

## **THE BOGSIDE ARTISTS' MANIFESTO**

We believe it is the artist's role to keep alive those values, which are basic and human, and to resist any force that seeks to undermine or compromise that integrity. Art is essential instructive in that sense. It seeks to change people's view of themselves for the better. Changing people per se however is not in its script. People caught in crossfire whether in Chechnya or Belfast do not reflect on the contents of the Louvre unless it be to wonder what good any of it is when men are still prepared to behave like savages and take upon themselves the license to kill their brother.

If art is a truthful state of mind then only those with a conscience have a right to live there. And once situated there, they must also be aware that they are in the service of a moral and therefore a social imperative to express that truth fearlessly. And because this work is essentially social, as indeed it always has been, the artists' work is also *political*, if we mean by political the actions by which men govern their affairs and create their social being.

We are also aware that art is not just political. It is many other things besides. But the gap between art and politics in the pragmatic sense is due to a dichotomy in the moral dimension. To express what is, might be or has been is the artistic calling. Art that serves a party political agenda puts out its own light. You have only to examine briefly how a fascist regime annexes art to its purposes to realise what damage can be done to a culture under its sway. Socialist Realism and the ideology it supported did irreparable harm to the free creative spirit of Russia. It also tarnished figurative art with the poison of political dogma to the extent that naturalism can scarcely be seen any more outside of its stigma as political posturing.

If art loses the distinction between fighting for its right to truth and fighting against the mythic Other it loses its way. It becomes merely propaganda and so forfeits its integrity. It has to be remembered that Hitler was a failed artist who could not gain admission to the Vienna Academy and Mussolini was a hack novelist. Both these demigods saw art as a power to be controlled for purely secular ends. Advertisers tend to think along the same lines. The difference between Kathe Kollwitz and Saatchi is essentially a moral one. It is a difference not of talent, industry or imagination, but of conscience.

As regards Irish history and its turbulent past, you will go far to see any significant attempts to record it through the medium of art. In the South, a combination of chocolate-box, sentimental, bourgeois nationalism and jackboot colonialism represented by the English Lieutenant General and his bureaucratic apparatchiks ensured that any commentary in the arts on the prevailing political situation was instantly repressed. Hence, you will find precious few contemporary paintings alluding to the famine. Meanwhile, in the “Black North”, as the Southerners fondly refer to us, the Protestant Ascendancy made sure the same policy prevailed. Incredibly, this moribund ethos prevails via the Arts Councils both North and South who operate to all intents and purposes as offices of the Tourist Board.

From the beginning of this century and before, artists who wanted to express themselves outside of the remit of the Royal Hibernian Academy were pointed in the direction of England or France. There, they pursued Celtic mythology or whatever was in vogue in the international scene. It was left to indigenous writers to express both their spiritual isolation and their response to events in Irish social history. The best of them had to leave the country to do so.

These days there are a few artists whose work could be termed political and as peace continues more will emerge. So long as their work remains mere commentary, enveloped preferably in the mists of infantile expressionism, it will have a chance of being nourished by the arts administration. It is ironic to think that expressionism was once considered for the role of Germany’s national socialist style! Anything more radical than on-the-fence commentary will be ‘sent to Coventry’ as it always has been. The Bogside Artists have been domiciled in Ireland’s cultural ‘Coventry’ since their formation in 1994.

Critics, still tethered to the old values, await the arrival of an Irish George Grosz as the spiritually bereft once waited for the Messiah. A few have rushed to the position eager to point up the absurdities and contradictions of the players in both houses assured that if they can pull it off the critics of the old school will sponsor them for a crust and dilettantes who know no better will collect their wares. But, it is a new millennium and the labours of Hogarth, Goya, Rivero, Beckmann et al have seemingly failed to enlighten even one of the combatants in any of the wars that proliferate. Why hope for another therefore, even an Irish one? In a few short years we have had the shameful catastrophes of Bosnia, Kosho, Chechnya, the Middle East

and Indonesia. To illustrate the culprits celebrating their degeneracy is about as redundant as a minister preaching to revellers at a rave disco. It just doesn't hack it any more. When TV footage of the real thing scarcely moves us what chance has the visual breast-beating of a Grosz or the high wit of a Hogarth? Those artists, true to their calling, were trying to make visible what to most people was invisible. We have the tube broadcasting 24 hours a day to tell us how low we can sink and will sink. We ourselves are the witnesses. We need no intermediaries. We need a new approach entirely.

Henceforth, for art to be effective it must not only know how to speak, but more importantly, *it must know what it wants to say*. All things considered, this is a worthy enough pursuit when we have had more than we can take of the inept and the banal hiding in the smokescreens of so-called modern art and touting itself as the unreachably profound when it is nothing more or less than simply out of touch with its own times.