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On the Radical Political Potential of Performance: witnessing, implication and ethics in representations of the Northern Irish Dirty Protests and Hunger Strikes (1976 – 1981)

Patrick Duggan

Recuperating Herbert Marcuse's work in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), this essay analyses a particular instance of radical protest, the dirty protests and hunger strikes in the Maze prison, Northern Ireland (described below), and aesthetic figurings of those events. My aim is to unpack the relationship between the social real (the historical instance of social performance), art (the aesthetic figuring of those events), and the potential for art to act as a radical – if incremental – means by which to (re)position the political engagement of the spectator.

For Marcuse, art has the 'radical quality' of being able to express the reality of an event through its inherently 'unreal' form; while not in the domain of radical praxis, for Marcuse this function of art is an 'essential component of revolution'.¹ Art practices then have the potential to bring into sharp focus 'established realities' in order to enable a questioning of the hegemonies that create them. This is achieved through the interplay between an 'emancipation' from the behaviours, systems and ideologies of a dominant discourse and a preservation of 'its overwhelming presence'. Thus 'art is recognised as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality'.² Marcuse contends that art can create experiences that 'explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard' wherein the 'given reality is necessarily *sublimated*' through stylisation, reshaping and reordering in order to produce 'new consciousness'.³ This idea about art's interrogation of the dominant political, social and/or cultural orders through performance can be usefully considered alongside Dee Heddon's proposition that performance is 'particularly suited to a political agenda because it is capable of staging a direct and immediate address to the spectator',⁴ as well as Nicholas Ridout's suggestion that

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7 (emphasis is original).

⁴ Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 6

performance's 'immediate' address reconnects 'perception and experience ... both personal (psychological) and social (political)'.⁵ My proposition in the analysis that follows is that particular arts practices might offer a means through which to renegotiate understandings of the historical actual, when experienced both directly within the historical moment and at a temporal distance. In addition, art can be deployed as a mimetic intensifier of the politics of the conditions represented *and* a mechanism for interrogating, remediating and iteratively refiguring the politics of the social real more broadly. In short, my contention is that Marcusean theory, when used alongside selected performance theory, can provide a means to articulate the radical potential of art.

In this analysis, I explore how participation in the dirty protests and proto-participatory spectatorship of those protests functioned both as a means to contest and question the dominant repressive structures of the prison and then as a means by which to re-mediate those events towards the materialisation of new social realities and political discourses. I am concerned to look at the relationship between the politics of the events in the social real and the politics and ethics of their later artistic representations. To do this, I examine four inter-related aspects of the protests. Firstly, the republican prisoners' widespread and, inside the Republican movement, expected participation in the social performances of blanket and dirty protest, as well as the use of 'art(istic)' practices within those. Secondly, the potentially lethal, highly valued but voluntary participation in hunger striking itself. Third, Peter Sheridan's unpublished and under-analysed 1982 play *Diary of a Hunger Strike* which was (in part) an artistic response to an explicit call for help by a prisoner to Sheridan.⁶ Lastly, the way in which an encounter with James Hamilton's installation and painting *The citizen* (1981 – 3), also unexplored from a performance studies perspective, might be seen to implicate the spectator in the political discourses of the Maze, and set them up with a particular subject position in that discourse (prison guard).

My intention here is not to make an argument regarding the ethics of the protestors' actions nor to engage in argumentation concerning the politics of the Troubles or Northern

⁵ Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 58.

⁶ The play was written in English in 1981 and first produced by Hull Truck in 1982 in Edinburgh. The script is unpublished but Sheridan gives the copyright date as 1982. The first production in Irish was at the Peacock Theatre during the Celtic Drama Festival, February 1987. Sincere thanks to Peter Sheridan for sending me a copy of the script.

Ireland more broadly. Rather, I intend to explore the ways in which the two artworks can be analysed to expose the ways they pull their audiences into a confrontation with events in the Maze prison and with broader discourses of martyrdom, suffering, power relations and extreme physical degradation, and stimulate a questioning of their own ethical-political positions in relation to such discourses. Rather than concentrating on reactions to the original stagings of these works, my critical project here is to analyse the relationship between what the artists were doing with these works in their original contexts, how and why the works might be important now, and more broadly how similar work might have a radical potential. As such, I want to propose that, when read through Marcuse, a model of political cultural practice can be discerned that has the potential to facilitate a radical reading of the way art might offer a remediation of the conditions of lived social reality.

For Liz Tomlin, the term 'radical' means "digging down", in order to reveal the contradictions, falsehoods or hidden agendas at the heart of ideological illusions of the real'.⁷ Because these works examine their contexts from within those contexts they offer a model of practice that is precisely concerned to dig down into, reveal and rethink the structures of power and violence in operation at the time but also, and importantly from the contemporary moment, retroactively. That is, in the moment of original staging, the cultural objects' very different artistic strategies attempted to elicit a shift in social consciousness and thence a shift in the material conditions of the time. My proposition here is that, analysed from a point of temporal distance, these works not only still attend to that project insofar as they offer insight into that historical moment, but they also serve to facilitate interrogation of contemporary conditions that map onto these historical events (such as recent hunger strikes in India or Greece). Recuperating Marcuse, and the analytical work that this facilitates, suggests a model of political praxis that provides a conceptual framework for looking at the politics of art that responds to unspeakable events. This model enables an interrogation of the aesthetic-social relations of artworks that emerge at points of crisis and protest by interrelating a politics of aesthetics to a politics and ethics of witnessing.

⁷ Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990 – 2010*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 5.

