

Art after Devolution Podcast Transcript

Episode One: The Practice in the Politics

SPEAKERS

Marcus Jack, Michelle Hannah, Maria Fusco, Ursula Burke

Marcus Jack 00:00

[Music] Welcome to *Art After Devolution*, a new podcast for the British Art Network. I'm Marcus Jack, a curator and writer working between Glasgow and Exeter. Over the course of this three-part series, I'll be examining the manifestations of devolutionary politics on contemporary culture in the UK. This is Episode One, 'The Practice in the Politics'. [Music]

Marcus Jack 00:31

This series is a provocation which calls to return our understanding of contemporary art, its production and exhibition to the immediate political and economic context of our time. The Britain in question is one where provision, not limited to funding and infrastructure, is unevenly dispersed. An enduring deference to the metropolitan centre continues to instruct our sense of value. Over the course of this series, we will unpack these realities through conversations with artists, practitioners, organisational leaders and policy experts. In doing, we hope to offer a polyvocal account of the burdensome inheritance, present challenges, and possible futures of decentralisation. *Art After Devolution* advances upon the British Art Network's 2023 annual conference 'British Art after Britain', held in partnership with the Hunterian Art Gallery at Kelvin Hall in Glasgow. This two-day event brought together artists and art workers to consider the influence of regionalisation since the historic moment of the Good Friday Agreement and founding of parliaments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. As questions about statehood, democracy and disunity ramp up in the year of changing government, *Art After Devolution* revisits this conversation with new interviews and recorded materials.

Marcus Jack 01:44

In this episode, we look at the ways in which the complex and often violent societies produced by devolution have functioned as both a subject and working context for artists. We will hear from Belfast-born, Scotland-based writer Maria Fusco, before I then sit down for an extended conversation with Irish

artist Ursula Burke. Closing this episode, Glasgow-based artist Michelle Hannah takes us through a speculative future in the confessions of an invigilator stationed at a regional arts centre after the apocalypse. First up, Maria Fusco reads an extract from her latest collection of essays, *Who Does Not Envy With Us Is Against Us*, recorded at British Art After Britain. In turns comic and discomfoting, she demonstrates how the social enclosures and cultural diet of growing up in a working-class Catholic household during the Troubles forges a method and autotheory for her incisive, knife-like prose.

Maria Fusco 02:42

I'm not sure how I came to writing. I didn't read books when I was growing up and I was not bookish. All I did was watch TV. When I peruse interviews with other writers, they often cite their joy of reading, their pleasure in getting lost in the complete universe of a text. I was busy watching gory horror films, ultra-violent video nasties and soft porn on television. I enjoyed getting lost in these because the extreme happenings in them came to an end, whereas the extreme happenings in my own everyday life in working-class Belfast during the very worst of the Troubles were cyclical and brutalising. By the way, if you're wondering how I was able to watch gory horror films, ultra-violent video nasties and soft porn TV, it was because I didn't have any parental guidance or supervision. I sat up by myself late at night while everybody else was in bed. There were six of us in the tiny terrace house we grew up in, and I was by far the youngest. And all I can say about that is that aggressively militarised civil unrest does funny things to adults.

Maria Fusco 03:46

Whilst I think I feel writing is an intrinsic part of my identity, it's taken me ages to realise this, despite having been a writer for quite a long time now. I've always been sure that being from working-class Belfast definitely is, I am sodden with the city's words. I was always surrounded by plenty of these, understanding their immense power in a shy and caught way. For example, there was always plenty of words written on walls in English and in Irish, but mainly, my relationship with the power of words was predicated on keeping your mouth shut, pretending you didn't know something in school, not talking over the turned-up volume on the TV, and not stating a preference of any sort and, crucially, never ever asking anybody for anything.

Maria Fusco 04:35

Here's something you might not know. You might find it interesting. When you're inside your house and yet another raid's happening outside you experience it through sound, and the reason why you experience it through sound is because you're hiding. When I made my first confession, as all seven-

year-old Catholics across Northern Ireland did, I had nothing to confess, so naturally, I lied. I'm sure this was not uncommon, but I didn't know that at the time, and certainly wouldn't have admitted to any of my classmates that I lied in confession. I told the priest I said bad words inside to myself. I did not need to explain to the priest what bad words were, but for the avoidance of doubt here today, when I said bad words when I was seven, I meant cunt, fuck, and, oddly, turd. I can't remember what penance the priest gave me, but I do remember being surprised that he wasn't surprised that I said bad words, and I was thankful for that.

