

Oi Gringo ... o gringo tem nome: Brian

On a photocopy, underneath a passage of text written by the artist Hélio Oiticica, an anonymous pencilled message suggests that Brian had found the piece especially meaningful. I wanted to head into this essay with something from that page.

I wanted here to homage what I think is the individual social revolt: that of the so-called bandit.

You can never presume what will be a person's 'acting' in social life: there is a difference of levels between his way of being in himself and the way he acts as a social man.

Hélio Oiticica, 1969

The print commentary on Brian Maguire's work chronicles his painting and drawing and video and photography. Using the public record these generalities follow: that he is recognised primarily as a painter, expressionist, Irish, that a profession of humanist beliefs informs his pursuit of figuration and that a humanist prerogative within his politics guides his strategies in art as social practice – he has also been assigned the duties of the outsider.

Many of his paintings depict scenes of sexual and social urban alienation, naked men and naked women in built environments, together and apart, having sex, or not, the weight of the world, the iconography of Irish republican nationalism and the solitary male nude. As a student at the National College of Art, Brian Maguire experienced an acute alienation from a certain aesthetic. He found friends who shared the rejection of this aesthetic. The rejected aesthetic was associated with the transcending of the material and the physical and the favouring of pictorial abstraction. This aesthetic was found wanting in its disregard for the material ground of painting as a place of personal action and stories, it was deemed too indifferent to the confusions of everyday life and a prohibition to personal authenticity. After experiencing Bauhaus-styled teaching at Dun Laoghaire Technical School, and in the face

of the student battles at the NCA over teaching, thinking and practical methodologies, expressionist figuration in painting was also an ideological alternative to both the received International Modernism and the official Irish Modern Art perceived to be the offer. Expressionism promised a primary felt ethic that included a communicative aspect through the use of the figurative. Chancing the offer that expressionist figuration promised, the possibility of producing work with some social traction, agency and authenticity, registered as a believable rebuke to the promise of spiritual union under a transcendental grand aesthetic or official discourse. Brian Maguire's pursuit of the alternative has retained a certain metaphysics, nevertheless, although it always remains conspicuous in its human weight, gravity and the bruising ground of life.

The weight of critical description about the 1980s paintings generally enjoys the proposition that the gestural worked paint is the first and material witness to the artist's direct experience, the autograph of humanity. The residual layers of himself, of his hand, the gesture in the material of painting and drawing, is not now so hard put to work within the conflict of expression and representation. His practice is more and more appropriately gathered as performative in its intent, production and deposition in the world. His personal presence, as witness or agent, in diverse spaces and places is, more and more, less recollected, as in earlier work, and increasingly acted out in projects that end in an accumulation of moments that is a sum of work.

In this exhibition the majority of work is dated after 1990. Since the late 1980s and through the 1990s, there have been efforts to review, revise, or at least revisit, the use and value of aesthetics from within the ideological traditions of the political left. The failure to effectively find a place in a politics for change, in the life of the individual, groups and societies, that both values individuality and commonality is consistent with the limits of revelation. Encouraging the harmed to express their pain does not automatically bring about social transformation. Revelation may make things only visibly worse.

If Maguire's humanism stopped in state of compassion alone the current work, in particular, would and could never have been or promised to be honoured. He will not promise things to come, that might happen and might come, rather, he undertakes a caution that promises are only fulfilled in the present. Intention, good intention, offers nothing in a world without end and there must be praxis.

The attribution of social value to art has in liberal democracies has been afforded a new value at the same time as the potential of effecting radical gestures has been mislaid. As Brian Maguire works on projects with an art-in-the-community brief, the risk for him has been, and is, in his potential complicity with the very system of control responsible for reducing individuals to monotone social groupings. But his own consciousness has had to endure the same pressures and the same processes that his work has explicitly proposed to people who have sat for him in portraiture, and others and their events, tools and circumstances that he has memorialised.

For 14 years he has worked weekly in Irish prisons with men, social and political prisoners, Loyalist and Republican, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, through the auspices of these institutions' educational schemes. He has painted portraits of both Loyalist and Republican prisoners who have consented to participate in his process. Initially his interest was in the interior architecture of the prison buildings. In time, the specifics of the social architecture in the prisons prevented the formalism in the pictorial value of these spaces being the end of his involvement. In the prisons he found that art already existed in the prisoners' prison culture in an economy of mutual generosity among prisoners, more than gift-giving, where some prisoners were producing portraits of the loved ones of other prisoners. He has worked into and out of the conditions of this model of exchange, working on an understanding of the process of rendering rather than bartering the gift, inside and outside the prisons, inside and outside a studio practice, inside and outside professional sanction as an artist.

