

Owen Boss

BEYOND THESE ROOMS SYMPOSIUM

Why Remember: What place has history in the modern contemporary art space - object, materials and presentation across art form and culture.

As we sit here in Tate Liverpool in 2019 both The UK and Ireland have experienced commemorations and what they mean. The UK have just completed their World War I commemorations. It is done and dusted. We in Ireland have just crested the midway point of our decade of centenary commemorations and are staring down at a complicated few years of War of Independence and Civil War, a bitter bloody conflict. It is complicated and contested and not easy. With these commemorations we are far removed from a five day rising in which we can easily assign narrative roles to either side. This remembering feels different. In 2015 / 2016 there was such a positive public facing planning based around commemorative events for 1916. Whereas now there is a searing silence to what is down the line. Hardly a surprise as Ireland's government party system is born from these events.

In 2011 just before our centenary decade began Queen Elizabeth II made a state visit to Ireland and as part of the visit she laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin. In 2014 this was reciprocated when our President made a state visit to the UK. For someone that had grown up in Ireland in the 80s it was a profound moment. A decade in which we were still in the grip of the catholic church. It made me think back to the Ireland of those days. A very different place. I went to a catholic school run by Christian Brothers in which history was very straight forward particularly in relation to how the republic was formed. Young minds being shaped to think a particular way and this extended to other areas of the school's education. As I was trying my best to be a Jet in our class production of West Side Story my best friend Graham was rehearsing for their play. The much more exciting piece that looked at the formation of the Irish state through rebel song. His teacher a staunch republican utilizing such hits as Come Out you Black and Tans and The Foggy Dew. I also thought of the news my parents watched every night which would feature some horror from the troubles, a car bomb or someone shot. .

I often wonder what my 11 year old past self would make of if they could see the world of today. A place where the Queen of England had visited, where there was 'peace' in Northern Ireland and no border. Would my 11 year old self see his 11 year old daughter of the future and see the world she lives in apparently without the weight of Nationalism.

That 11 year old self may still see something they are familiar with.

The O'Rahilly Charge performed by The Cabra Historical Society, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EJX8Yh92m4>

The pageantry of historical reenactment. Harmless fun for a group from a local historical society reliving the O'Rahilly charge of 1916 on the actual street it happened. I wonder would I catch the youtube film reenactment and see the significance of the credits. Filmed for an Phoblacht, the media wing of Sinn Fein. Why are they doing this? Why is it important?

I think that 11 year old would look at this world with puzzlement, a world turned upsidedown where Ireland seems to be a shining light of liberalism. He would view the rise of nationalism and populism across the globe that gives rise to a former television star come-leader that wears a hat emblazoned with M.A.G.A.



Make America Great Again. Again... That last word that hangs there at the end of the sentence almost as a portal to the past, to nostalgia. When was America great? As it's the Republican Trump we can rule out any time when the democrats were in power. It couldn't possibly be Bush, could it? Reagan perhaps? A president from trump's own ilk, a former movie star relying on that familiarity for votes. Definitely not the chaos of the 70's, nor the 60s counter culture. My guess is the post WWII baby boomer generation of the 1950's. Lots of prosperity and disposable income. Any further back and we get to the depression era, prohibition and mass immigration which we know he does not like.

That 11 year old may also see a man in a top hat trying to look like he belongs far in the past, even before either of them were born.



A man that is appropriating the visual imagery and style of a gone-by era in which great swathes of the map were pink.



When the UK was a striding powerhouse and the world's foremost powerful nation.



How through one piece of clothing he links to the past to suggest a future of power.

That 11 year old may also see a thing called a tweet in which a politician called Daniel Kawczynski talks about the post World War II Marshall Plan and the fact that Britain didn't receive any loan or help from the United States. They may also get a glimpse of their own 43 year old self as that adult wonders in puzzlement what the hell is the marshall plan. A loan from the USA post World War II to Europe worth billions of dollars in order to rebuild the continent, a loan in which the UK gets the lion's share. Then that tweet is a lie and if it is a lie then why lie about something so far in the past. There must be value or power in that information that is pertinent to the present and that information must link to the future.



There seems to be a move to harvest the past, to appropriate moments from long ago to feed the present with a view to controlling the future. To tap into nostalgia of a bygone era when the Summers were warmer and everyone was safer and happier. There is a value and a power to be mined there from the citizens that also hark back to that past. And this is why we need to remember and why it needs to be placed in an art space. Although that space admittedly does come loaded and within its own stream of cultural history and has its own links with itself. It also has the capacity to present a nexus of multiple thoughts, ideas and objects that can attempt to pause the narrative of history for even a moment. To say stop! To say no! Let us consider! Let us Question! Let us not accept what and how we were taught. Let us instead embrace the non-linear non-binary version of history. Embrace its complexities, its multiple readings its obscurity.

The exhibition *Beyond These Rooms* here at Tate was borne of two archive documents. One 38 female eye witness accounts of the execution of 15 civilian men during the 1916 Rising and the other a military enquiry of the same event kept under lock and key at Kew archive until 2016. Both are very similar but both contradict each other. But both are held in separate archives so both are imbued to some degree with truth. I would like to think I have tried to embrace this complexity in *Beyond These Rooms*.

These are dangerous times we live in. We seem to be on the edge of something and if our global political powers see the value of history and how it can be used to influence their citizens then we as artists need to rally against that, stand in opposition and unpick it and present all its wonderful complexities back. And attempt to deflate the rethoric and jingoism.

I wonder how my 43 year old daughter of the future will remember this present.

