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Dirty Museum

1991



Originating from 1991, one roll of 35 mm B+W film documented the derelict fabric of an emotive site of Irish national memory and a shaming episode in Britain's declining colonial power. In Kilmainham Gaol, the leaders of the Easter 1916 uprising were executed by firing squad. The death of James Connolly, brought to the Gaol from the nearby Kilmainham Hospital, remains a suffocating event amidst the possible amelioration of, and full reconciliation for, post-colonial Britain and Ireland. Already terminally wounded, Connolly was tied to a chair, propped and executed.

Widely regarded as the 'Bastille of Ireland', this important Irish monument is the subject of Jack B. Yeats' paintings *Communicating with Prisoners* (1924) and the Gaol has been

designated national Heritage. Costumed actor-guards now perform its History. But the intricate restoration of the Gaol's fabric, as well as its viscerality in the national memory and identity, has not been easy, Cooke (2000: p.1) noted the ambiguity of the Gaol's symbolism, in 1922 Republican Irish prisoners were also executed there by fellow Irish from the Free State army. Following the tragedies of the Irish Civil War

For thirty odd years its doors remained locked, its yards and corridors abandoned to the elements and the thousands of pigeons who made their home there. But throughout the years of dilapidation that history was carbonising in the imaginations of the revolutionary generation of 1916-24 into a crystalline symbol of the Irish nationalist struggle for independence.

With this idea that time's passing generates a density of certainties, I pondered, what to with my photographic images of the pre-restored Gaol, a file which had lain in my 'to do' file for twenty-five years; unformulated, hardly verifiable anymore, resistant to further mediation, unseen.



I periodically reviewed these photographs. I knew that these sites of disputatious Anglo-Irish relations could not simply be converted into pieces of History for Now. As the dereliction of the site which I visited in 1991 could be authentically traced back to the historical meaning of the site's oppressiveness, the pre-restored dirtiness was somehow an exemplification of the cruel conduct of the British army in the pre-Republican period. And the site resembled other war sites, where the war is conducted in hidden cellar prisons, behind electrified fences and inscribed on blasted walls.



The photographs were selected and enlarged in both the analogue and digital periods. In the digital period I have played with their relative scale, to crop or reorder the roll of film sequenced in the contact sheet. That sheet recorded my time in a guided walk through the Gaol. It remains an imaginary configuration of how the prisoners would have walked to their sites of execution, a walk determined by the architecture of the Gaol. Such architecture is subject to a number of theories and architectural practices, I became informed of the rationalisation of murder: Entrance, Judgement, Exile, Punishment, necessary Death. But as for art, nothing progressed.



The guided tour itself, mostly an activity of standing and listening, getting close to things but not close enough, to linger but rarely in silence, is also there in structures of the images, there are no misdirections. I noticed that in some images the shadows drop from top-left to bottom middle, or that the weaving flexes move from top-right to bottom left, but mostly things were centre-stage, or just off-centre. My arising interest was with the redundant features of the Gaol's pre-restored condition and its services. Everything was immediate encounter, things we walked towards with ordained pauses and fiercely recounted episodes of evil although none of the photographed scenes would now seem very different from amateur records of a local community hall or a church renovation, the images seem serve some kind of modest parochialism.



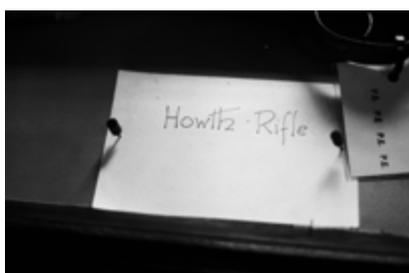
Empty fireplaces (photographed twice). Tunnels with dangling ropes and flexes, unshaded dusty bulbs (photographed twice), dust on plaster walls, a back-door service gate, a solemn wooden-door which seals the courtyard in which the prisoners were despatched. Recumbent ladders, also photographed twice with my scarce film, the beams jutting out of walls - reminiscent of an improvised scaffold.



The doubling continued, two canvas chairs, two table legs, two tables (one larger than the other) but formed of the same material, two light-switches. There was also something of the funeral in the images of the manhole cover, the periscope plumbing piping sticking out from the ground, and the worrisome trip-causing twin slabs of cemented block, another service plate sealing a hole in the plaster wall resembled a small hatch as if seen in a crematorium. And then against the museo-atmospheric in snips of handwritten evidence: Howitz Rifle. There were two images in the contact sheet of the same wreath and one image of tourists,



In writing this I have reminded myself that my intention had been to work towards an offsite public artwork to be placed temporarily within the Gaol under the auspices of an exhibition at the nearby Irish Museum of Modern Art, quickly self-dismissed. When I visited, the site had none of the interventions one would expect of national museums, its status as a Museum Gaol was still coming into being, the chaotic additional fabric to the site littered the remnants of parquet flooring and dense granite flagstones. You could see and palpably sense how easy it would be to kick the life out of a prisoner here, shoot them at close quarters with high-calibre rifles. Their body matter would scatter, traces easily and efficiently washed away, slopped out as a posthumous clearing away of History's progress.



In 1991 the site needed no embellishment, nor further complexity. As a Gaol it was also a Monument, but soon in transition to a fully-fledged Museum. The ownership of the transition might fall to those who might wish to convey the terrible unknowable, or to those who would fashion an informative display, a knowable. Either way, a determined attempt would have to be made to retain the site's solemn character, supplanting the material decay with a space of contemplation. I had hoped they could leave it all as is, monumentalising a Gaol meant the imagination could run riot. Items would need not appear as categories, visitors could visit

without distraction and cells speak for themselves. Those executed prisoners may well have been scared, perhaps misinformed of their impending fate. The buildings were evidence of colonisation, come and look at the furniture they left behind, come now and see the evidence. The site was a visceral History, so how to embalm it?



2011

What would I make of the Gaol now? I do not know, nor do I think I ever will. The Gaol's Directors have challenged singular interpretation and the exploratory routes through the Museum Gaol are sometimes artistically enhanced. Twenty-years later I revisited the Gaol but this is an epilogue told with a sigh. I could not re-enter the clean Museum Gaol where the 'ghosts' were now costumed actors. I asked a passing tourist to photograph the moment of my unwillingness to step forward. There were experiences of dirty History in the Gaol in my only visit which remained intact, a reflective distance from these was unwarranted.



References

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