As I discuss below, in both *Diary of a Hunger Strike* and *The citizen*, there is the bi-fold operation of political participation: at one level they seek to interrogate the politics of the participatory practices/protests that happened in the Maze during this historical period, asking what it meant to participate in such violent and potentially self-destructive protests. At another level, they seek to enfold the audience into proto-participatory meaning-making precisely *about* those politics. Participation should be understood here not as ‘a discrete form or genre of art-making’, as Carl Lavery argues, ‘but rather a fundamental component of aesthetic experience *per se*’.⁸ For Lavery, participation is constituted by an ‘invitation’ to spectators to ‘participate in the making of the work’ and this triggers a complex process of meaning-making that is necessarily ‘variegated, pluralist and open-ended’,⁹ within an artistic encounter. My investigation of participation in the two pieces discussed above is less concerned with how the spectator is involved in theatrical or artistic activity (such as taking on a role within a play) than with the way in which each work *invites* the audience to consider their position as active meaning-makers within the process of the encounter. Following Marcuse, this produces an opportunity to question the ethics of the events represented from *within* that representation. In this way, I eschew the participation/observation binary in favour of an understanding of a proto-participatory aesthetic in which the creation of the artistic ‘whole’ relies on a spectator being called to engage actively with questioning both the content of the representation, their position as fundamental to its creation, and how they should act in the face of it.

Although not the central concern of this essay, it is perhaps useful to note this modelling of participation is close to Jacques Rancière’s account of the ‘activity’ of spectatorship in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008).¹⁰ Like Rancière, I am reflecting on the potential for viewing itself to be productively and importantly considered an action, one that does not need to be furthered with any ‘intervention’ in the action of performance beyond the inherently creative act of watching theatre/performance. However, I depart in a crucial aspect from Rancière because my contention here is precisely that the radical potential of this and similar art practice is in the audience’s engagement being rooted in an

⁸ Carl Lavery & David Williams, ‘Practising Participation A conversation with Lone Twin’, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 16:4 (2011), 7 – 14 (p. 8)

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009). First published in French as *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: Editions La Fabrique, 2008).

ethical response to an artwork, rooted in a kind of *witnessing*. Rancière is somewhat fearful of such a call, particularly the 'infinite' responsibility that spectators might end up feeling that they owe to the Other, which for Rancière constitutes a kind of 'enslavement' and therefore at odds with his own radical framework for an 'emancipated spectatorship'.¹¹ For Rancière, political emancipation comes first, and an ethics of witnessing threatens this. I disagree. For me, the call to ethical witnessing that art can make is precisely what enables a radical, if incremental, remediation of one's understanding of the hegemonies of the social real, and critical work towards realising a new political reality.

The Blanket Men

Between 1971 and 1976 any Irish republican prisoner in Northern Ireland was granted 'special category status' (SCS), acknowledging the political nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland and thus the political motivation of the prisoners. SCS effectively equated to prisoner of war status and thus allowed prisoners to freely associate, wear their own clothes and receive visits, letters and post. However, in 1976 the British Government moved towards a policy and politics of criminalisation in an attempt to delegitimise the IRA (and other paramilitary groups), and to obscure the colonial roots of the conflict by reframing the violence of the Troubles via the discourses of law and order. SCS was removed from all paramilitary prisoners annulling political recognition. Anyone convicted after March of that year was classified an 'ordinary decent criminal', a device deployed rhetorically to position the paramilitary prisoners at the same level as 'normal' criminals such as rapists, drug dealers and car thieves. Republican prisoners refused to recognise the new categorisation and would not conform to the new prison regulations, including the dictate to wear prison issue uniforms. Deemed to be in breach of disciplinary rules the prisoners had their entitlement to 50 per cent remission of sentence for good behaviour removed, were confined to their cells twenty-four hours a day with only their cell mate, a bible, mattress and three blankets each. With nothing to wear the inmates wrapped themselves in the blankets that lay on their beds. This was to become a distinctive costume for the republicans

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1 – 24 and 83 – 106. See also Jacques Rancière, 'The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller-Two readings of Kant and their political significance', *Radical Philosophy*, 126 (2004), 8-15.

of the 'H-Blocks'¹² and as a result they become known as the 'Blanket men'. In March 1980 all prisoners with paramilitary connections were denied SCS irrespective of sentencing date or date of crime.

The 'Blanket Protest' was the first in a line of protests that escalated in seriousness as the non-conformity of the prisoners was met with disdain and violence by the prison authorities and a sustained attempt to break the will of inmates. As well as enforced twenty-four hour lock up, prison guards regularly beat prisoners, refused them privacy and humiliated them when they tried to go to the toilet or shower. Requests for toilet visits were often denied or severely limited and the right to 'slop out' (empty buckets containing bodily waste) was often refused. Access to washing facilities was restricted and when they did happen the prisoners' bodies were forced into naked display through the removal of towels; strip and cavity searches.¹³ The response by the Blanket men was to escalate the situation by refusing to save or wash, pouring their urine under the doors into the corridor and throwing faecal matter out the windows until they were blocked up, at which point the men resorted to smearing it on the walls.¹⁴

By late 1980, approximately half of all republican prisoners were involved in the dirty protest but in early 1981, after the dirty protests failed to result in a return to special category status, Bobby Sands, then leader of the republican prisoners in the Maze, proposed a return to hunger striking, this time with rolling starts rather than a mass protest (as the with the 1980 hunger strikes).¹⁵ On 2 March 1981, the dirty protest was called off to focus attention on the hunger striking and the prisoners' accompanying five demands: the right to wear their own clothes; the right not to do prison work; the right to freedom of association; the right to organise their own leisure and education activities; and the right to restoration

¹² So called because of the prison blocks' distinctive, uniform H-shaped design

¹³ The *Prisons Memory Archive* is an excellent source of information on this and other aspects of life in the Maze/Long Kesh from plural perspectives: <http://prisonmemoryarchive.com/>. See also Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 165 – 174. Laurence McKeown, *Out of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners Long Kesh 1972 – 2000* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2001), p. 17.

¹⁴ Feldman, pp. 167 – 168.

