upwards of £200,000 and many sit empty. One such place, hired by Household via Air BnB, a new type of accommodation for an itinerant, neo-liberal workforce, was the location chosen for the screening of Philip Ewe's *TICKET TO A SCAM ARTIST* (2014).

In a situation emulating the tour of an expensive showroom apartments, viewers waited outside the building in groups of four, until they were collected by a member of Household and shown into one of the exclusive, softly padded apartments, complete with gilded mirrors and non-descript décor. Here they sat on plush sofas and watched the video in which Ewe performs linguistic acrobatics, flipping around the 'flirtations' of the 'pied a terre zone', the asset portfolio potential of 'saying yoo-hoo to the capital game' and the possibility of spilling guts on 'wipe-clean surfaces', in Dadaist phone calls to bemused estate agents.⁴ A wicked lampooning of the insane economics and inane language of property development *TICKET TO A SCAM ARTIST* is very amusing.

At the heart of the weekend was an afternoon symposium for which Household called on international peers to discuss examples from their own organisations' histories of working in public. Eva Neklyueva, Director, Checkpoint Helsinki; Meredith Johnson, Curator and Director of Consulting, Creative Time, New York; and Phoebe James, Collection Coordinator, Artangel, London, shared case studies of wide ranging, experimental, and importantly, popular projects that would challenge and inspire even the most forward thinking. These talks illuminated the potential possibilities and problems of commissioning politically-engaged social practice, time-based and ephemeral artworks in an embedded way, for and with different constituents.

The presentations offered a nourishing array of projects and usefully situated Belfast within a more international debate. Perhaps what was missing from the event was a more in-depth and nuanced discussion on key questions around public space, who the public are and how to progress with new artistic and cultural policies. The danger with discussions such as this is that the majority of the audience and participants are the already-converted constituents of curators, artists and academics. Indeed, even as a visitor to Belfast it was clear to me that few people in the room had real influence over processes of planning and commissioning despite Household having reached out to such stake holders.

Although disappointing, this turn-out was a useful indication of the work that needs to be done in terms of relationship building, before other such advocacy events can be usefully undertaken, let alone effective planning of a future strategy and vision. It amuses and saddens me that a

⁴ Philip Ewe, *TICKET TO A SCAM ARTIST* (2014)

small group of practitioners with little to no funding should have the power to call such an interesting cohort together without the support of many of the region's most powerful cultural workers or funders.

So, how far did we go in answering Household's, or my own, questions? Well, *Out in the Open* felt like the start of many conversations. As with any conference, many of the in-between discussions were as useful and informative as the formal talks. It was a nourishing moment for Household to contextualise research in an international forum and to share their ambitions and aspirations for their city, but like any good artwork, the event evolved more questions than it answered. I began to understand that the group saw the opening questions as an oppositional statement that might work as a blueprint for future commissions. Perhaps their statement should read something like this:

"Public art in Belfast can be fluid, intimate in scale and ephemeral in execution. It should exert influence over, and operate within, our constantly changing urban environment in new ways. It should be made by multiple publics and should require a new consideration of surroundings by asking difficult questions about how our city's spaces are developed and controlled."

I will end on artist Mitch Conlon's work, *Solitude* (2015). At its initial stages when we visited in September, the piece was set to be a long-term collaboration with fans at Cliftonville Football & Athletic Club, a small, semi-professional team in suburban Belfast who play at the 'Solitude' stadium. Cliftonville, a largely Catholic team, have fierce rivalry with Protestant neighbours Crusaders. This intensely local rivalry works as a microcosm of national and international cultural tensions and rivalries, often seen in the passionate arena of football.

On the day we visited, Conlon choreographed a parade in which the art crowd and Cliftonville fans carried a giant, hand-stitched banner with the enigmatic words 'Nothing But Solitude' patched across it, from the park adjoining 'Solitude' to the stadium gates. Here it was folded again and carried into the game. After kick-off Conlon once again unfurled the banner, this time proffering it to fans. This was a tense moment: would fans accept the offering?

Conlon's performative action drew on the esoteric culture of small-scale local football affiliations to speak of inherited rivalries and the history of religious hatred in Northern Ireland. It satirized and celebrated the visual spectacle of the flags and symbols utilised to demarcate territories across Belfast and the strips, colours and slogans used to display deep, often politically affiliated sentiments within football culture.

For me *Solitude* invoked some of the most important elements of public art; it functioned as a collective act, a gift and a statement of intent. The relationship that Conlon was nurturing with this community was integral to the success of the work and the importance of trust was inherent in his protective and careful management of our involvement in the work – a form of cultural trespassing that could have undermined his position as collaborator. The piece was fuelled by generosity; it was popular but not spectacular; respectful but not worthy and embedded but challenging. I look forward to seeing what happens next.