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THE PARALLAX GAP: DRAWING SPECTRES IN POST-CONFLICT NORTHERN IRELAND

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In post-conflict Northern Ireland, the artist Willie Doherty has been active in showing how the memory trace of the Troubles lingers on as a spectral presence. Doherty's work has been influential to a number of visual artists working in response to this context, whose work can be characterized by a heightened sense of in-betweenness and representational, spatial, or temporal instability (Long, 2019). Such work is concerned with an oscillation between the past and the present in order to convey the sense of an uncertain future. Although filmic, photographic, and sculptural works have been deployed by such artists to harness these conditions of uncertainty, it is the medium of drawing that remains relatively under-explored as a way of showing how the spectres of violent pasts remain in this fragile context.

This paper is an examination in the use of drawing to show the spectral presence that continues to haunt spaces marred by histories of violence in Northern Ireland's post-conflict context. The study is underpinned by theories that relate to haunting, but also to psychoanalysis, as read through Slavoj Žižek's theory of the Parallax Gap. Theoretical concerns are applied to the filmic techniques of the artist Willie Doherty (2007), and to Richard Hamilton's painting *Transition III* (1954). The resultant drawing and textual analysis responds to the spectral-turn in post-conflict art in Northern Ireland, making a case for drawing as a practice of haunting.

Introduction

In January 2019, the dissident Republican group calling itself the New IRA planted and detonated a car bomb outside the Londonderry/Derry city courthouse. The harrowing images caught by CCTV cameras bore a striking resemblance to the atrocities that took place in Omagh (1998) and Claudy (1972) during the height of the Troubles period, with journalists linking the explosion to the ongoing Brexit negotiations and the possible return to a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The anxiety stemming from these recent events signifies the collective trauma that continues to blight Northern Ireland even in the twenty-two years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. In the contemporary post-conflict context, visual artists such as Willie Doherty have been showing how this trauma has continued into peacetime, adopting techniques that evoke a spectral presence in places that hold an historical legacy of violence. Doherty's work shows how the spectres of violence linger on, because they have not been reconciled or fully confronted and therefore have the capacity to inhibit notions of a progressive future.

One aspect of the trend in post-Troubles art has involved the speculative re-ordering or re-imagining of the relation between the past, the present and the future within this notionally settled contemporary period (Long, 2019). In this pursuit, such visual art depicts disturbances in the present that agitate the normative reconciliatory pathways to peace. The view proposed by Lawther (2020, p. 170) is that such an approach might be considered as a practice of haunting, where spectres can be used to understand the intersection between unresolved pasts and the transmission of trauma post-conflict. Gordon (1997) acknowledges the ghost as, "the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us". Furthermore, Gordon (1997) tells us that we should not think of ghosts as representations of missing or dead persons, but as haunting reminders of the violence and complex social relations in which we live. Jacques Derrida (1994) also held the view that we must "learn to live with ghosts...in the name of justice". In both of these conceptions, the excavation of ghosts creates an unravelling of the politics of memory, confronting us with the past in any conjectures about the future.

Although visual artists such as Willie Doherty, Duncan Campbell, Una Walker, Aisling O'Beirn, John Duncan, Ursula Burke and Daniel Jewesbury have been concerned with filmic, photographic, and sculptural techniques as a way of highlighting the struggle for memory in the post-conflict context, it is drawing that has been relatively under-utilized in the framing of these elisions between remembering and forgetting. This paper seeks to address this issue by making a case for haunting as a practice through drawing. The paper opens with a brief account on theories related to haunting in the post-conflict context and expands on these notions through the philosopher Slavoj Žižek's theory of the parallax gap. The following section presents an analysis of the parallax view in Willie Doherty's film *Ghost Story* (2007) and considers techniques that Doherty has adopted in order to evoke the sense of a spectral presence. This filmic analysis is then paralleled with a study on techniques adopted by the artist Richard Hamilton in his parallax painting *Transition III* (1954). The fourth section is a summary of the theory and artistic techniques analyzed; deployed in the form of a parallax drawing of the site where the author's cousin was killed by an IRA car bomb in 1992. The paper concludes by arguing that the practice of haunting through drawing can accentuate the importance of looking at the past in all its complexity in any consideration of the future.