Maria Fusco 05:40

Now, four very important words. So, in Belfast, during the Troubles, British soldiers were known as the Brits, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were known as the peelers, and in chance, actually, as an aside were also known as SSRUC. Thereby corralling two heavily armed, aggressive, and in retrospect, probably terrified, security forces into manageable definite articles. Like all families in our bad area, we bought *An Phoblacht*, which is a Republican paper which was sold door to door, and after a quick read through, because if a particular neighbour who happened to ask you a question about *An Phoblacht's* content, she needed to have some sort of an answer, we burnt it on the open fire in our living room. We did this in case the Brits, when they were raiding our house, which they did at least once a week, usually on a Saturday morning, when *Swap Shop* was on the television, saw a copy, they would associate us with being active Republicans and would punish us. That's what we thought would happen anyway, because it happened to other families in our streets and many, many other surrounding streets. And let me tell you, it's astonishing how immense the material volume of a small, terraced house expands when the interior is ripped apart bit by bit and dumped on the street.

Marcus Jack 06:59

Up next, I speak with Irish artist Ursula Burke, whose multimedia work in sculpture draws upon classical reference to address the precarity of identities, particularly in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland. Ursula spent two decades living and working in Belfast after the Good Friday Agreement, where the anxious reconstruction of a political sphere has formed a backdrop to cultural regeneration.

Ursula Burke 07:26

I'm an Irish artist. I'm currently based in the south of Ireland, not far from Cashel. I spent 20 years living in Belfast, in Northern Ireland. I make sculpture predominantly, and the kinds of materials I work with are craft-based processes. So I work a lot with soft sculpture, textile sculpture, drawing, mosaic sculpture and embroidery sculpture. I moved from the south of Ireland, I did a diploma in GMIT, and

back then, there was no degree, so the only option was to either continue to study in Dublin, which was NCAD, the National College of Art and Design, or Belfast. At the time, I had applied for both and got into both, and I thought Belfast seemed like a really interesting place. Having lived in the south of Ireland, I was experiencing a very comfortable idea of Irishness, very familiar to the projection that we might know in regards to something like the tourism board. So it was kind of like green rolling hills, lots of Guinness, quaint little towns and villages. And me being an Irish woman with red hair and an Irish accent, you know, I was kind of the living embodiment of an Irish person. So I accepted the place in Belfast and moved to Belfast to attend art college, to do a degree.

Ursula Burke 08:49

When I landed there, it was like, even though it was just north of Ireland, but it was like arriving in a whole other universe. I very, very quickly started to realise that identity was a very critical issue, and the ways and means that people express their identity or constructed their identity was utterly different than mine. I started to realise that identity in my work was a very important issue. The construction of identity became something that I started to research in my work, and I was looking at ways and means that I was complicit with a projection of my own identity, and how people who identified as the same creed or the same individual, this from the same religion, or whatever you might want to call it, how they went through this kind of continual process of constructing and authenticating their identity on a daily basis. So I started to make a lot of work around identity and representation.

Ursula Burke 09:46

For a long time, I have been obsessed with the classical realm. It's something that is just innately a part of me, I don't know why, but it's just something I've always responded to. One day, I went into the Ulster Museum and I was doing some research in their collection, and I came across this really incredible sculpture, and I was really besotted with it, and I wanted to know what the material properties of it were, and realised that it was Parian porcelain. Parian porcelain is this incredible material, it has particles of Parian marble within the slip. So when you fire it, it looks like or emulates marble. So at the time, I had no clue whatsoever how to make porcelain sculpture, like I had zero clue, but I just thought, this is something that I have to figure out, because I loved the classical realm, but I had no interest in carving marble. So I went back to the art college. I figured out how to slip cast using a Parian slip, and very quickly, I started to make sculpture in Parian porcelain that looked liked or emulated marble. I then went and I was awarded a British School at Rome fellowship. It's part of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, one of their awards, and that was [a] really foundational moment in my work, because it was

the culmination of everything I was thinking made manifest in the city, because the British School at Rome is a fellowship where you go and live in Rome for six months.

