

Willie Doherty

Matt's Gallery

It worked. For days after seeing Willie Doherty's new video installation, I walked the streets of London gripped by involuntary suspicion - wondering about cars idling quietly at the ends of poorly lit alleyways, doing double takes at vaguely conspiratorial street corner meetings, trying to pick out surveillance cameras hanging above urban junctions.

Belying the long arm of its impact, the *Only Good One* is a Dead One is a simple project: a darkened room, empty but for two videos projected on adjacent walls accompanied by a voice-over. A rambling tape-loop speech, the soundtrack documents the interior monologue of a man vacillating between being the hunter and the hunted, between a vivid fear of becoming the victim of assassination and a violent fantasy of carrying out a murder himself. Although like all Doherty's work, the piece is clearly a meditation on the murky malevolence of the political troubles in Northern Ireland, *The Only Good One*... works on less specific and more widely engaging levels as well, activating deep-seated universal emotions by playing off the paranoia, anger and desperation that lurks inside all of us at some time or another.

The formal construction of the video sections provides succinct accompaniment to the textual component of *The Only Good One*... One scene is a shaky handheld video document of a drive down a pitch black country road winding through featureless rural landscape. The other is a view of the activity on a quiet urban street captured by a camera secreted in a parked car, the image distorted by exaggerated night-time blur and surveillance camera pixillation, in which distant human figures are robbed of identifying characteristics and every oncoming car's headlights seem to signal impending danger.

The construction of the installation employs numerous strategic conceits which heighten the tension, most obviously the layout of the room, which forces the viewer to face one video wall or the other - as a result, one of the images is always just visible out of the corner of the viewer's eye. I found myself repeatedly glancing back to the surveillance projection from the more active, if repetitive, image through the windshield of the moving car. Like an agent on a stakeout, I tried to catch the significance of a movement or a light, lingering on the number plate of a vehicle emerging from around the corner, suspiciously surveying a group of figures

About this review

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[Back to the main site](#)

gathering beneath the dully phosphorescent halos of the distant street lights for some vaguely sinister assignation.

These images both derive from and feed into archetypal scenes of terrorism and political violence, now familiar to those outside the conflict looking in, from both fictional and journalistic sources. Several of Doherty's goals are met by this simple realisation. It reminds us of how very little of the Northern Ireland conflict is really experienced by the average non-resident. What we get instead is a string of dissociated images, a trail of visual and contextual mediation which winds ever farther away from the incident, not to mention the impetus behind it - the abandoned car by the side of the road, the row of house windows pierced by gunfire, the bereaved relative, the grainy mugshot, the courtroom drawing, the talking head summary. This disconnection between these visual artefacts and the complexities of the socio-political reality of the 'Troubles' is made more insidious by its consistent repetition and by the inurement that it generates in the viewer to the deeper motivations of the actors within the conflict.

An examination of this disjunction has been at the heart of much of Doherty's work, particularly his photo/text pieces, which employed formal strategies superficially similar to those of Barbara Kruger or Hamish Fulton. Yet Doherty's underlying plan is at variance with either of these polar examples - closer to Kruger's socio-linguistic deconstructions than to Fulton's warmly romantic naturalism, but ultimately more edgily specific than both, and requiring more of the viewer than either. The Only Good One... is, structurally, simply an animation of both the images and the words he has regularly employed: just as viewers read Doherty's still photos through the veil of text, they interpret the moving video within the atmosphere of his spoken words, each element interposing itself within the interpretative territory of the other. In the same way the repeated phrase 'I worry about driving the same route everyday....maybe I should try out different roads....alternate my journey. That way I could keep them guessing' activates the driving video, segments like 'I feel I know this fucker....I know where he lives, his neighbour... his car...I'm sick of looking at him' suffuse the unremarkable street scene with meaning, frost its every incoquity with dread.

As this is being written, the British papers have been filled with daily reports of escalating sectarian violence and political confusion in Northern Ireland, codifying new visual and verbal additions to the vocabulary of the conflict: Shankill, Greysteel, Hume-Adams. As if to provide a gri illustration of Doherty's thesis, the new images pile up next to equally ambiguous semantic rubble - the decimated 'Loyalist' hideout without any loyalists inside; the shot-up 'Republican' pub where both Protestant and Catholic blood pools together on the floor; talks that aren't talks; the voices of leaders dubbed in by actors; misleading statements that are just

editing errors. That Doherty makes his work from such deperate confusion should neither be seen as a diminishment of the importance of the events, nor as an attempt to elevate artistic expression beyond its real power. It is, rather like the best of all artistic gestures, an expression which gives voice to the individual in their capacity as a member of the larger community.

By putting viewers in touch, however peripherally and artificially, with the context that drives both perpetrator and victim, Doherty places us closer to the conflict, and temporarily draws aside the curtain of approved images and words that obscures the outsider's experience of the insider's world. The contradictions that lie behind the veil complicate our understanding precisely because they are closer to the intricate truth of the situation. Indeed, one of the most ambiguous phrases from the soundtrack has seemed to linger the longest: 'I saw a funeral on TV last night. Some man who was shot in Belfast. A young woman and three children standing crying at the side of the grave....Heartbreaking.' Could this non-sectarian expression of remorse, seeming to belong neither exclusively to the attacker or the attacked, ultimately be the voice of hope?

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