Haunting as a psychoanalytical tool

The ongoing Brexit deliberations have induced thoughts of a possible return to a hard border between the North and the Republic of Ireland, with debates focused on how the 'line' that divides each country might be constituted. The debates sparked notions that old forms of division could yet appear, under new conditions, for unexpected reasons (Long, 2020). According to Lawther (2020, p. 157), the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 signaled a moment of transitional justice for Northern Ireland, but what the agreement lacked was a comprehensive approach to dealing with the past. This lack of a unified approach to peace making is registered by the art theorist Declan Long in his recent book *Ghost Haunted Land* (2019). In his survey of art produced in the post-conflict context, it is the notion of a haunting of the past resonating in the present that challenges the idea of the progressive future that was originally intended by the peace agreement. In psychic terms, the recent spate of violence might be classified as a return of the repressed, signaling that unresolved trauma has been triggered by the border issue. Haunting, then, is not something that causes a petrification of the subject, but rather disturbs it in a way that moves the psyche into action, enabling the acknowledgement of charged pasts and unresolved issues.

The academic Stephen Frosh has expanded on the relationships between haunting and psychoanalysis, stating that "psychoanalysis intentionally stirs up demons, it refuses to stay silent about trouble and pain, it insists on talking about the things that we would much rather hide or lay to rest" (Frosh, 2013). As Gordon (1997) argues, haunting and the appearance of spectres or ghosts is one way in which we are notified that what has been concealed, repressed or remains unanswered is very much alive and present with the potential for personal, social, and political disruption. Here, the exposure of the spectre enables a way of bringing the past into the present so that it permeates future thoughts and actions. This approach to haunting is strikingly evident in the film work of Irish artist Willie Doherty, where the approach has been to seek out and represent seemingly forgotten places in a circuitous loop. Doherty's layering of absent spaces evokes a disturbed presence in the way that scenes cut in and out of one another, performing an action that is symbolic of the traumatic discontinuity that continues to pervade the collective inner life of trauma victims in the post-conflict context.

Frosh's framing of the interrelationship between haunting and psychoanalysis reads as a tool to help take possession of the subject, rather than exorcise the ghost from it. In this holding space, it is the unconscious that is rendered visible by a process of reflecting on how the past infiltrates the present. Trauma has the power to evade time, manifesting as a frozen object that is paradoxically also in motion through its cyclic capacity to blot a subject's experience of external reality. One way that this paradox can be conceptualized is through Slavoj Žižek's theory of the Parallax Gap. According to Žižek (2006), parallax can be defined as "the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight". Here, Žižek is interested in the psychic gap between the inner world of the subject and the external world of the object, likening parallax to the way that the unconscious operates. In Žižek's theory, when a shift in the observer occurs, there is no shift in the object being observed; i.e., there is no change in the observer's perspective of the object, it is the same object just looked at from a different position.

Žižek's formulation of the parallax gap might be applied to the peace agreement in Northern Ireland, where the shift in political position from 'trouble' to 'peace' did not fully account for the collective trauma caused by the Troubles. For trauma sufferers, the ontological position is one that is suspended in the gap between these two political states. One way to acknowledge this difficulty is to expose the trauma induced by the 'parallax gap' through a process of haunting, and this is particularly potent when thinking about sites that have had violent acts performed on them. According to Lawther (2020, p. 163) one of the primary ways in which landscape can be haunted is through the "freezing" of geographical space and suspension of the time-space-memory continuum. Feldman (1991) argues, "Ghost tales map the history of death in local space, disrupting the linearity of time". For Feldman, ghosts are spectral traces, whose reason for existing (or persisting) is to call attention to what happened in a particular place and to demand that that place does not pass from memory.