Ursula Burke 11:14

So, it was a wonderful experience. I spent most of my days travelling around, looking at all of the art in over the 600 churches in Rome, which is great because you can go to Rome and you don't have to go and spend money in the museums, which are also incredible. But you know, I would just stand around museums in Rome and look at Michelangelos, Canovas, Corradinis, and during that time, I was doing a lot of research about the political situation that was happening in Northern Ireland, which was really contentious in that moment. It was after the Good Friday Agreement, but the peace process was also really tenuous and complex, and there were a lot of really ugly situations happening back in Belfast that I was witness to and keeping up to date with while I was in Rome, and I started to think a lot about the concept of collective wounding, because it seemed to me that the political process and its representatives, who were currently ex-paramilitaries, who are now in Stormont in the Northern Irish Assembly, were rivalling the whole time, it kind of like these tribes rivalling against each other, and it didn't seem to me like it was for the collective good. It seemed like there was this constant unravelling of the political process, and it only ended up wounding the electorate, the people of Northern Ireland.

Ursula Burke 12:36

So while I was in Rome, I was immersed the whole time with the classical ideal in sculpture, which is that beautiful concept of the ideal in form. All of these, you know, incredible sculptures that have these beautiful faces. And I was obsessed at the time with Bernini, I spent a lot of time going to see Bernini's work, and that's one period in art history that I really love, like I love the Baroque because I love how Bernini deals with the dynamic in form, the use of dynamism in form. The sculptures are not static, but they're emoting, and they're relating emotion. And during that time, then I made this conceptual bridge between what was happening in Northern Ireland, because after the Good Friday Agreement, written within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement were these conservative terms, open-ended terms, to allow for a kind of peace that created a holding pattern for Northern Ireland. It was like a cunning plan that allowed for a tenuous peace, but it was always a truly deferred peace. You know, it was a deferral of the conflict, but always quite closely lingering, like a spectre that was always lingering in the present. And that tension between the faces and sculptures that I was looking at in Rome, the concept of the ideal in form. But then I did some research and thinking about the ideal, the concept of the idealised notion of society, so thinking about Plato and the Republic and all those kind of concepts, and I made a conceptual bridge between that and Northern Ireland, because in Northern Ireland, you know, people post-devolution, post-Good Friday Agreement, were constantly hoping to get to a place of consistent

peace, but it was always a truly deferred state. It was never fully realised. It was an idealised hope being expressed consistently, but never fully realised. So that conceptual bridge between Northern Ireland and the classical realm was made manifest at that moment.

Ursula Burke 14:45

So when I was in Rome, one of the first sculptures I made when I was there, as I brought a plaster mould with me – one plaster mould – and it was the mould of my daughter's head, my teenage daughter's head, and I'd been doing a lot of research about sculptors in the classical realm. Oftentimes, when they were part of a guild and they were trying to illustrate their skill, they would be asked to make one sculpture, which is called *Virgin with the veil*. And *Virgin with the veil* is an incredible piece of sculpture. There are multiple versions of it in existence, and it's essentially a bust with a veil on the surface, but it would illustrate the sculptor's virtuosity and hand in the material, in being able to carve something so fragile and detailed as a veil. So I thought, I'm going to try and do that while I'm in Rome, I'm going to do my own version of *Virgin with the veil*. So I cast using the plaster mould of my daughter's head, and then I created this technical approach to using porcelain, where I made it into a kind of fabric and I laid it over the bust. And then I created a balaclava that laid over the porcelain bust. The bust was lying out inside, and I created this sculpture called *Balaclava Bust*. And it was really in that moment I started to understand the potential of the material I was working with.

Ursula Burke 16:07

I then went on to make a series of sculptures where, thinking back about that conceptual continuum between Northern Ireland and the classical realm and the collective wounding that I was witnessing and thinking about the ideal in form, I wondered what would happen if I placed a bruise or a wound on the surface of a porcelain sculpture that looked like or emulated marble. It was supposed to operate within those conventions, you know, the ideal in form. But then you place a bruise, a big fat bruise, or a big fat lip on the surface. So I started to create a series of sculptures called *Bruise Bust*, and they were all using Parian porcelain, and they all look like marble when fired. So that was like the genesis of the work that I'm making today. I also work a lot in textile sculpture, embroidery sculpture, soft sculpture, and a lot of the work I make now is kind of the integration of the two materials. So it's making work that has like a porcelain element, maybe like a porcelain bust and then a soft sculpture body with elements of embroidery on the surface.