In describing the work made in Brazil for the XXIV Bienal de São Paulo in 1998 as 'an act of love', Brian Maguire has echoed the educator Paulo Freire in his analysis of the 'pedagogy of the oppressed'. Freire also critiques the gift of false consciousness bestowed by those who, by return, receive validation of their position of power through the performance of giving, the spoiled revelation. For Paulo Freire the act of love involves risk, whereas gifting need involve none.

Whether working in art rooms on the Republican and Loyalist wings and floors of British and Irish prisons, in the Casa da Cultura, Brazil, or Gransha Hospital, Northern Ireland, Brian Maguire situates himself in deference to the people who spend their time in these rooms as part of their everyday, and the rooms and relationships are entered into on those terms. Neither the artist nor the sitter is present to rescue the other. The sovereignty of the person of the prisoner is rehearsed through the understanding that the artist is present only because of their loss. The sovereignty of the person of the artist is rehearsed in his liberty to move in and out. The prisoner can circulate, but the artist can leave.



The quotations at the head of this essay are taken from a longer piece printed in the exhibition catalogue for the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica's solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1969. In the full extract Oiticica poses a dilemma in the question of how to pay homage to individual social revolt. He proposes that the problem is an ethic one more than an aesthetic one. The ethic that Oiticica describes comes from the value he gives to individual expression as a fundamental human value, even a basic human right.



A transformation of this ethic, to 'ethic moment', arose for Oiticica and he tells it in the following way. He learned that a man he knew, a friend, was known to his society at large as public enemy number one. His knowledge of the man, his friend, was based on the shared banalities of the everyday relationship that he had with him. There was, then, a huge contrast between Oiticica's very benign experience of his friend and the contrary social image of a violent and dangerous man. It was the effect of this contrast that produced in Oiticica an 'ethic moment' so extreme that, from that point on, he felt that all else that he did in life he did only ever *after* that moment.

The figure of the bandit used by Oiticica acts to illustrate his concept of individual social revolt. The image of the bandit is appropriated so as to represent his preferred idea of personal authority over issues of morality. The state of independence presented in this image is

frequently the status that is attributed to the outsider. The role of the outsider can be assigned under any guise from pervert to expert. In art the general case and category of the outsider artist is regularly, soberly, presented without provision being made for the giddiness that comes with standing on the edge of cultural definitions. Someone on the inside does not always have dominion over their environment. Likewise, an outsider is not by definition without authority and control.

When Brian Maguire represented Ireland at the 1998 Bienal de São Paulo, as well as the theme of Density, the curator Paulo Herkenhoff, presented another conceptual theme for the event, with a special cultural meaning in Brazil: *antropofagia*, or in translation, anthropophagy. Meaning almost the same thing as cannibalism, anthropophagy has a metaphorical symbolism that supersedes its literal enactment. In cultural context, anthropophagy is a metaphor for a process of reconstruction and critical transformation of national culture through the incorporation of foreign culture – the word and concept having been an imperative for Brazilian modernism. The line ‘So a antropofagia nos une’ (Oswald de Andrade, poet, 1928) or ‘Only anthropophagy unites us all’ was pasted on a billboard beside the main pavilion. Ireland and Maguire inside.

In recent billboard work with his portraits of Loyalist and Republican prisoners, Brian Maguire has reproduced the images with the poster layout accommodating up to eight images in a grid. As much as the prerogative to seek identity in the difference of others and the shock of closing the space of difference, or assimilating it, the representational use of the grid belongs, as surely, to a modernist compulsion to connect and disconnect simultaneously in joining discrete and distinct planes along the angle of the line. In the posters, short descriptive texts run under the images: *Ex-Combatants; Looking Ahead*. How digestible the prospect of admitting these cultural descriptions is, is not fixed but the grid presents a cohesive picture. Is anthropophagy imaginable?

The text that accompanies the Bienal de São Paulo catalogue entry is taken from Jonathan Swift’s satirical, *A modest proposal for preventing the children of poor people from being a burden to their parents or the country, and for making them beneficial to the public* (1729). Swift offers a solution to the problem of hunger among the poor of Ireland in a literary text of coercion and murder. He recommends that the Irish savage children be fattened on mother’s milk through their first year, before

My interest in the crowd at IMMA brings me back to Hélio Oiticica. Oiticica, who died in 1980, was initially a painter. He left his studio practice and easel painting and moved to work in performance and object making associated with a Conceptual Art practice and an ideology of personal agency through the occupation of social space. Two projects were represented retrospectively at the Bienal de São Paulo in 1998. One of them was the *Parangole*. The *parangole* was a model for a cape, to be worn, and was also an allusion to moments of frisson, moments that can suddenly turn or scatter a crowd. *Parangole* was a model for movement. Wearers of the cape (who embodied 'the work') were encouraged to swing it through the space about themselves and extend poetically into that space, letting the fabric gather on surfaces or objects that stopped the movement.