The process of selectively calling forth the dead and the past through place has inspired the author's revisiting of a car park where his cousin was killed by an IRA car bomb in 1992. Spencer McGarry was an off-duty RUC officer who had been visiting his mother in the seaside town of Ballycastle when his car was installed with a mercury tilt-switch bomb (Figure 4A). Spencer's murder left a remarkable absence in Ballycastle, but also contributed to a wider anxiety around police murders that had occurred during the period. The carpark in Ballycastle is for many a space that is suspended in time because of the events that took place in it. In this revisiting of the site, and with the drawings that follow, the intention is to fill the absence left by Spence, and to represent his loss as a continued presence.



FIGURE 1: WILLIE DOHERTY, GHOST STORY (2007), HIGH-DEFINITION DIGITAL VIDEO, COLOR, SOUND, RUNNING TIME (LOOPED): 15 MIN. DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Taking possession of the ghost



FIGURE 2: WILLIE DOHERTY, GHOST STORY (2007), HIGH-DEFINITION DIGITAL VIDEO, COLOR, SOUND, RUNNING TIME (LOOPED): 15 MIN. DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Wille Doherty's film *Ghost Story* (2007) is a fifteen-minute video projection that centers on a journey in and around Londonderry/Derry in Northern Ireland. The video explores the idea of the past haunting the present, where the evocation of ghosts can be linked to the violence associated with the Troubles. In both the steadiness of the camera that gives the sensation of a body that is detached from its surroundings, and with a voiceover that refers to "restless creatures whose intentions are often beyond our comprehension" and figures who "inhabit a world somewhere between here and the next", there is a strong sense that spectral forces are at work (Long, 2019). The sites depicted in the film also link to this spectral quality, resonating with a common trope in Doherty's work that focusses on places that appear to be forgotten. This is most striking in the main location of the film, which centers on a long track in a woodland terrain; the spectral quality of the scene is evoked through its resemblance to a search party looking for a disappeared victim. The evocative setting, along with the disturbing slow passage of the camera's movement, denotes the petrification of a body that is being carried forward by a spectral force towards a terminus that is never reached (Figure 1).

In two points of the film, a parallax view is revealed as the camera's position shifts 90 degrees from the dominant perspectival shot of the woodland track. Motion parallax is a type of monocular depth perception cue that occurs when a subject is in motion, telling the observer which objects are closer as they appear to move faster than objects that are further away. To shoot these segments, a Steadicam operator was positioned on a balloon-wheeled dolly and pushed along the track, the resulting visual effect is similar to the view a passenger might have when looking out the side window of a moving car (Figure 2). The scene shows a barbed wire fence in the foreground, a dense wooded area in the middle, and a mountainous terrain in the background. If the observing eye attempts to fix on one of the trees in the middle distance, the fence and barbed wire in the foreground appear to shift quickly to the left, while the mountains in the background shift slowly to the right. It is the visual gap produced by this view that creates a blurring of the landscape around the fixed point of the tree. This phenomenon adds to the spectral qualities of the film because it holds the observing subject in suspension, strung out in a fixed position while the direction of travel appears to be moving in opposite directions. The turbulence of the scene rushing past the 'locked-in' eye functions as a visual metaphor for how trauma inhibits the capacity to form a sense of depth in meaning to places that harbor violent pasts.

Drawing the parallax gap



FIGURE 3: TRANSITION III, 1954, RICHARD HAMILTON. © R. HAMILTON. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, DACS 2022. PHOTO: TATE.