Marcus Jack 17:18

I wonder if I can just ask, picking up on what you've already said about the significance of recoding or reframing these images that speak to a contemporary political suffrage within a classical form. What does that marrying of the two historical moments do for you?

Ursula Burke 17:36

It's really interesting for me, in that in my head, I always create this conceptual continuum, so it slides backwards and forwards across periods of time, art history, backwards into antiquity, slides forwards into the contemporary and then forwards again into some future, indeterminate space. So when I'm creating work like this, the classical realm is really of interest to me, and not only in terms of sculpture, but also in terms of painting. I'm hugely influenced by painting, so I might look at someone like Caravaggio, for instance, and I did a series of work called *Embroidery Frieze (The Politicians)*, and it's a series of embroidery panels. I went online one day and I Google image searched 'politicians fighting in parliament'. And that worked really well, if we bring back into mind that idea of the conceptual continuum, I was researching images of the contemporary, of the now. But when these images came up, they really immediately struck me as looking like Baroque paintings, the actors in the frame reminded me of like a Caravaggio painting or a David like the *Oath of the Horatii*, like the gestures and the form that they were carrying out within the frame were super interesting. So that again, that conceptual continuum where they were sliding back into antiquity and then back into the present, where I took those images, and then I hand-embroidered each frame. I was highly influenced as well by things like the Bayeux Tapestry, which is not actually a tapestry, it's an embroidery, you know, a series of embroidery panels. And I was thinking about the Parthenon Frieze and techniques of using a frieze narrative. So I hand-embroidered over a series of ten years, panels from countries all over the world, and the source material was always something that I found online. Those were the parameters of the work, but they were really evocative of antiquity. And then I hand-embroidered all those panels and then created kind of like this formal approach, where the threads were hanging out of the frame. And I was making connections between, obviously, the political situation, not only in Northern Ireland, which was contentious, but ejecting outwards to multiple, various sites around the world as well. So the work, you know, is continuously and multilayered, multidimensional and sliding backwards and forwards again.

Marcus Jack 20:04

Yeah, yeah. Speaking also to kind of image economy that we know now, you know, I think of that image of the Hungarian politicians fighting and that, that has this different kind of value to it. I wonder if I could ask you also about the materiality of some of this work, because these materials you're working

with are similarly coded, you know, textiles, embroidery, having this feminine, gendered aspect, but also having this kind of activist aspect, specifically thinking about banner making, things like that, which sits quite at odds, I suppose, with the emulation of marble and these more reified materials. Could you talk to me about that?

Ursula Burke 20:44

Sure, when I was a kid, I'd spent a bit of time with my mother, who worked for a boot factory. She used to sew the stitching in these boots. She would get 50p a boot, and for me to make some extra money for sweets, she would give me 5p a boot, if I would sew these boots with her, you know. And I really liked the idea of hard and soft labour, the kind of like hard and soft labour that was happening in that moment: for her, it was hard labour, for me, it was soft, you know; for me, it was money for sweets. But that kind of act of making, that kind of approach of sewing, was something that stayed with me through my practice. So I like to recover or deconstruct conceptions and conventions around those various material approaches. So embroidery, typically, has been considered inane, decorative. Also, like my granny, when I was a kid, like had a front room filled with little porcelain figurines, you know. Again, that kind of sat still. They did not speak at all, but they were decorative, pretty, something to just gaze at. And I love the idea of kind of undercutting those conventions and actually making work that was political with a small 'p' that those approaches could speak to really large and contentious and complex issues. So it wasn't just going to remain the realm of the female and the realm of the decorative and inane, but the work undercut those conventions and spoke to some really larger political issues.

Marcus Jack 22:12

Speaking about labour and politics as these conjoined forces, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about working in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years or so, and how that was as a context for an emerging artist and then a more established maker? How you felt you related to the place as a kind of context of provision and a context of conflict and all these different things?

Ursula Burke 22:39

Initially, it was a really exciting, vibrant place to work. I arrived in Belfast in '97, and '98 we had the Good Friday Agreement, and then devolution in '99. During that time, even though the agreement was kind of fresh and new, the exclusions and inequalities of society continued, but with that was like the burgeoning of an ideological landscape. People now had this idea that, okay, we have this tentative form of peace, and there were no longer bombings and shootings and that kind of thing, but there was still this kind of electricity in the air. It was an exciting place to be as an artist. Because Belfast was a

small place, really, in terms of the art scene, and without the infrastructure and without a commercial art scene, there was a real energy around the type of work you could make, and there was an incredible artist-run scene as well.