¹⁵ On 27 October 1980, seven Republican prisoners began a group hunger-strike demanding the reinstatement of special category status and to be allowed to wear their own clothes. This strike was called off on 18 December 1980. The 1981 hunger strikes might be read as being more tactically organised than the previous ones, with a new prisoner going on strike every two weeks. For more information on the long history of hunger striking in Ireland see George Sweeney, 'Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1993), pp. 421 – 437.

of lost remission (reduction of sentence). The hunger strikes lasted until October during which time ten men died. While there was some give on the part of the British government, the five demands were never met.

To some degree, the images and particular aesthetics of these protests – blankets, dirt, disgust and starvation – have become iconic not only of that period in the history of the Maze prison but more broadly of the Republican movement and the Troubles at the time. This iconography has been taken up in much cultural practice that centres on those events and it is on two examples of that cultural practice that I focus here.

Radical Political Potential

The art works that represent these events interrogate them by asking the audience to consider the ethics and politics of participation in those protests. In ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, Emmanuel Lévinas argues that the fundamental principle of an ethical relation is that one must take responsibility for one’s actions in relation to/for the other. He argues that ‘one has to respond to one’s right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one’s fear for the Other’.¹⁶ In the moment of their original staging, these works asked, after Lévinas, what we might consider fundamental ethical questions: how would you act if you were in the prison and how will you act now in the face of these representations? The article looks at two such responses: Peter Sheridan’s *Diary of a Hunger Strike* (1982), a play written after a prisoner wrote to Sheridan asking for help, and the installation stagings of Richard Hamilton’s painting *The citizen* (1981 - 3), created in response to seeing images of the protests on television. The analysis considers the ways in which these representations re-mediate the politics of the protests by implicating audiences in the politics of the events. Although they operate very differently, these two cultural objects structurally and phenomenologically call the spectator to (re)consider their own ideo-ethical position in relation to the events and the wider geo-political contexts from which they arose. Employing Marcuse, I argue that these artworks might be considered as instances of radical art works that call for participation in ‘revolution’. From my analysis of these cultural objects, I discern a model of praxis in which the remediation or re-presentation of politically contested, violent events give the spectator

¹⁶ Emanuel Lévinas, *The Lévinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 82 (see also p. 75–87)

an ideologically and ethically charged lens through which to contemplate, and potentially to refigure, the politics of the real.

In the context of the Maze, the protests were in part materialised through performative gestures, such as: call-and-response learning of the forbidden (within the Maze) Irish language (Gaelic), as well as singing and storytelling in it, and painting, drawing or sculpting with faecal matter.¹⁷ There are many authoritative documentations and oral history accounts of this latter kinds of practice.¹⁸ Martin Lynch captures the complex relation between disgust and humour, disturbance and necessity that produced such actions in his rigorously researched play *Chronicles of Long Kesh* (2011):¹⁹

OSCAR: Listen, I'm a republican. Will be till the day I die. But there's no way I'm gonna plaster my own shite on that wall. Tell the OC he can forget that order. No fuckin' way! There's a limit.

FREDDIE: Three days later...

OSCAR is taking great pride in artistically smearing his shit on a wall as he happily hums 'Tears Of A Clown'...

OSCAR: Hey, y'wanna see this pattern. It's like a ... like a Van Gogh Sky. (*Beat*) This dirty protest isn't so bad after all ...

The first thing I built was this here mantelpiece. Took me over three days. Then I made a vase of flowers. I thought it looked nice so I put some Chinese ming dynasty patterns on it. Took me over a week.²⁰

Such actions might be seen to represent a particular type of 'radical' art practice, perhaps akin to some live art practices, for example Piero Manzoni *Artist's Shit* (1961), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1971), Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) or Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Buenos Aires* (1992). Read in the light of

¹⁷ Performative in the sense of being performance-like and in J. L. Austin's sense of helping constitute the world for those engaged in these acts. For a more thorough analysis of these protests as 'performatively made' see Patrick Duggan, "'Dis-ease" and the Performance of Radical Resistance in the Maze Prison', in Duggan, P. and Peschel, L., *Performing (for) Survival: Theatre, Crisis, Extremity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2016), pp. 222-240

¹⁸ See, for example: McKeown, *Out of Time*; Feldman, *Formations of Violence*; Michael Moloney, interviewed by Prisons Memory Archive, <<http://prisonsmemoryarchive.com/culture/>>, [accessed 28 May 2015]; Peter Taylor, interviewed by Prisons Memory Archive, <<http://prisonsmemoryarchive.com/culture/>>, [accessed 28 May 2015].

¹⁹ The play was built from a series of interviews with inmates and prison workers as well as substantial archival research.

²⁰ Martin Lynch, *Chronicles of Long Kesh* (London: Oberon Books, 2011), p. 50.

Marcuse, the artistic responses to the events within the prison represent another practice, with a different but no less 'revolutionary' potential.

While both of the works analysed here are inevitably political in content, in so far as they directly attend to the events in the Maze Prison and thus to the politics of the Troubles and Irish nationalism, it is their forms and structures – what we might think of as their dramaturgies of repetition (*Diary*) and gaze (*The citizen*) – that hold what Marcuse might term their 'political potential'. Marcuse's argument, and the reason his work is potentially so useful here, is that the revolutionary or radical political potential of art resides specifically within the very form of art itself. Art does not need to be overtly political or to contain an explicit social message (though it might) because by its very (representational) nature and its aesthetic form every 'authentic work of art' can be revolutionary. This is because in aesthetic form there is an inherent indictment of 'established reality':²¹