The parallax scene in Doherty's film provides a useful understanding on how filmic techniques can address the practice of haunting. For the purposes of this paper, the analysis of the film opens up a question on how other representational techniques have been used to study the visual phenomenon of motion parallax. One such artist concerned with this approach to depicting the reality of seeing was Richard Hamilton, who would later come to take on the Troubles as a subject in his work. It was the writing of the contemporary US scientist James J. Gibson that would influence the question of vision in motion for Hamilton, coming from a time when the artist was particularly concerned with techniques oppositional to linear perspective. Gibson's *The Perception of the Visual World* (1950) is an empirical account on the visual reading of the entire environment, often from an aerial viewpoint, scanning organic and manmade textures for depth and meaning. In *Transition III* (1954), Hamilton re-did for himself, on the King's Cross to Newcastle train, Gibson's experiments on the relative motion of objects in the visual field of a speeding spectator. The resultant painting shows objects moving in different directions with an ensued blurring of the external environment (Figure 3).

Hamilton's painting depicts the view from a train window as he looks out at 90 degrees to it. In the piece, the focus is on a tree – drawn towards the upper right of the painting. The visual apex is focused on this object while the landscape appears to be shifting in two opposite directions both in front of it and behind it. Each mark on the painting beyond the tree appears to be duplicated at a given distance along

a notional parallel, one example being the single telegraph pole of which the motion is apparent (it is seen three times in the short space of time represented, with particular clarity when it intersects the point of attention) (Tate, 1972). It is the representation of other phenomena entering the scene which creates further disruption: the accelerating car that blurs across the landscape leaves a disintegrating trace and, similarly, the fracturing of the foreground is a measure of how the objects that are closer to the eye appear to move faster due to the speed at which their image hits the retina. These smears and blurs in the painting are an attempt by Hamilton to 'make-real' the experience of viewing external reality that goes some way to challenging perspectival hegemonies.

Perspective is a model for a certain form of organized vision but constructed in a way that permits the depiction of illusion over reality. To apply this metaphor to the peace process in Northern Ireland, the lack of a unifying structure to harness the collective trauma of the period has resulted in a continued traumatic pulse in the post-conflict context. For trauma sufferers, although the political rhetoric is one of moving forward, there is an unconscious force that keeps the trouble of the past in the present, challenging the possibility of moving on. Hamilton's approach to depicting motion parallax registers the reality of seeing as ambiguous and full of gaps and blurs, showing this in relation to a visual fixation on one object (the tree). In this way, Hamilton's parallax can be utilized as a visual metaphor for trauma in the post-conflict context; while bodies are attempting to move forward in the present, it is the events of the past that are also pulling bodies in the opposite direction. This splitting of the body is how trauma acquires the subject, producing a psychic tug-of-war that makes the reality of seeing more difficult to access, and where the ambiguity of life is siphoned off in place of an illusion. In other words, trauma keeps a subject looking firmly at the tree.

Drawing out the ghost

The following drawings respond to the site where the author's cousin was killed by an IRA car bomb in 1991. Spencer McGarry, an off-duty RUC officer, was visiting his mother when his car was fitted with a mercury tilt-switch bomb under the wheel arch of his car. The bomb exploded as the car tilted on a small incline in the car park shortly after Spence drove away. In the minds of many in Ballycastle, and for those who lost RUC family members during the Troubles, this car park holds a spectral presence of the events that took place there. It is, for the author, a place that triggers a haunting, repeating image of Spence's short journey as his car started, exploded, and came to an eventual standstill.

Despite the triggering affect that driving through the car park has for the author, there is little by way of commemoration of the event on the site other than for a small memorial in overgrown bushes next to one of the parking bays. Although poignant in its quietness, confronting the memorial evokes a different experience to the sensation triggered by the fragments of memory that haunt the author when driving through the space. These memories aren't wholly focused on the explosion, but rather the aftershock of it; reminders of the somber discussions in my Grandparents' living room following the event, the newly heightened trepidation around vehicles, and the parental induction into how to check for car bombs. These memory fragments are bound up with the event and, for the author, made for a perception of the external environment as inherently unstable.