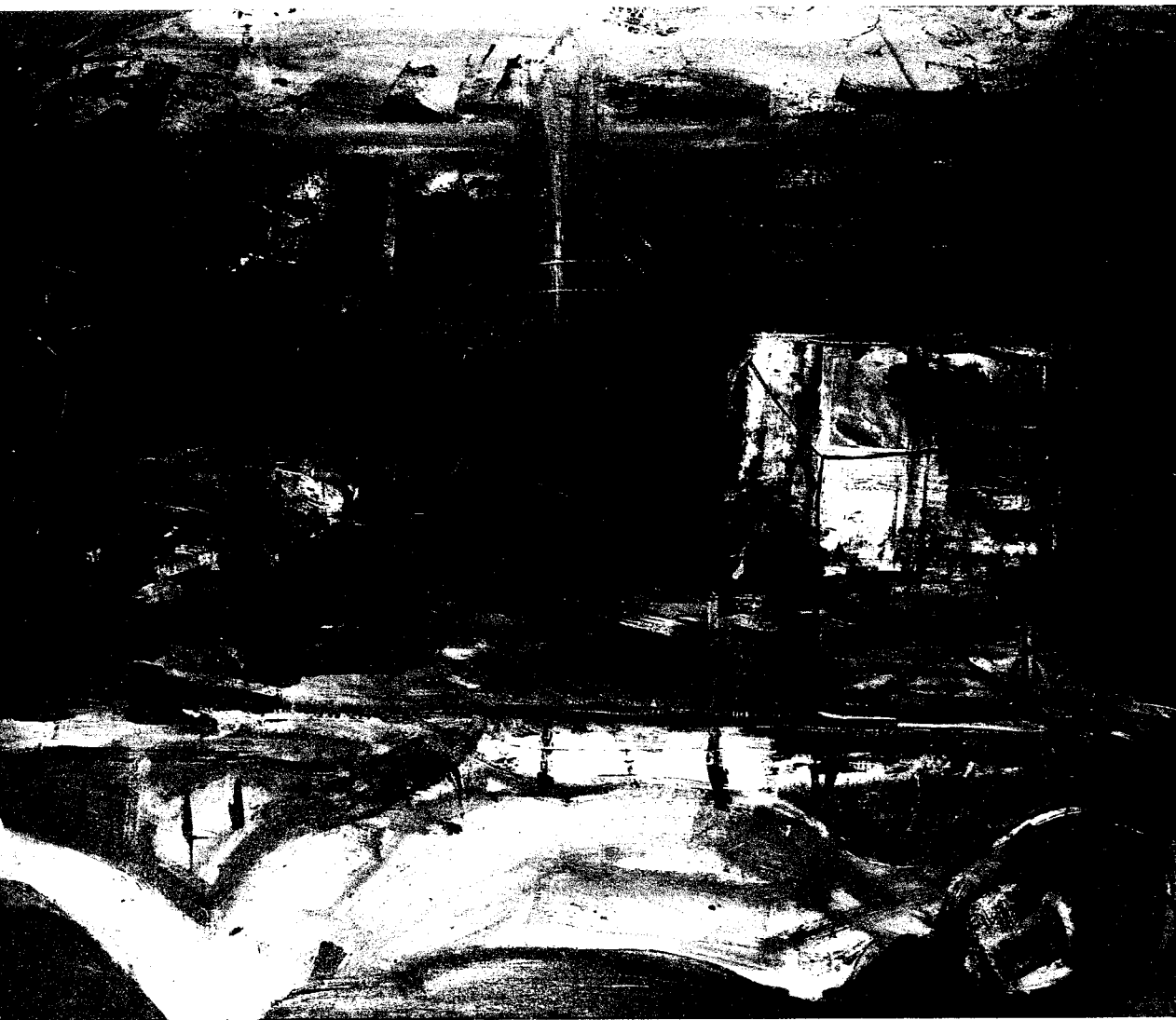
The São Paulo *favelas* were themselves synonymous with *parangole*, for Oiticica, because of the way space is distributed and how people who live there constitute it. Houses in the *favelas* were as *parangole*. Rooms were at once kitchen, living-room, bedroom and so on by virtue of the things that are out or put away – that sit when not in use - rather than by the walled definition of the interior. Each set of associated objects in a room constituting a different conceptual space, and all remaining, at the same time, in the same room. A human centre of habitation and work. The practices of Brian Maguire and Hélio Oiticica are distinct and discrete and different. But both feel for the same ethical drive to diminish the separation of life from art.