The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality.²²

Marcuse is here defining reality in terms of social relations and as such is proposing that art has the power to cause a change in social consciousness which might in turn change the reality of the social relations under interrogation by the artwork. Thus any possible social change or 'revolution' caused by art is not because of any didacticism but because it can alter the way in which those who encounter it and thus participate in giving the work meaning shift (even minutely) their ways of thinking and their political or ideological positions as a result. This, of course, is a problematically vast configuration of art's capacity for social change, in part because it might be levelled at any and all art practices. However, for Marcuse, art operates in tension with the conditions of material production in the social real, insofar as it is not 'for' something in the same way that material labour is (making a car, for example). As such, art provides space for intellectual work, leisure, non-operational thought, creative and political freedom. The space opened up by art makes it possible, according to Marcuse, to construct value and ideals that pose a challenge to dominant social

²¹ cf. Marcuse, pp. ix – xi.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

orders.²³ Art, then, represents a critical space that might be seen to imaginatively materialise an alternative to the social reality of its context from *within* that context. The proximity between the social performances in and around the prison and the aesthetic representation discussed in this essay serves to short-circuit what Raymond Williams might consider the gap between residual, dominant and emergent structures of feeling²⁴ insofar as the cultural objects clearly interrogate both the residual and dominant while opening critical space for the realising of a radically different emergent structure of feeling. The particular usefulness of Marcuse's conceptual frames to my concerns is perhaps also bound to this observation. For Marcuse, 'revolutionary' art needs a target and this begins to point at his understanding of the radical potential of art. The prisoners are arguably engaged in aesthetic practices within the prison as protest and attempted materialisation of alternate social reality, one in which processes and discourses of power and incarceration are subverted and refigured. Meanwhile, both Sheridan and Hamilton are responding to these events artistically from within the immediate context of their happening (historically, politically and geographically). Both the prisoners' practices and the artists' representations of them are intended, then, to refigure the established reality towards a more politically nuanced (understanding of that) reality.

Compelled to action: the artist as witness

Having watched an episode of the Granada Television documentary *World in Action* entitled 'The H-block Fuse', Richard Hamilton was 'struck' by a 'strange image of human dignity in the midst of self-created squalor'.²⁵ He has commented that the 'image itself [was] so compelling' he had to 'jump in when [the] chance offer[ed] itself.'²⁶ For Peter Sheridan the call to respond to and intervene in these events was more direct, more personal, coming from inside the walls of the prison itself:

²³ Arnold Farr, 'Herbert Marcuse', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2014 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcuse/#toc>> [accessed 1 June 2015].

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 121 – 127.

²⁵ Richard Hamilton cited in Terry Riggs, 'The citizen 1981 - 3: Summary', 1998, [online] Available at: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-the-citizen-t03980/text-summary>> [accessed 25 February 2015].

²⁶ Richard Hamilton cited in Stephen Snoddy, "'The citizen" and "The Subject": Richard Hamilton and Ireland'. In *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 9, 1993, pp. 163 – 166.

It started with a cigarette paper. I opened an envelope which seemed empty, but there it was, nestling down at the bottom, a single Rizla cigarette paper. On it was a script in blue biro ... from a republican prisoner in the H-blocks, and it was a plea for help. It asked me, as a writer, if there was anything I could do to bring attention to what was going on inside the prison. It was a simple request, direct, the best kind and the hardest to refuse.²⁷

Lionel Pilkington has argued that the dirty protest was an action which operated precisely to confound the attempt at colonial civilising that resulted from the removal of SCS and imposition of the 'ordinary decent criminal' moniker. He proposes that the smearing of faecal matter on the walls was 'so appalling that it seemed to *demand intervention from the spectator*.'²⁸ This is not unlike the compulsion felt by Brecht's famous eyewitness to tell and retell the story of a traffic accident so that others ('bystanders') 'are able to form an opinion about the accident'.²⁹ In other words, and in line with Marcuse's suggestion on the political potential of art, there is a demand on the witness to *bear witness*, to impart knowledge of the events to others in order to stimulate debate. This demand for intervention acted upon the internal spectatorship of the Maze (such as the prison authorities, families of the prisoners, and British government representatives) and those looking in from the outside (such as reporters, artists and their associated audiences). Indeed, both of the artists considered here created their works because they felt that demand so acutely. The works they created in response are precisely attempts to create participation in just such a debate about the events in the Maze, about the Troubles in Northern Ireland and, crucially, about systems and structures of power and protest more broadly.

'I pledge myself to abstain from food to the death': Peter Sheridan's *Diary of a Hunger Strike*.

Diary of a Hunger Strike follows two republican prisoners, Patrick O'Connor and Sean Crawford, their relationship, navigation of the complexities and traumas of hunger striking as well as the various machinations and tactics of the prison guards and the British government in trying to get the hunger striking to end without giving any concessions. The

²⁷ Peter Sheridan, 'Diary of A Hunger Strike', in *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike*, ed. by Danny Morrison (Dingle: Brandon 2006), pp. 209 – 213 (p. 209)

²⁸ Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre & Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 63. My emphasis.

²⁹ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Street Scene: A Basic Model for Epic Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 1964), p. 121

play is structured through repetition: of death and slow decline into it; of the anguish of losing loved ones; of the request for the five concessions and the refusal thereof, and ultimately the repetition of the performative utterance (in Austinian terms) to 'abstain from food to the death'.