Although this article has drawn on both filmic and painterly techniques to substantiate the phenomenon of parallax as a visual metaphor for haunting, the desire to draw this experience, rather than to film or to paint it, is part of an intention to leave a physical impression on the surface of a page, as there is an impression of the disturbance in my mind. Through a desire to literally impress the visceral unease that is

triggered, there is a willingness to show the aftereffects of living in a troubled community. The drawing is then a channel to show this subjective haunting in a way that goes beyond the freezing of subjectivity that can arise from such traumatic events.

The intense uneasiness felt by looking out at the environment while being in the car recalls Sigmund Freud's analogy of the mystic writing pad as a model for how perception works. A mystic writing pad is a child's toy consisting of a thin sheet of clear plastic covering a thick wax board. It works by pressing a stylus onto a plastic sheet which leaves an impression on a wax block below. When the plastic is lifted up, the dark traces on the film disappear, but the wax block retains an impression of the information it has received. Freud used this analogy to show how the psyche takes in information from the outside world that is then recorded in the wax as stored layers of unconscious memory. The appearance and disappearance of the writing in the toy is similar to "the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception" (Freud et al., 2001). These base layers of the unconscious work to construct subjective perception, and it is the author's feeling of instability as a cause of the flickering up of memory that is registered in the drawings (Figures 5A, 5B, 5C).

The drawing process started using the author's car to retrace the passage of Spence's car. In following the same route, it became apparent that being in the car forced a way of looking at the site that was unidirectional, with both eyes locked firmly in front. The sensation of being locked-in to a linear view of the site provoked mental imagery of what Spence might have seen moments prior to the car's explosion. The thought seemed to intensify, in a subjective way, the author's already objective frozen state of having to keep looking forward while driving.

Knowing that the drawing could not be conducted while driving seemed to resonate with this petrified position, and contributed to the author's desire to find another way of looking at the site so as to destabilize the linearity of the view and attain another perspective on it. To achieve this, a notional third eye was deployed taking the form of a small camera installed on the driver's side window. The use of the camera set up a paradoxical embodied/disembodied dialogue with the car park, because although the author was present, a decision had been made to use a secondary device to help capture the dislocated sensation stemming from the memory of the atrocity. In this way, the author's hand is denied from making a drawing in the here and now, severed in favor of the mechanical third eye to try and gain another perspective. The parallax is at work here because although the author's hand is displaced in favor of the camera, the camera's use is paradoxically an embodied act because it registers the subjective distance that the author has with the site. The camera then becomes symbolic of a desire to maintain some subjective distance from the memory, that is, at times, too uncomfortable to bear (Figure 5C).

The pervading discomfort actualized through the memory extends to the author's decision to make the drawing away from the site. Although the author has visited the car park many times, it is not an environment that felt comfortable for lingering in for an extended period of time, this trepidation stemming from a fear over who might see the author and the questions that might ensue. This uneasiness meant for a hasty survey using the camera and a swift return home to look at the images gathered. In the studio, the images were extracted from the camera and digitally stitched together, the resulting image then projected onto the surface of the author's drawing board where a tracing using pencil on cartridge paper was conducted.

Although influenced by the analysis of parallax in both Doherty's and Hamilton's work, the author's tracing over the image is an attempt to capture the sensation of being petrified as experienced when driving through the site. This is channeled through an attempt to accurately map the visual discordance that comes from the parallax view obtained by the camera. The tracing picks out the apparent doubling of particular features – such as the cars in the foreground which appear to be moving to the left, while the pitched roofs on the houses in the background seem to duplicate and travel in the opposite direction (Figure 5A). By picking out and tracing these doublings and disturbances, there is a sense of remembering the explosion of the car as if looking out of the driver's side window at the moment of detonation.

