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Forgetting and Remembering: Place and Space in the work of Yvonne Cullivan 2011.

Living in Ireland, we are habituated to the crumbling presence of vacant buildings in our physical landscapes; medieval castles teetering alongside massive motorways, ancient follies high on a hillside, the 'big houses' of previous centuries open to the sky, the multitude of abandoned villages in mountainous places, closed pubs and grocery shops in provincial towns and the spectral emptiness of the new housing estates that now haunt us. With notable exceptions, we eschew active demolition of these buildings. On occasion, older buildings are reused as workhouse becomes dispensary, hospital or hotel. Perhaps materials are recycled - dressed stone from a castle reused as quoins in a school building, ironwork once parkland furniture is relocated in urban sculpture. But this is far less common than the endemic abandonment of buildings to the Irish landscape. This cultural dereliction was in part forced by politics, a reaction to the economics and the pursuit of pleasure by the ascendancy as land was enclosed, cleared of people and animals, replaced by trees or vistas for the vested interests of the powerful. The exigencies of climate, rising or falling water levels or depleted soils combined with the lure of better opportunities elsewhere, also did their work. Centuries of vacated, mute buildings nonetheless remain. Why this sustained profligacy?

The effort to demolish may have been too demanding and too laborious; many of these buildings and settlements were larger than they appear today. While demolition and eviction dispossessed the landless labourer or tenant farmer, political and cultural ambivalence may have constrained the revolutionary urge to use these same tools to deconstruct the sign of the master's house. New building grew alongside the old. This is our predilection. The new house is built alongside the home place, two shopping centres straggle either side of town and the main street quietly closes. *'You can see it emptying, you see towns like this all over.'* The buildings remain, silent, in waiting. *'Everyone is gone'*.

There may be another, less conscious desire for our refusal to build on other's foundations, our disavowal for demolition, our reluctance to remove the visible signs of uninhabited structures, contouring our

everyday imperceptible perception. We live in the midst of ruins, perhaps without full awareness of why we choose this. Buildings are places and spaces, in which the territorial and relational intertwine. Particular kinds of human activity are only made permissible, possible within the structures, practices and institutions of specific places, individual buildings. *'We were always told "don't be going down the Desmense on your own, go in groups". Is always something people feared for some reason, but the thing is, because the fear is being carried on, its not letting enough people go down to make it more sociable. Its just so empty now'*. At the same time, our actions and interactions in these spaces give meaning to the place, imbuing it with potentiality, hope – *'maybe the chipper, maybe the hotel, maybe if the pool was open...'*

Buildings ward off forgetting. It seems as if we need the reassurance of 'being from somewhere' a place with histories so that we can remember our stories, remember into the future. – *'This place changed my life, the resources that I knew I had came out off me here, they blossomed and I'm a different person now'*. Consider Bibaracte, a fortified city in ancient Gaul, founded in the second century BC, recorded by Julius Caesar and a thriving centre for political and commercial activity, linking the Roman and Celtic world. A few decades after the Roman conquest, the centre of commerce was relocated nearby and Bibaracte fell out of memory. Forest covered all traces of roads, housing, places of worship, worker's tools, jewellery, utensils. The name slipped out of usage, even the location was a puzzle. Nineteenth and twentieth century excavations revealed the extent, sophistication and crucially the long duration of the settlement. How is it possible to forget a place in time, in which people lived, loved, worked and died,? What combined forces erased buildings, networks and community from memory? It is certain from the vantage point of now that Bibaracte had no future. But before that, all was possible, contingent on what though? There is something disturbing about not knowing.

The vacancy of buildings stands in between forgetting and remembering, disturbing us, as does the artist. Yvonne Cullivan's aesthetics of practice are grounded in participatory, collaborative values, inviting others to engage with her but on their own terms only. The work she produces though temporarily grounded in the local context evokes larger political, economic and cultural anxieties. The images hovering between familiarity and defamiliarity are presented to us as autonomous entities, to experience, interpret, engage with as we wish. Cullivan shares her line of sight with us. She observes, inviting us to move closer to what she is bringing into focus, interrupting for a moment the quick overlaying of our own interpretation. There is no imposition here, no provocation but there

is tension, apprehension, unease. The spaces of the images evoke moments in time, before or after activity, before we enter or leave, a time of mute waiting.

The artist offers us the opportunity to feel, sense and consider what we have made and might yet make. All spaces and places are implicated in social, political, economic and cultural actions and the relations of power that give these actions substance and import. We have had a part in this too. Cullivan combines image and text, inviting further reflection and the possibility of action. *'It could just turn around on itself, people will decide; I'll invest my money here, I'll spend here, I'll send my kids to school here, I'll stay here, I'll get involved back here'*. The lines of text are spoken conversations between the artist and those she meets. Images and texts form contrasting lines of interpretation, now opposing, now intersecting. The guiding spirit of the work reorients our attention from place to space, spaces in which connection, relationship and care vibrate. The art is an *aide memoire* for community, a reminder of what we cherished, what we desired, what was necessary for collective life. *'Our kids are now global. Everything is at the touch of the button. Everything is there for them. But they need to know what's here too you know. It's like getting a little jewel and polishing it and the need to hand it on, to pass it on'*.

What might happen when 'community' is no longer visible to us? The vacant buildings in the Irish landscape remind us of the long duration of the human effort to create, to connect, to be active. And so perhaps we allow them to remain. But this time will we respond to the artists invitation to deconstruct, to critique the relations of power that prioritise speed and excess over communal relationships and the slowing of time to enjoy what we have. *'I think we are just going to appreciate what's around us as opposed to always wanting to get over the mountain and get more you know.'* Some changes take longer than others to emerge; particularly those that are informed by creative and community processes. Cullivan's work frames moments in time, a place, a space of tangible waiting, making visible what is on the edge of our perception, giving space for voice. This is the moment between forgetting and remembering. Who chooses what will happen next?

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23 June 2011