Ursula Burke 23:40

So when I came out of our college, after I did a master's, I went and joined Catalyst Arts, which, it's based on Transmission, the model of Transmission in Glasgow. And it's an artist-run where you work for two years for nothing, but it's kind of like boot camp for curators, and you learn so much. So I did that, and that was incredible, because we really had nothing. We were given a budget of £1000 per project. You were allowed to curate one project each a year, but we would all have wild ambitions for projects. But because we were living in Belfast, we kind of had like the cachet of living in a city at war; the Troubles really translated a lot outside of its own context. So I remember contacting Annie Sprinkle and asking for her to do a project with us. We had no money to pay her a fee. All we could do was bring her work over and send it back. But she was so interested in the idea of Belfast, she was really happy to do that. Like and also working in Belfast, there were a lot of artist-run studio groups, so it was easy to access studios, but there were always kind of like these buildings in a state of dereliction. Oftentimes, you can imagine, the buildings that artists inhabited were on the outskirts of the city, in kind of dangerous places. And after the Good Friday Agreement, after devolution, I started to notice that urban development and gentrification of the city rushed in very, very quickly. The legislative powers were trying to sell a concept, you know, an idea of Northern Ireland now as a city at peace, kind of whitewashing of the Troubles. So this interesting thing happened, whereas, you know, Belfast has this city centre, and then these four regions – north, south, east and west – and they're all broken up into these sectarian divides, but the city centre, for a long time, was dead at night. After 7pm, you know, you would really find no one walking around. And it was like a legacy of the Troubles, because during the Troubles, people would be picked up off the streets very easily in the city centre. But after the Good Friday Agreement and after devolution, a lot of arts organisations started moving into the city centre as a result of urban development and gentrification. A lot of organisations, like Catalyst Arts and Belfast Exposed and *Source* photographic magazine and Factotum, all of these groups and studio groups started to move into the city centre and started to re-inhabit that space. But with that came really interesting work that started to be made. Artists started to, rather than making work traditionally, that looked like and about the Troubles, they started to now make work about the changing face of Belfast. It was no longer those really terrifying images, provocative images of Northern Ireland. It was now about urban development and gentrification of the city.

Marcus Jack 26:38

Did you find that the shadow of segregation still coursed through institutions, through the ways that you were working? How were the legacies of the Troubles being dealt with at organisational levels?

Ursula Burke 26:51

That was something I don't think that was ever an overt thing. If that was happening, that was happening beneath the surface, particularly within the artist community, it was kind of like a free for all, all different peoples of religion, colour and creed. You know, there was never a kind of conception that you're Catholic, I'm Protestant, or vice versa. That was something that we were aware of, of course. The thing is that you spend any kind of time in Belfast, you start to develop this, like meta language very, very quickly. If you present yourself, somebody very quickly looks you up and down. The minute you open your mouth and speak, they can hear an accent. They can start to understand how you pronounce your 'H', how you say things, are all tells, you know. So that could be a really complex thing if you wandered into the wrong area, but also the material culture on the streets, like the murals and the kerbstones also warned you very quickly not to wander into the wrong areas. But within the artist community, it was kind of like a free for all, in terms of religious differences. There was not much care given at all. In the organisations I worked in, Catalyst Arts, we had people from all over the world. We never cared, and we made a lot of kind of projects trying to interrogate the concept of like, trauma, memory, legacy. Like we really did take on the concept of the Troubles as much as we could, and interrogate it, ask questions around that. But within those structures, within the art world, I think the degree and level of acceptance was huge. People really didn't care, and that was not something that I was ever witness to.

Marcus Jack 28:31

Did you ever feel like artists were incumbent in the kind of peace process, or were being mobilised in that way, or had a responsibility towards that?

