

# SPECTRE vs. VECTOR

Stephen Hackett



Paddy Bloomer & Nicky Keogh discover the Belfast sewers

## 1. In which Paddy Bloomer and Nicky Keogh dream their own submarine country, yo-yoing through the Belfast sewer system with the aid of a chemical breakfast

**credibility prop** *n.* an item such as a clipboard or briefcase, carried or used by an infiltrator to reduce suspicion

**sanitary sewer** *n.* a sewer that *isn't* sanitary - that is, the kind drainers avoid

Sitting in the Crown bar (the initial tourist destination for those straight off the bus in Belfast) Paddy Bloomer and Nicky Keogh discuss their navigation of the Belfast sewer system, following the route of the River Blackstaff underground. People are curious to know which route they took, and to hear about the dangers involved in wading through tons of shit and discarded copies of the Belfast News. Anecdotes of strange sounds and panic, suspicions of flood gates opening and concerns about methane poisoning; the artists describe the benefits of taking a chemical breakfast and whiskey for such a journey...

This has all been documented by the artists with the aid of a dodgy camera and a torch,

but documentation was always considered an afterthought; they considered it more in terms of an adventure, just. The story seems to carry the journey in its retelling and exaggeration. Maybe *documentation*, as presentation of the journey, may not live up to it. Maybe we don't need to see it anyway...

The next stage is to get surfboards and move upriver against the flow.

This activity ties in with the act of *infiltration* (*n.,v.* going places you're not supposed to go in general); a global pursuit involving the investigation of man-made structures not designed for public consumption, recognised as an adventure sport but moving now, perhaps, into the realm of art practice. Bloomer and Keogh were doing it for the hell of it, but it's becoming a crossover activity; parallels can be drawn with the work of Dan Shippersides, a Belfast-based artist who combines the activity of climbing with his own art practice.



Ciarán O'Doherty cleaning the Big Fish

**2. "Such were the topological deformities of this street that one seemed to walk through a succession of music-hall stages." Thomas Pynchon, *V*.**

The Art College in Belfast were keen over the last ten years to include a public art module in their Fine Art B.A. course and you can see remnants of it throughout the city every year: red running men stencilled onto walls, TVs made of cement resting upon boulders, city centre banks marked 'fragile', 'jokes are funny' posters... all mixed up with 'OTG', an empty signifier graffitied on walls around Belfast for the filming of 'Eureka Street', and 'Lesbians are everywhere', a mural for the film 'The most fertile man in Ireland'. It feels OK to write anything on the walls of Belfast, it's part of the culture.

**3. In which Ciarán O'Doherty performs his civic duty and cleans John Kindness's *Big Fish* sculpture. *The big fish will float to the top.***

**"In her book on the Parthenon pediment sculptures, the Greek archaeologist Olga Palagia writes of the statues of Kekrops : 'B and C were finally removed from the**

[west] pediment to the Acropolis Museum in 1977 after the industrial pollution of modern Athens had wreaked havoc on their delicate surface'."

The British Museum, [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/parthenon/7.html](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/parthenon/7.html)

In August 2001 a number of artists were asked to present a showpiece for the launch of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's 'Five Year Plan' at Donegall Quay, beside the River Lagan. The plan was a strategic development which framed itself as follows: "Our plan involves a radical realignment of support. It has the backing of government and it puts the arts at the centre of the region's life in an era of change and growth, The arts enrich our lives, they power creativity and self-fulfilment, building confidence and inspiring hope in communities."

As the dignitaries looked on, artist Ciarán O'Doherty cleaned John Kindness's *Big Fish* with a water pump that sucked up polluted Lagan water. *The Big Fish* was commissioned by Laganside Corporation, the prime movers in the redevelopment of Belfast's inner city, in 1998. Laganside, currently working on a 'cultural quarter' to house the city's arts organisations, are keen also to commission public art work all around the city; there seems to be a strong emphasis on fish-related sculpture.