In the streets around the Casa da Cultura of São Paulo the ambiguity of Brian Maguire's visual difference and the possible threat he posed (policeman?) was sign-posted in salutations of 'Oi gringo'. Speculations about who he was and what he did were consistent with the kind of mutable identity that is any visitor's. Stands into the crowd. O gringo tem nome: Brian.

In death Maguire remembers the living. Memorials to past events remembered, people dead in life or in memory are paid homage in their *afterimage*. The drawing, the action, and not the remainder, the drawing, the thing done, has become the location for what is a complex politics of representation and praxis in Brian Maguire's work as an artist. He pays homage along shifting axes of up and down and left and right – graphing emotional depth through perspective on the oblique.

Maguire recollects hearing the news from his teachers that the blood of Christ crucified was caused by children. Transubstantiation, the very literal embodiment of flesh (divine) and blood through the plain alchemy of bread

and wine, is a seductive secular metaphor for the exchange of the living and breathing artist with another material, like paint. If the expressionist pisses or cries on a composition, is it more erotically charged than if it had been only accompanied by pissing and tears? The nostalgia for human wet as the body's confession to worldliness, offers up the body in a state of grace or a state of innocence. Further absolution comes of its wounds and weeping. Expressionist and Action Painting are well documented for their part in playing out this enthusiastic mystery in the image of and through the person of the artist.



Holbein's Christ Makes it to the Rockies 1991, acrylic on canvas, 117 x 173 cm / 46 x 68 in.

Holbein's Christ Makes it to the Rockies by Brian Maguire, is painted with a full figure, prone, feet to the left and head to the right - the reverse of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Holbein. In death, Holbein's dead man's body and head are refigured, together, as Corpse. The state of the face does not betray any joy in heavenly reconciliation. Hurt by hard objects and metal pushed through him. He died in pain. It's on his face. He is dead inside a tomb. Getting up, to Heaven and to release, seems unlikely with the tombstone, horizontal and heavy, insisting he stay down flat on his dead back. The only exit is the side facing the living. The only way out - and up - is to spill into this space that belongs to the witnesses.

The motif of burial is repeated in Maguire's work. Be it with figures, guns or discrete shapes, burial is represented on two grounds. One is exposed, looking at the thing as if excavated, and the other, on top, marked by no more than an incongruous risen area or nothing less than the upright and horizontal of the Christian cross.

Fixed to a street-side wall of Liberty Hall in Dublin is a memorial bronze plaque, unveiled on the 4th of May 1991. The memorial remembers dead Irish men. The dead are recalled in a list that runs in two columns either side of this relief by Brian Maguire, a commission by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The men died in Spain, killed defending the Spanish Republic. A figure is depicted, feet to the left, head to the right, lying horizontal. Other mounds of risen ground fan out beneath the figure. Perhaps the mounds are clay shrugged over buried dead. The exposed figure could either be under ground or on it, depending. A ridge runs above the prone and exposed figure. If this level is the horizon line, it offers an insecure equilibrium.

I wanted to come to this memorial towards the close of this essay. By accident, I noticed it, and, by coincidence, that was shortly after being asked to write about Brian Maguire's work. Later, I came across it again, in the public record, just. I found this memorial because I didn't want to get wet, and I took shelter under the awning. Looking, I got to thinking about a writer that I have found significant. In the writings of the French political activist, philosopher and teacher Simone Weil (1909-1943), an ethical imperative greatly informs her philosophy and her politics. Her writing on sacrifice and liberation is often informed through her thoughts on the materialism of the physical body and her subjection to its needs and desires. She also suffered from painful, violent and prolonged headaches. She joined the Republican forces in Spain in 1936 and served for a time at the front. In 1943, in London as a member of the Free French in exile there, she refused to eat anymore than the amount of food that was rationed to her fellow citizens in Nazi occupied France. Lacking sufficient nutrition she died from the effects of tuberculosis. The following is an extract from her *Factory Journal*, kept in 1935 while she was working at a Renault factory outside Paris.

LOOKING FOR WORK

Tuesday (in the rain) – with a woman (who tells me about her 13-year-old boy whom she is keeping in school. 'Without it, what can he become? A martyr like the rest of us').

Wednesday – (glorious weather) with 2 metal fitters. One is 18-years-old. The other, 58. Very interesting man, but extremely reserved. To all intents and purposes, a real man. Living alone (his wife walked out on him). A hobby, photography. 'They killed the cinema when they made it talk, instead of letting it remain what it really is, the most beautiful application of photography'. Reminisced about the war in a peculiar tone of voice, as if it were a life like any other, just a harder and more dangerous job (artillery man, it's true).

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