Ursula Burke 28:42

Yes. I mean, there were attempts made, often at the behest of, like, economic forces, you know, cultural forces. I remember when I was in Catalyst Arts, there was this really interesting time where Belfast was placed in a bid for Capital of Culture. And they came to consult with a lot of arts organisations, trying to co-opt them and bring them on board, and projecting a sense of Belfast outside of its own provenance. You know, like, how do we go about this in an interesting way? And like Catalyst Arts and the co-directors, we all gathered together and came up with a lot of interesting ways to do this,

but the team for the bid, in the end, came up with this concept, which was 'Imagine Belfast' – the most inane idea that they could have ever come up with! The idea was that they created a series of billboards around Belfast and, you know, it was like, 'imagine a hug', 'imagine a kiss: Belfast', you know. And what they had done was they had whitewashed the legacy, the history, the very thing that was interesting about Belfast, the richness of the culture and the legacy of the conflict, out of that, hoping that the fear that people would have had coming to Belfast no longer existed. You know that the idea that we were now post-conflict and trying to very, very quickly eradicate the concept of any kind of conflict having been in the city at all out of the bid. Not surprisingly, they didn't win the bid. But things like that happened a lot, you know, they would try to mobilise artists to the behest of, kind of, cultural tourism, and bringing tourists into the city a lot.

Marcus Jack 30:25

That idea of, maybe we would call it inheritance or something spectral, makes me want to ask about your most recent show, which has just closed at Ormston House, *Other Ghosts*, a three-person show. Could you tell me a bit about that?

Ursula Burke 30:39

Sure. So, in that exhibition, I had, actually, the work that I referred to earlier, which is *Embroidery Frieze (The Politicians)*, and another sculpture called *Truncheon*. I did a residency in Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris, which, again, was really incredible. While I was there, I spent a lot of time in the Cluny Museum, and in the museum, they have these beautiful series of medieval tapestries. 'The Lady and the Unicorn' is the image in the tapestries. When I was there, I was trying to negotiate the concept of integrating porcelain and textiles together into one piece of work. So I went into, as one does, into the gift shop on my way out of the Cluny Museum, and saw that they had a lot of these cushion covers, and they were the same material approach. It was kind of like a tapestry, and on the surface had the lady with the unicorn. It was during the time of Brexit, negotiations in and around Brexit, and I was really interested in how discussions in and around Northern Ireland were being had in relation to Great Britain leaving the European Union. It seemed to me like a lot of the same tropes were being brought up that in and around Ireland and Irishness that were conversations that were being had during occupation, during colonisation. So like, you know, the *Punch* cartoons like the drunk, dumb, slovenly Irish, you know, they're too stupid. Why don't they just leave with us? Like, what is Ireland's problem? A lot of people were thinking that Ireland was still part of Great Britain. And again, I was thinking about the concept of collective wounding. So I bought that cushion cover, I brought it back to the studio, and I made this small, little sculptural bust, classical bust, again, using the Parian porcelain that looked like

marble. And I placed wounds and bruises on the surface of the skin, and then I wanted to anthropomorphise a body to the bust. So I bought this truncheon, this plastic truncheon online, you know, off Amazon. It was like a party favour, and I covered the body of the truncheon in the cushion cover from the Cluny Museum. And I was thinking a lot about the concept of the unicorn. The unicorn, typically throughout antiquity. During the fifteenth century, a lot of artists were working with the concept of the unicorn. They thoroughly believed unicorns were real, like they were certain. And there were lots of depictions of unicorns throughout art history. And I loved that, because the unicorn, in my mind, was some kind of phantasm, you know, this kind of fictional character. It was kind of, again, this wonderful image, but like some sort of surreal phantasm. And for me, in that moment again, I was thinking like Brexit operating in the same way – it was being deferred and put off and put off, never fully happening. And the concept of Brexit in Northern Ireland was like some kind of surreal phantasm, you know, because people really, truly didn't understand the complexities of the border issue one in Northern Ireland, and what it meant in relation to Brexit. So the body of the truncheon was covered in this cushion cover, which had the unicorn on the surface, and then I hand-embroidered like these tears, or these like weeping little wounds on the surface of the truncheon. So that was a really small piece, but a really important piece. In going forward, I've made, since then, a lot of more monumental sculpture that integrates the porcelain and the textile.

Marcus Jack 34:14

Thank you so much, Ursula, I think we've covered a great deal of ground here. It's been lovely to speak to you about your experience in Northern Ireland and now in the Republic. Can I just ask before we leave, if people want to kind of follow your work more and know what you're up to next, where can they kind of engage with you?

Ursula Burke 34:34

Well, now that we're in the digital age, in most of the normal places, they can find me on Instagram. There are a number of interviews and videos of me online, and you can find me in lots of places.