The play begins on the 52nd day of the hunger strikes with the action taking place across two rooms: a 'shit smeared and bare' cell is contrasted with the crisp, clinical cleanliness of a hospital room.³⁰ Having been called to interpose himself into the debate on behalf of the prisoners, Sheridan felt compelled to do so and in late 1981 went to Belfast to work with the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, meet families of the Blanket men and ultimately attempt to more accurately represent the situation than he felt was happening at the time.³¹ The play blends an overt political position with sensitive and engaging representations of the emotion and human relationships at the centre of the events. To recall Marcuse, its political potential is bound to the confluence of meaning created between the form of the piece and its content. *Diary* unfolds through a dramaturgical structure that mirrors the repetitious nature of 'doing time' and then the rolling structure of the 1981 hunger strikes. This was intended, in Sheridan's own words, 'to tell the true story and show how prison protest was political in the truest sense.'³² We might read this desire to hit at the 'truth' of the situation as positioning the work in contradistinction to and working against the received realities and dominant narratives that surrounded the events. At the time, much press coverage of the Blanket protests represented the republican prisoners as barbarians and thuggish, filthy hooligans (the idea of the 'dirty protests' – as opposed to the 'no wash' moniker the prisoners used - is a construction of this discourse). This was further propagated by British governmental discourse that would paint the prisoners as uncivilised and foul architects of and solely responsible for their own conditions:

It is the prisoners themselves who have made conditions what they are.
These criminals are totally responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. It is they who have been smearing excreta on the walls and pouring

³⁰ Sheridan, 1982, p. 6. This is an aesthetic juxtaposition that Steve McQueen would later echo and emphasise in his 2008 film, *Hunger*.

³¹ See 'Peter Sheridan', *Troubles Archive* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, n.d.) <<http://www.troublesarchive.com/artists/peter-sheridan>> [accessed 15 March 2015]

³² *Ibid.*

urine through cell doors. It is they who by their actions are denying themselves the excellent modern facilities of the prison. They are not political prisoners ...³³

Sheridan's play is intended to engage with and highlight the less visible, less spectacular more human impacts that the hunger striking had. In his own terms, Sheridan wanted the play to 'ameliorate' some of the guilt that he saw as pervasive in the Republic of Ireland because 'after partition, we had abandoned them to their fate.'³⁴ The play was intended to shift the territory of the established debate about the prisoners of the Maze. In a Marcusean sense, Sheridan wanted the play to function as an active participant in disrupting the dominant discourses surrounding the Maze, just as the men participating physically in political protest were.

The play's repetitions function as both a dramaturgical device and an integral part of the narrative content. Scenes or barely altered sections of them repeat throughout the play giving it both a sense of déjà vu and frustrating mundanity. In repeatedly showing the rituals of prison existence – such as hiding contraband, constant surveillance, attempts to find ways to entertain yourself, encounters with guards – the play creates an experience for the spectator or reader that echoes the structure of the prison life at the time: although at a human level the events are deeply, painfully emotional, the physical experience of incarceration is tediously repetitious, even as it is violent and degrading.

In deploying this dramaturgical form alongside the emotionally charged narrative content (the death of central characters and the impact that has on their comrades, loved ones and even prison authorities), Sheridan's play uses theatrical tools to help stimulate understanding of and debate about the experience of being in the Maze and the wider political context surrounding that experience. That is, to draw on Alice Rayner, the phenomenological encounter of theatre has the potential to operate epistemologically to transform (an) experience into knowledge *of* experience. *Diary of a Hunger Strike* attempts to do just this by deploying dramatic content that focuses on the human emotions and relationships while structurally, and thus crucially phenomenologically, making manifest the

³³ Northern Ireland Office, 'Comment by Northern Ireland Office Spokesman on Archbishop O'Fiaich's Statement', 1 August 1978, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/proni/1978/proni_NIO-12-68_1978-08-01_b.pdf> [accessed 15 March 2015]. The same press notice goes on to deny any and all accusations of mistreatment of prisoners by prison staff.

³⁴ Sheridan, 2006, p. 212.

curtailments of physical freedom and the boredom inherent in an experience that repeats itself daily (prison rules, regulations and controls on the body) and more slowly over time (the hunger strikers present absence in disappearing to death). The use of structural as well as linguistic and content repetitions means that the play avoids reducing its argument to the merely polemic. One need not read the play very closely to identify that at the level of content it sets out a particular and clearly definable political stance in relation to these events. Slightly reductively, this might be put thus: the situation was inhumane, the strikers were in the right and their demands should have been met in order to stop the continued loss of life. So, while the content of the play does absolutely highlight the emotional complexity of the situation (especially through the characters that visit the prison) it presents quite a straightforward politics. However, given the politically polarising nature of both the Troubles and these particular events, the experience of the play presents a more nuanced understanding of that inhumanity that is impactful whatever side of the political divide one identifies with. In this way, then, the play is both representing the way that the prisoners, their loved ones, guards and visitors to the prison experience their involvement in this protest and the larger politics around it, and it creates for the audience or reader a phenomenological experience that positions them as second-order witness to the events.³⁵

This is not to argue that the experience of the play is like the experience of being in the prison or of hunger striking but rather, after Rayner, that the theatre experience opens up knowledge of the Maze experience, through what we might think of as a witnessing effect, towards expanded debate in a Marcusean sense. This is because, as Marcuse argues, art practices and, I would contend, especially art practices that are made in and responding to a context of crisis, sublimate the social real and here, 'the "data" are reshaped and reordered in accordance with the demands of the art form, which requires that even the representation of death and destruction invoke the need for hope - a need rooted in the new consciousness embodied in the work of art'.³⁶ Marcuse goes on to describe this process of sublimation in more detail:

Aesthetic sublimation makes for the affirmative, reconciling component of art, though it is at the same time a vehicle for the critical, negating function of art. The

³⁵ By 'second order' I mean that one becomes witness through an encounter with an artistic representation rather than with the event itself, which might be considered first order witnessing.

³⁶ Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 7 – 8.

transcendence of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity. Thus, on the basis of aesthetic sublimation, a *de-sublimation* takes place in the perception of individuals – in their feelings, judgments, thoughts; an invalidation of dominant norms, needs, and values. With all its affirmative-ideological features, art remains a dissenting force.³⁷

The bifurcated engagement with the protests, through representation in content and then phenomenological, second order witnessing of them through art – is an artistic attempt both to present back to society those things happening behind the closed doors of the institution and generate something of an experience of it. In so doing this play is engaged in a meaning-making process that is rooted in the liminal experience of at once encountering an artistic object of analysis (content to be read) and embodied practice. At a basic level then, the play adheres to Marcuse's proposition that 'in the work of art, form becomes content and vice versa.'³⁸ This serves to enable the piece also to participate in the more complex function of 'break[ing] open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle.'³⁹ In this way, Sheridan's play is an attempt to scrutinize and intervene in the politics of the hunger strikes and ultimately to advance a humanitarian argument (as opposed to a Republican one) concerning the futility of the specific historical situation. Moreover, when analysed at a temporal distance, it suggests a model of political praxis for understanding cognisant situations of crisis in other geo-political contexts.