Carried out at first in a methodical fashion, with the artist in the role of professional restoration expert, with white jump-suit and gloves, O'Doherty's performance gradually became more frantic, as pipes leaked, buckets overflowed and water sprayed. The delegation (a mixture of businessmen, politicians and artworkers) stood well back, perhaps disconcerted that the fish was being so cackhandedly 'cared' for. The performance was incidental, happening in the background; in all probability nobody there even recognised it as art. The artist had been approached by the Arts Council to "do something crazy" in the vicinity of the launch.

The area around the River Lagan has been the prime site for re-development in recent years; the BT Tower, the Waterfront Hall, the Hilton Hotel and a series of luxury apartments... but the river stinks, and it's said that if you have a mouthful you should get your stomach pumped.

"Public art programmes will tell us what heritage is valued, what aspects of the history of the city are selectively remembered, celebrated and incorporated into prevailing narratives of civic identity. Public art, set against a background of sharp social division, has drawn the fire of critics who argue that excessively optimistic

**images of community, urban life and history, merely mask the undesirable reality experienced by an increasing number of the urban population."**  
**Tim Hall The Landscape of Urban Regeneration: Public Art**



No Trustpassing

**4. Spam Javelin throwing, Vaseline Alley, Time wounds all heels, Pretend friends stay away, Welcome to earth: NO TRUSTPASSING, Catalyst Arts' annual members show, 2000.**

Catalyst Arts, an artist-run gallery space in Belfast asked its membership to create signs which would be placed in public locations from the 'lavatory wall to the City Hall'. The show's title came from a misspelled road sign on a Texas highway. The Catalyst committee placed the work in any location they saw fit; it was a cackhanded affair but was allowed free reign, and completely neglected to look at any idea of accountability. Which was nice.

So we had 'Vaseline Alley' on the road to Stormont, pole jumping off the Albert Bridge, changing speed limits, pictures of gammy-toothed Mancunians, Arabic toilet instructions... Perhaps the problem (or compromise) came when documentation of the signs was exhibited in the gallery space, on video and slide. *Is there nothing to be said for just letting it be?*

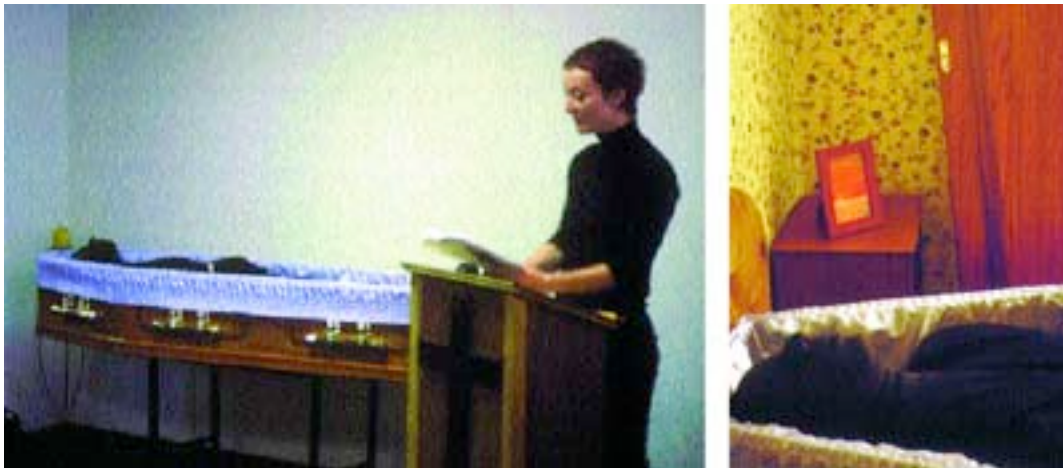
Perhaps this is a problem for all contemporary public art projects: the need to 'justify', on the part of funding bodies, artists and audience. There's a sneaking suspicion that it's all just taking the roof off the art gallery. The same crowd will come for the most part (and get a bit of fresh air, or see a different part of town, then go for some drinks) and everyone else will scuttle past without any understanding of the context or reasons, left clueless... And perhaps this anxious navel-gazing comes from a fear of being sucked into Arts Council strategies for community inclusion or outreach; a fear of compromise.