Marcus Jack 34:44

Fabulous, thank you so much, Ursula.

Marcus Jack 34:52

Closing this episode, we share an extract from artist and performer Michelle Hannah's 2023 performance *Burnout*, recorded at British Art After Britain. The monologue of a forgotten invigilator

haunting the ruins of a civic gallery in a northern hinterland in the year 2223, they offer a speculative yet shrewd elegy to culture's regenerative promise.

Michelle Hannah 35:19

The public are gone. The public got infected. It was uranium, lava, meat infections, toxic sand, black oil, thorium, a solar virus. The list is endless. This city is a desert of ill particles. And to think that this used to be culture, it's more cruising dystopia. I can't really speak long. To be honest, I was on shift today, the early shift, to be exact. It's a standard day beat that I do, checking, always checking, always alone with a radio and a crumpled uniform of keys, entailing the usual walk, point to point, stair to stair, corner to corner to crumbled wall. Limbo is a relief, to be honest. Tight thoughts and burning knots seem to almost never unwrap. In, my waking hours are solely making sure no one touches anything at all – ever. That's the most important part of the job, the only part. One little graze exposure to those remnants of civic life could mean disaster for those that are not immune, like myself. It is funny how paintings smell when they burn. I get instructions sent weekly, I think, or monthly, that certainly paid in Ethereum, no disposable income, no colleagues, no union, one city and not many discoveries.

Michelle Hannah 37:31

There are, there are the, there are the strangers, only occasionally that do come by called curators. They appear in well-cut hazmat suits. They oversee the now, they oversee the now defunct storage spaces, offices and remove some long dead painting or video wall or stolen sculpture. And they just always walk right past me. Not a word. They used to make eye contact when I just started, but not now, no, never. Why would they? I, I obviously have nothing to offer. I have no fortune, no connections or social standing apart from being a burnt-out meat space to ward off others. They see a working void in me that is well below their pay. The higher grades like them, well they live way outside the boundaries, near the home counties lowlands. I hear there's still flat whites, tote bags and hill walking down there. No one else really comes in. The act of radiation left only shadows burnt into the old city square, outlines of a nuclear crime, scene of those colonial Victoriana statues, long pulled down. You can almost trace round the racism. Yet this crumbling, sand-stoned carcass of a building somehow holds up. The only small relief, if I can say, was that the middle class were the first to die. A slight comfort, maybe. They thought they had it sorted, contained away from the genocide, keeping the riff raff, northern plebs out as we of the hoi polloi council lined. They all mostly gravitated to a sort of safe cordoned off site at what was once the Shires, but the poking stick drawings on their skin turned septic, with the nuclear heat, the mullets fell out, and then, of course, no mummy or daddy were left in West Londinium to send them crypto.

Michelle Hannah 41:01

People fake Glasgow, or is it Dundee or the new Newcastle? I can't really remember. They all eventually fled in a few hundreds to Exhibition Park, but that soon got noxious, the pond infected leading up to all barricaded off. Now it's just filled in with the collaborating bodies of their art collective, rusted roots and toxic trees enmeshed in PhD, Solomon sludge. What they, what they didn't realise is that it's our land now, the proud, solo, flying off-piste fluid and the working undergrowth, be it sink in ones, zeros or dense immense transmutations, healed with our benefit skin. We they ignored, have built a stateless kinship through forced inertia. There's no more style miles or Baltic nights, no more straight blue men, no more trends or GS of A.

Marcus Jack 42:28

In the next episode, 'Infrastructure Needs Data', I'll be speaking to Professor Abigail Gilmore about the arc of devolution since the late 1990s, tracing the many ways in which macro-level shifts in politics have altered the terrain for culture at a local level. If you like what you've heard, please subscribe, share and consider dropping us a review wherever you get your podcasts. This really helps us to reach new audiences.

Marcus Jack 42:53

Art After Devolution was hosted and programmed by me, Marcus Jack, and you can follow me on socials at @MarcusFJack. It was edited and audio produced by Claire Lynch, line production by Bryony Botwright-Rance, assisted by Rosie Jennings at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. Music is 'Too Many To Count' by Comfort from their 2023 album, *What's Bad Enough?* Check them out wherever you listen to music, and thank you to Natalie McGee for the permission to include it. The image in our graphic is *Balaclava Bust* by Ursula Burke, used with kind permission from her.

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