Despite the original intention of the drawing to materialize the tremors of memory, there is an intensity of the event that is largely absent in the drawing. Rather than creating deep impressions on the page that might more accurately link to the severity of the event, the actual impressions made maintain a degree of lightness. Furthermore, although an adult's eye and hand is engaged in the making of the drawing, the drawing's qualities maintain a child-like crudity in execution, indeed the author was 7 years old when Spencer was murdered. The regressive, sometimes lacking observational rigor of the drawing may well be a product of the disturbance incurred by the event, and the crude play demonstrated in the drawing revealing an awareness of the difficulties in trying to form a sense of depth in meaning to a place when the past and the future (going backwards and forwards) seem to create a freezing effect on the observing subject; as if keeping an observer in a child-like state.

This difficulty in forming a coherent sense of the environment as expressed through the drawing links back to Žižek's formulation of the parallax gap as the psychic space between a subject and an object that can't be mediated, even if there is a shift in perspective from the observing subject. This creates a futile quality in the drawing because, although in peacetime there has been an objective movement away from violence, for trauma victims the position is one of petrification caused by the perpetual psychic revisiting of violent pasts that live in the present. This denotes an impossible situation where although the observer has changed position to an objective space of peace, the trauma as induced by the memory of violence remains. In this situation, a subject can move all it wants, but ultimately it is frozen because the unconscious keeps it firmly in place. Paradoxically, by attempting to show this frozen position from a subjective point of view, its expression is perhaps a way of unfreezing this petrified position, because it tells us something about what it is to be a product of such a volatile environment (Figures 4A, 4B). In this way, Spence's loss is treated as a reminder, through drawing, of the aftereffects that past atrocities continue to have.