Meeting *The citizen*

While Marcuse does not figure art as revolutionary *per se*, he sees it as opening up a space for radical thought, on the part of the spectator or maker that may then produce revolution. Of course, as a Marxist scholar himself, Marcuse was not blind to the Marxist understanding of the dialectical relationship between art and its conditions of production. That is, while art might embody revolutionary potential, it might also be seen to be produced, interpreted, and distributed within and through systems of repression. As Arnold Farr would have it, 'in an oppressive/repressive society the forces of liberation and the forces of domination do not develop in isolation from each other. Instead, they develop in a dialectical relationship

³⁷ Ibid. Emphasis is original.

Ibid., p. 41

Ibid., p. 72

where one produces the conditions for the other.⁴⁰ As discussed above, Marcuse's argument is that the revolutionary potential of all art – not just the art of the proletariat or politically polemic art – lies in its capacity to express a truthfulness or experience that is beyond the confined parameters of the social real and thus signify the potential of an alternative social reality. This he sees as an essential imaginative leap towards revolution.⁴¹ Importantly however, Marcuse also highlights that in order for art to have any genuine engagement with disruption of repression, those who create it as a means to emancipation need to ground their practice in an understanding of how the society in which they live actually works at that moment. This seems particularly pertinent to my current concerns because both in the Maze and then in representations of it, it is precisely an awareness of the social conditions in which the work is being made that gives it both its content and, crucially, its form and thence its political urgency and critical agency (as well as any potential ameliorative capacity). This is particularly pronounced in with Richard Hamilton's installation staging of his painting *The citizen* (1981 – 3) at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, both in 1988.

As with *Diary*, there is a similar focus on positioning the spectator as witness with a responsibility to debate and challenge the politics of the events represented, but here the relational aesthetics of the spectator's body to piece is vital to its political meaning and radical potential. *The citizen* is a diptych painting, the right hand canvas shows a life-size, almost photo-realistic portrait of a republican prisoner 'on the blanket': standing on the diagonal with his bare chest turning to face out of the frame, the figure has long dark hair that partially obscures his eyes, although the focus of his gaze is steadily and implacably on the viewer; bearded and wrapped in a dark blanket, he holds a confident stance – right foot forward as if to stride out of image, out of the cell. The pose is deliberately proto-heroic, recalling the mythology of Irish chieftain, Finn MacCoul, a figure of importance within Irish cultural history and one 'claimed' by both sides of the political divide during the Troubles. Behind him the shit smeared cell and grill covered window are represented. The left hand canvas figuratively represents another faecal daubed wall. The swirling shapes of this panel for Hamilton recall both the calligraphic sweeps of the prisoner's own mark making – the

Farr, 2014.

⁴¹ Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 1.

'graphic personality of [the cells'] inhabitants'⁴² – and the spiralling qualities of Celtic art. The figure in the painting is not threatening nor particularly welcoming but his gaze is open, captivating and implicating; the viewer is addressed by his gaze. There is no sense of the brutal hooligan or dirty savage that pervaded popular discourse on the IRA. The interrelation between figure and swirling, faecal environment is intended aesthetically to call the spectator's attention to the poise and dignity of the man in the centre of the undignified position of smearing his own shit on the walls. His gaze is thus captivating and urgent.⁴³

The painting is framed with steel square section tube, figuratively 'assum[ing] a prison connotation - a rusty cage.'⁴⁴ When first shown in Derry/Londonderry in 1983 the image was deliberately hung in a low-ceilinged side room on its own. This isolation and claustrophobic framing has been read as giving an encounter with it 'the intensity of an altarpiece or icon'.⁴⁵ Hamilton pushed this intensity further when creating the later installation at the Fruitmarket Gallery. Housed within a cell-like interior, the painting was hung on a short, end wall and the viewer encountered it by looking through a cordoned-off gap in the other end wall. The interior walls were painted very pale turquoise, in an attempt to match with the background of the painting so that it would merge into the walls. The floor was mocked up to appear as concrete and the ceiling was 'a white velarium through which a soft, low light was filtered.'⁴⁶ Within this space was installed a single, grey foam mattress and grey blanket. Hamilton smeared thick brown paint mixed with sawdust on the walls to echo the marks made by prisoners on the walls of their cells.

The importance of this latter element is not just that it situated the painting in a naturalistic representation of the cells but it also provided Hamilton an opportunity for gestural experience of an action that physically mirrored that of the prisoners' own mark making. The artist notes the embodied learning implicit within this action:

⁴² Hamilton cited in Riggs 1998, online.

