

LIDA / MAUL  
KAMAL ALJAFARI  
MARIANNE PAILLIEU  
URSULA BIEMANN  
LOUISA BUFARDECI  
MUTLU ÇERKEZ  
MARCO FUSINATO  
CALLUM MORTON  
NATHAN COLEY  
GEORGE GITTOES  
JENNY HOLZER  
**SANDRA JOHNSTON**  
MICHAEL LEUNIG  
SUSAN NORRIE  
SALAM PAX  
SIMON PERRY  
PETER TYNDALL

While Sandra Johnston is probably best known for her performance work, video and photography have played a part in the realisation of projects and the documentation of her practice to date. Now she is concentrating on the moving image and does not figure in front of the camera. The recent series of videos constitute her first fully realised work to bring to the fore the ways in which the formal aspects of the medium act in relation to more representational content to produce meaning. There is a quiet urgency in her current direction. In this mode, the new work offers a timely critique of what is now archival television news and press photography as well as the established history of art, Northern Ireland, and 'the Troubles'.

Johnston's reflections on art and politics say much about what she and similarly-minded contemporaries appear to agree is a problematic process - where the mediation of reality becomes an appropriation of reality. Ownership, a concept central to the idea of social investment and civic life is, of course, an important part of envisioning better times after the bad. The authorship of the artist, as an alternative to the commercialisation of news and history towards some economic or sectarian advantage, is also at stake in Johnston rethinking what the social contract looks like in Northern Ireland these days. It is certainly obvious that the commercial redevelopment of Belfast's city centre has been a highly contested issue for artists in recent years. The iconography of the conspicuously corporate re-imagining of Northern Ireland's cities and towns is that of the consumer-citizen. An initial period of speculation on what would replace the idioms and ciphers of Northern Irish art - imagery consistent with the impact of violent conflict on civilian life - has given way to debate about what a post-ceasefire vernacular in art from Northern Ireland is or should be now.

Johnston's new videos strategically re-appropriate existing written, film, and video material and juxtapose them with previously unrecorded recollections. They are as a counterpoint to the sensationalism of the media archive and the exaggerated

corporate vision. A boy, unseen on screen, wants to know which television station will be showing the footage being filmed. The camera records his question: 'What side will it be on Mister?' We understand the scenario because the camera has also recorded the voice one of the crew – a man with an English accent – as he directs the camerawork. Meanwhile, the voice of a child is heard explaining how his mother had speculated that the filming was for television. It becomes clear that the archive footage represents a selection of viewpoints taken to illustrate the aftermath of an accident. The central images are of the mangled remains of a fence, a child's bicycle, and a baby's pram. A couple of shots later, among the same twisted railings, a small bunch of flowers has replaced the bicycle and the pram, and a crowd has gathered where before there had been none. In addition to the pictures: erratic snatches of sound, silences, voices, accelerating car engines, dogs barking, bicycle bells ringing, and a helicopter. On screen, text explains that what happened was the result of a car chase and crash involving police, an IRA member, gunfire, and a collision with a family group.

Video images by the artist are accompanied by a voice-over by peace campaigner, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, describing the events of August 10, 1976. She explains why it is important to remember and why no monument exists on the spot. The shooting dead of the driver resulted in the immediate or subsequent deaths of four members of the narrator's family.

As rain falls on the windows through which the camera videos, the images become less and less viable as sources of forensic or evidential information in contrast to the objectifying catalogue of unaltered television archive shots that begin this work.

While Mairead Corrigan Maguire speaks, the visibility of the items and activities in the images become more obscure. Colours separate from the umbrella from which they originate. It is a common enough occurrence that the 'optics' or public perception of a situation is argued to be of greater importance

than whatever the reality may be. It would be wholly wrong to reduce Johnston's treatment of the image to a literal or literary metaphor. The status of the photographic or video image has its own immutable logic in Northern Ireland where a culture of surveillance latterly took a mannerist turn: the rhetoric of veracity accorded to the photographic image as evidence in the decommissioning of paramilitary arms has never yet been authenticated by actual photographs or videos.

In the course of her videos, Johnston sets up emotional scenes through their aesthetic structure: the memory of a particular colour remains bound up with a journalist's personal confusion and shock at realising how the failure of empathy could be measured in the failure to act; a cross-community mediator describes as surreal a sequence of comically anachronistic incidents during a riot; a woman remembers systematic military transgressions, her father, domestic colours and textures, and her unspeakable shame having seen her mother's suffering upon the loss of her husband.

Johnston's videos share characteristics that have been termed anti-archival in relation to photographic practices, where the indexical reference is absent or occluded by otherwise photographic means. Johnston's approach to these scenes sometimes gives the impression that the pictures have been distorted and that the playing time is not always necessarily right. Sometimes it is merely an effect of the original technology or the transfer from analogue to digital media that appears to falsify 'real time'. The conspicuousness of the materiality of the filming and video processes in the sourcing and editing of these works links the artist to a set of aesthetic values historically invested with an oppositional sensibility. Sandra Johnston proposes and delivers a critically lucid view in stark contrast to the redundancy of the standard-lens ethos of official culture. VC