FIGURE 4A: PARALLAX VIEW FROM POINT OF EXPLOSION, DIGITAL MONTAGE, 21X83CM, 2020

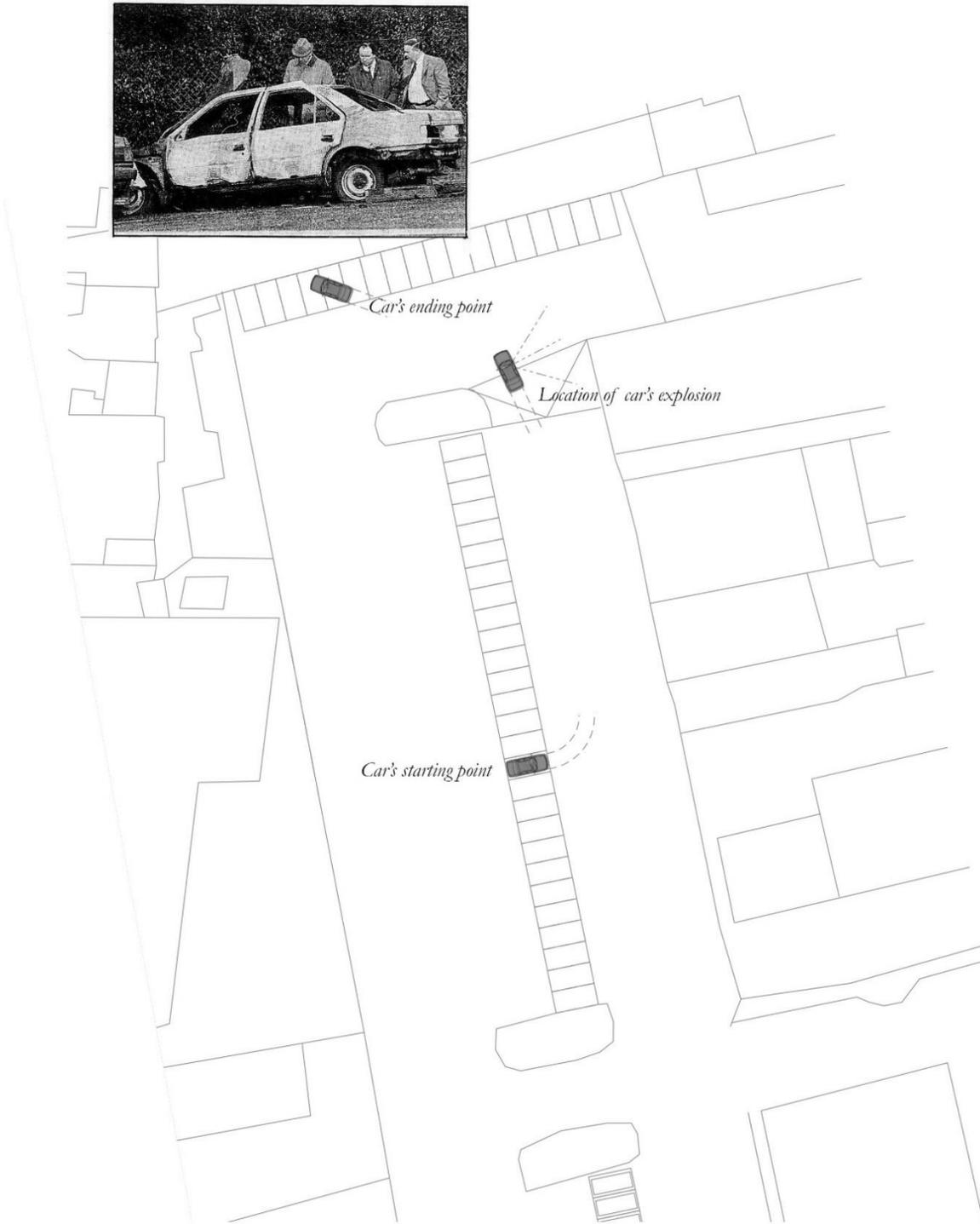


FIGURE 4B: MAPPING OF SPENCER MCGARRY'S CAR, CAD DRAWING 50X50CM 2019.



FIGURE 5A: CARPARK PARALLAX. PENCIL ON PAPER, 21x83CM, 2020.



FIGURE 5B: CARPARK PARALLAX DETAIL. PENCIL ON PAPER, 2020.



FIGURE 5C: CARPARK PARALLAX DETAIL. PENCIL ON PAPER, 2020.

Conclusion

This paper has presented drawing as a method for haunting through its representation of the continued transmission of trauma in Northern Ireland's post-conflict context. This approach to haunting through the use of parallax is inspired by the artists Willie Doherty and Richard Hamilton, and in the application of Slavoj Žižek's theory on the parallax gap. In response to this analysis, a parallax drawing of a site imbued with historical violence has been made as a way of demonstrating this method in action. The drawing, in both theory and practice, establishes a way of giving form to the trauma that punctures the present through a depiction of the gaps in vision that occur when the world appears to be moving backwards and forwards at the same time, "In a period of apparent 'aftermath' (time) always seems to flow in more than one direction" (Long, 2020). The result of this oscillation between past and present renders a petrification of the subject and a symbolic suspension of the psyche that is symptomatic of a traumatic environment.

This article contributes to scholarly and artistic practice in the context of post-conflict Northern Ireland by situating drawing as another way of communicating the trauma incurred by historical violence. Recent disturbances in Northern Ireland have called attention to related creative practices as warning signals to the impact that a return to violence might have. Visual artists such as Willie Doherty are providing reminders that much of the past still lives vehemently in the present for many people in the country. As a way of reminding, one conception of the parallax drawing is that it functions like a psychoanalytic

diagram, exposing the origins of the traumatic event. In this way it is a form of visual 'talking', similar to the dialogue between a psychoanalyst and analysand. Due to its process of excavating the past, this approach to drawing might be conceived as a form of transitional justice, communicating how places marked by a legacy of violence continue to impact on the collective psyche in Northern Ireland. Through this act of haunting through drawing, Spencer McGarry and the legacy of violence is not forgotten.

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