

It is Our Prison

Common sense places the responsibility for imprisonment with the offender. While this is patently true in that the process begins with the offence, it is also untrue in that the prison belongs to us not the offender. He (mostly he not she) is our prisoner. It is our prison. Its rules and budgets are set by our parliament. It is our responsibility to have a care for the nature of our prisons.

In Ireland the rules set in 1947 remained unchanged up to the Whitaker Report in the mid 80's. Whitaker was at this time a retired governor of the Central Bank. His report asserted that the prisoner's removal from society by itself was punishment enough, that no further punishment was necessary, and that sentences were to be reviewed at five yearly intervals. He noted early in his report that there was no official information or indeed any documentation held by the State as to what constituted for the prisoner, the experience of imprisonment. The only information was a book written by an anonymous prisoner about his experience. This lack of information made it difficult to measure the effects of imprisonment, particularly in relation to the individual prisoner's exposure to institutionalisation.

Whitaker's report started a process of liberalisation within the Irish prison system. Almost immediately the period of political unrest and insurrection in the North of Ireland (1969) expanded the numbers of prisoners and the nature of the prisons. After the first turbulent 15 years the struggle inside the Irish Republic's prisons began to subside and the prisons became more peaceful. The state's ambiguity in relation to political status (demands were met but not acknowledged) meant that privileges gained by political prisoners were extended to all other maximum-security prisoners.

At this point in the mid 80's the traditional commitment of Irish political prisoners to education was a strong factor in the growth of 3rd level courses inside the prisons. These courses were delivered by the Open University based in the UK. In 1986 the National College of Art and Design became the only Irish academic institution to offer courses in prison when it undertook to supply an art course to the principal maximum security prison, Portlaoise Prison. The course took its methodology from the Fine Art Department in which artists teach practical classes and conduct individual tutorials. Under the principal of *normalisation* – do inside the prison whatever is normal outside the prison – meant that public examination was by annual exhibitions in the College and in City Museums. This established a serious dialogue between prisoners and public. The quality of the venues – national and city institutions – underlined the level of the work.

In the mid 90's the development of digital recording led this course to invite the Los Angeles Video Artist Ed Boreal (LA at the Pompidou 2007) to hold a series of classes and workshops on the moving image. His work, followed by the Irish film maker Joe Comerford (*Reefer and the Model*, 1988; *High Boot Benny*, 1993) established video as a significant media in the NCAD Art Course. The thinking behind the introduction of video was that since painting had developed primarily as a means of portraiture in the prison, video could evolve as a new form of pencil.

The artist and teacher Jonathan Cummins took over from Joe Comerford eight years ago. By using artists to deliver the course, NCAD opened up the probability of new work being created in which the prison is subject. In almost all cases this happened and over two decades the artist/teachers created critical work in direct response to the prison. The critical position taken by individual artists informed their teaching practice. The intense nature of the dialogue between teacher and student more often than not moved their relationship in the direction of friendship. The responsibility of the artist/teacher to represent the prisoner in the outside world led over

time to a relationship with the man's family. Over time all this led to trust and collaboration between artist and prisoner.

This process is fundamental to the development of these 4 films *When I Leave These Landings*. Jonathan Cummins's work is created by negotiation and relationship, developed over time. The works are viewed, discussed and moved forward by both artist and prisoner. The works are a form of self-portrait in the traditional sense. They offered each prisoner the possibility to construct and present their own story. This work provides us with what Whitaker found missing – the prisoner's experience. The films reveal the lives of the prisoners, the dynamics of imprisonment and the results of imprisonment. The narratives explore the impact of imprisonment and extreme ideological conviction on the self. They explore the conflicting demands of family, personal and paramilitary life. Taking the form of four conversations with four men, the films mirror the intimate camaraderie and dialogue, which takes place between men in cells. Never cutting away from the men's faces, these films are intimate and sensitive documents. Collectively they play a role in both constituting and understanding prisoner identity and as such they bridge civic space and prison space. The narratives tell us of a level of burn-out with the struggle, the exhaustion of paramilitary engagement. The men do not want their sons to be involved. The question for each is how they can come home, in a personal context and in a political context. This world is one of paramilitary organization and action. The systems of this world are replicated in the prison life. In other countries we call this world terrorist.

The hallmark of the relationships within the Portlaoise Art Programme is dialogue. Dialogue is at the core of these films. There is no torture here. Education has replaced oppression within the institution. The Education Officer – a prison warden – receives his retirement gifts from the prisoners. The Artist pushes boundaries in participatory art practice. Here the prison - a total institution – has risen to the task of facilitating its own critique. That most human thing – a conversation – is recorded in the most inhuman thing – the cell. The prison contains society's DNA. It is society that give the class structure and the educational achievement of those who form the majority of Irish prisoners.

The films represent an ability to engage with our history. Many of Ireland's issues of becoming a State and its identity are universal difficulties. How we go about dealing with the 'troubles' is of international interest. It is dialogue, which is the basis of this work that underpinned the peace process.

Brian Maguire, 2009

Accompanied the exhibition *When I Leave These Landings (2004 – 2009)*, Jonathan Cummins, Centre Culturel Irlandais, 2009.