Catalyst has had a strong tradition of public art projects in the past. Perhaps this came in part from a realisation of the inaccessibility of its original gallery space to the general

public [Catalyst moved into a new gallery in October 2001 - *Ed.*]; however, Catalyst had a pragmatic approach to siting work outside of traditional venues. Projects such as 'On The Buses', 'En Route', 'Waterfront', 'Splatter', 'Barrage' and 'Viva Scanland' allowed artists and curators to work with different institutions and organisations in the city and beyond. In most cases though, there was a limited conception of the possible audience, even whilst a different context for artists to situate their work was being offered. Perhaps this was a realisation that things could only go so far...

One of the key organisations working with a public art remit in Belfast, Grassy Knoll Productions, developed out of Catalyst and has carried out public art projects at a local and international level. Their shows 'Resonate' and 'The International Language' offered a more ambitious approach to working outside the gallery space.

So what **is** this unhealthy interest in working outside gallery spaces in Belfast



*AimnĪn, Sublimate Transcend*

**5. *Sublimate Transcend*, in which someone arranges his own wake, funeral ceremony and mourners' meal. June 2001.**

**'Q.** What happens when I die?

**A.** Your family simply calls your nominated funeral director who will handle all the arrangements efficiently and sensitively according to the plan you have chosen and your specific instructions.' Plan your own funeral online today: <http://www.dignityfuneral.co.uk/>

The artist Aimn sent out invitations to his own funeral; he had organised a three day wake in his home, followed by a service in a local funeral home. He remained here alone after the service whilst a meal was organised for friends and fellow students of the artist. He remained in a coffin for 12 hours every day, without movement, over the four day duration of the performance.

"One of the questions I posed in the wake of the funeral work was what happens when the audience is gone, what are you doing when the audience is gone, and I don't think people should be afraid of working without an audience, or afraid that what they are doing not qualifying as art."

In a country familiar with the rituals of the wake house and funeral ceremony Aimn's piece could be seen as 'close to the bone' in terms of its taboo subject matter. There are perhaps many ways in which it might be misread: as an act of self-indulgence, shock tactics or manipulation, exploiting the discomfort of those in attendance. It was, however, a very straight presentation, down to the last detail.

The performer is somehow *not performing*, for whilst he remains a focal point he is in a completely passive state, a presence *around which* different social interactions are (initially at least) artificially enacted, mutating into a hybrid of death rituals. The artist is submitting to the outcome to some extent, outside the perimeters of what has been organised, surrendering control to other people within the work.

Aimn recognises the point after the service, when all the guests have gone, as perhaps the central element of the project: "To have the work happening without an audience, this was the key stage, in that you would have this meal happening in a separate location and this body in complete isolation, and finally the connection was severed (from the stage in the wake house)... The link itself... stopped being something that was visual, it became purely conceptual. One of the things I was interested in was that the piece acknowledges a state of not being resolved, and really focuses on the impossibility of reaching resolution... in as clear and extreme fashion as I was able to do.

"When people come together for a funeral, they are coming together for the sake of this presence who is a part of their lives, but at this moment of coming together this presence is no longer there: it is an *absence*, so I think you've got something paradoxical happening there, which I think can be reflected in art, in that the presence of the artist within their work only comes to fruition when it's finally absent, it's that kind of process

of letting go."

We think it's all visible, but it's not so, it floats inside a tight network, mutating for others into urban myth or anomaly, sometimes misunderstood: did you see that nut selling Mexican potatoes, the signs saying 'Welcome to Earth', that man frolicking naked with a pig... In most people's minds it's all just some sort of public art guff - walk on.

Then there's the glue sniffer who holds up the world, a pitched sword battle outside McDonald's during a loyalist feud, a woman with two pairs of glasses, covered from head to toe in scraps of paper detailing her own personal manifesto... *people go about their business.*

Cynical? Maybe. Or perhaps just *recognising some of the shortcomings.*

Move on, adapt, and survive.

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