⁴³ The image (not in the installation format) can be viewed here:
<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-the-citizen-t03980>> [accessed 3 August 2015]

⁴⁴ Richard Hamilton cited in Tate, '*The citizen* 1981 - 3: Catalogue Entry', 1998,
<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-the-citizen-t03980/text-catalogue-entry>> [accessed 3 August 2015]

⁴⁵ Tate, '*The citizen* 1981 - 3: Catalogue Entry', 1998, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-the-citizen-t03980/text-catalogue-entry>> [accessed 3 August 2015]

⁴⁶ Ibid

I did the shit-smearing myself in *The Citizen* [sic.] here [in the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh]. I'm rather glad that I did. The reason was because it is possible to discern a difference between the marks made on the wall, which were done in an attempt to emulate what would have happened, using simulated shit mixed with sawdust. Every cell I've seen is different. I realised that [the prisoner] has actually put it as near as he can to himself because he sleeps in that corner, and there is more shit there. It's all to do with defiance, I think. Defiance of authority. I didn't try to put myself in those conditions but I thought about what the conditions would be in which a person would do this ⁴⁷

Beyond this, the installation staging was intended as a means through which more fully to engage the body of the spectator in the encounter with the painting. This installation is intended to heighten what Hamilton describes as the 'kinetic interaction of an audience with a contrived space', it 'demand[s] mobile involvement [physical engagement with the space: walking, bending down, exploring rooms etc] on the part of the spectator to absorb whatever idea or information is being presented.'⁴⁸

In accepting the invitation to view the work through the cell door, Hamilton places the spectator in the subject position of prison authority, they are thus implicated with a particular, privileged gaze and given a position of power over the subject of the painting. This is interesting insofar as one might read it against the empathic gaze of the depicted prisoner who looks back without aggression but yet nevertheless seems to demand the viewer's attention, creating an implicating exchanges of gazes. This exchange of gaze can also be read against Hamilton's own stated political position as not being sympathetic to the politics of the IRA but as interested in the way in which the inmates approached and coped with the degradation and disgust with 'humanity'. All of this suggests a complex circulation between art work, its historical referent and the embodied actions of the spectator which are paramount to the meaning of the work. The piece frames the spectator as an active and implicated witness to and participant in the politics of the social events.

In being denied entry to the cell and forced to gaze in from the outside, the spectator here is physically and metaphorically asked to assume a position and gaze of power, like a prison worker looking in. They are not subjugated to the conditions represented and are free to move on from this position but at the same time are set up to

⁴⁷ Richard Hamilton, 'Catalogue Entry', online.

⁴⁸ Ibid

be implicated in the scenario. The spectator here is of course not a prison authority but equally, to evoke Richard Schechner, within the representational economy of the encounter they are not *not* a prison authority.⁴⁹ In their spectatorial performance they are at once themselves and representations of dominant positions of power, both in their own encounter with the artwork and for others in the gallery who might be looking at them looking. Operating in this in-between state, the viewer of the work might be seen to be inscribed in a complex, politically and ethically charged role that is at once potentially subversive (calling into question the legitimacy of the situation) and in the same instant representative of the established power dynamic and systems of repression under consideration. At once inside and outside the structure of power that the piece is engaging with, the spectator becomes caught in a position of having to consider their gaze in relation to the represented other and as such they are being asked how they should or will now act.

The 'not not' of this performative encounter might be seen to materialise a liminal space in which the possibility of a radical reconsideration of one's politics and subject position in relation to the represented events may take place. Here, the spectator is made participant both ideologically-politically and physically. They are now *in* the scene being asked to reflect upon and reconsider (even if only to then reassert) their understandings and political positions. This of course echoes Marcuse's propositions on the radical potential of art. Here, the form of the piece as much as its content places the spectator in a complex encounter with the gaze of the other in which they become at once second order witness to the events as well as implicated in those events by occupying a position of power in relation to that other and the figure's gaze. This operation is designed both to highlight the nature of the events and to stimulate debate about the politics of them. Or, in Marcusean terms, there is a relationship between the politics of the aesthetic form of the work, and the politics of witnessing that work because the piece implicates the spectator in the politics of the events in an attempt to stimulate debate about what he terms art's 'categorical imperative' that 'things must change.'⁵⁰

Implication and ethics

⁴⁹ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 113

⁵⁰ Marcuse 1978, p. 13

In both of these cultural objects there is a complex layering of being called to witness, bearing witness, and what I think of as remediated witnessing. Both artists are 'called' to be witnesses in different ways, Hamilton through an affecting encounter with documentary reporting on the events and Sheridan through a direct request from the prisoners. Answering these calls, they set about bearing witness to the events (as they see them) through artistic representation. These artistic responses deliberately attempt to implicate and affect their spectators, an attempt to make the work a mimetic intensifier of the politics depicted. In turn the spectators' encounter with the artwork offers a complex remediation of the events which might, if read through Marcuse, be seen to affect understandings of the events, potentially towards new political realities – or 'revolution'.

For Marcuse, art practices have a capacity to 'shatter the reified objectivity of established social relations'.⁵¹ In other words, art practices can become productive modes through which people might engage in 'contesting the history and future of the state',⁵² especially in contexts of extremity where political representation and personal agency is often radically effaced. This is in part the revolutionary potential of art. However, contra the orthodoxy of Marxism, Marcuse argues that revolutionary art (by which he means art that might change social consciousness as a means to stimulate social change) is not just the preserve of those engaged in class struggle. For Marx, revolutionary art can only be made by the proletariat. However, as Marcuse argued in relation to this orthodox Marxist position:

The subjectivity of individuals, their own consciousness and unconscious tends to be dissolved into class consciousness. Thereby, a major prerequisite of revolution is minimized, namely, the fact that the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence, and their passions, their drives and their goals.⁵³

Contending that just as plural forms of oppression and repression exist and make revolution desirable, Marcuse is proposing here that art practices are produced in different forms and from different subject positions which fundamentally determine (but do not undermine) its revolutionary potential and target.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bill McDonnell, *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland* (Exeter: Exeter University Press: 2008), p. 221.

⁵³ Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, 3–4

The art works emerging from within the Maze – those taking place during and as a means of protest – were expressions of suffering and attempts at amelioration from it *and* means of writing back to the conditions and structures of power both local (such as the prison staff) and national-political (such as the British government) that defined their incarceration.⁵⁴ These artistic gestures were propositions for a different way of living. They were not radical praxis in the sense of *being* revolution, but they represent the expression of a cultural, political and environmental ‘truth’ that moves towards revolution against the material conditions of the Maze/Long Kesh. What is key in this, is the way in which participation in the protests and then in art or cultural practices, offered the men involved experiences that might be seen both to resist the ‘normal’ hierarchies and practices of power in the prison, and a means with which to represent (to themselves, to the prison authorities and, potentially, to the press) a radically different material reality to the one they occupied. These acts are then both radical protest and radical cultural practice, and they call on artists to remediate that experience from without the circumstances of the prison. Such remediation in turn provides an artistic experience that might be seen to ask audiences incrementally to (re)consider the politics and structures of the social reality depicted as well as their personal political and ethical responses to that.

This ‘incremental remediation’ of the spectator’s personal politics chimes with what Caroline Wake has persuasively argued as witnessing’s temporal delay:

we are spectators in the moment but witnesses in and through time. In essence, when witnessing a performance the spectator experiences a sort of “after-affect” rather than simply experiencing affect during the performance or the after effects of that affect. The affect itself does not arrive during the performance but afterwards⁵⁵

In light of this, I propose that the particular configuration of aesthetic practices and conditions of spectatorship illuminated in the analysis above, suggests a new model cultural praxis for bearing witness to unspeakable events via art (and analysis thereof), both at the time and, crucially, at a temporal distance. In both these cultural products there is a sense in which the artists are both imitating the real and moving towards facilitating an encounter with it. With *Diary*, Sheridan attempts structurally to echo the tedium, repetition and slow

⁵⁴ Laura McAtackney, *An Archaeology of the Troubles: The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 27 – 35 and 225 – 268.

⁵⁵ Caroline Wake, ‘The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies’, *Performance Paradigm*, 5:1, (2009), p. 4.

violence of the hunger strikes while also representing the emotional and political consequences of those events. In *The citizen*, Hamilton physically asks the spectator to occupy a charged subject position thus reading their body *into* the represented scene. As such, both are employing techniques that offer what, as I note above, we might think of as a mimetic intensification: an artistic encounter that attempts to interrogate the politics of the events *both* representationally *and* ontologically. In so doing, I propose that these works move to position those who encounter them as ‘something more than passive viewers’,⁵⁶ that is, as witnesses. For Simon Shepherd, as a witness ‘a person attests to the truth of something that is or was present for them’.⁵⁷ While for Tim Etchells ‘to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them’.⁵⁸ This suggests that one central difference between being a spectator and being a witness is concerned with some form of implication in the events represented, in part through a refusal to disavow the presence of the spectator’s body as part of the mimetic economy of the event.

Crucially however, the works analysed here set up the spectator as witness not in the sense that they need only report on what was seen in a testimonial sense but that they be encouraged to bear witness to fictionalised and intensified representations of the events from the social real so as to insert themselves into the wider political discourses around, for example, power, violence, human rights, martyrdom, and incarceration. This is precisely an ethical positioning in so far as it does not compel a ‘simple’ reporting on events but attempts to prompt a fundamental consideration of one’s position within that context and, recalling Lévinas, one’s responsibility to the others represented therein.

In their own ways, both *Diary of a Hunger Strike* and the installation stagings of *The citizen* directly involves the spectator in some way, implicating them as active in the production of the piece’s meaning and enveloping them in that co-relation and co-creation. Similarly, each, in different ways, is concerned to represent radical political participation in content and form. These works set up the spectator as participant-collaborator and (thus) politically implicated spectator. Neither of these cultural objects is concerned to claim a

⁵⁶ Simon Shepherd, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 73.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 17 - 18.

position as a definitive interrogation of the events of the Troubles or in the Maze, they do not claim impartiality nor to be particularly factual (though both are rooted in extensive research processes). Rather, in line with how Marcuse sees the radical potential of art, these pieces seek to awaken debate and incrementally to illuminate and (potentially) recalibrate understandings of the politics of the real (both within and beyond the historical juncture). With *The citizen*, Hamilton places the body of the spectator inside the art work both literally and ideologically by asking them to take up the position of a prison guard looking in on the scatological detritus of a prison cell, confronted by the calm, gently implacable gaze of its blanket draped occupant. Peter Sheridan's *Diary of a Hunger Strike* uses the iterative structure of the 1981 hunger strikes themselves as a central dramaturgical strategy: a series of repetitious events, scenes and phrases are deployed to present a sense of the relentlessness and (self-inflicted) violence of starvation.

Conclusion

One of the defining features of the dirty protest and hunger strikes – imaginatively and in its reporting – is the way in which an encounter with it is narrated as an encounter with alterity and abjection. The artworks discussed in this article position the spectator as witness to the politics and ethics of those events and call on them to reconfigure their understandings of the prisoners' actions in light of that. This is a political request. In both these works there is a very careful re-presentation or re-deployment of structures of the protests and the institution as fundamental aspects of the works' dramaturgy. In presenting these structures within the aesthetic dimension, the artists frame these political protests, the conditions of incarceration and the institutional politics surrounding them as objects for analysis. The two pieces explored here strategically heighten spectator involvement as means through which to make plain their position within the politics being represented. In so doing these works call the spectator, in a Marcusean sense, to political (re)action and thence to the possibility of materialising an alternative political reality. This amplification of involvement might be seen to be the key to making apparent art's capacity to be a political request to action. Just as the initial encounter with the protests was experienced by Hamilton and Sheridan (and others such as Steve McQueen and Martin Lynch) as a fundamental demand to intervene in the politics of those protests, we might argue through Marcuse that *The citizen* and *Diary* as

are attempts to turn encounters with representation into ethically charged requests for political participation on the part of the spectator. The forms of these pieces amplify strategies of audience involvement and implication to replicate the invocation to action that the artists felt. We might argue that these artists responded to the prisoners' participation in (art as) protest by making works that invite the audience to participate via heightened dynamics of involvement. As such, art practice becomes a crucial and radical tool with which to request political action.