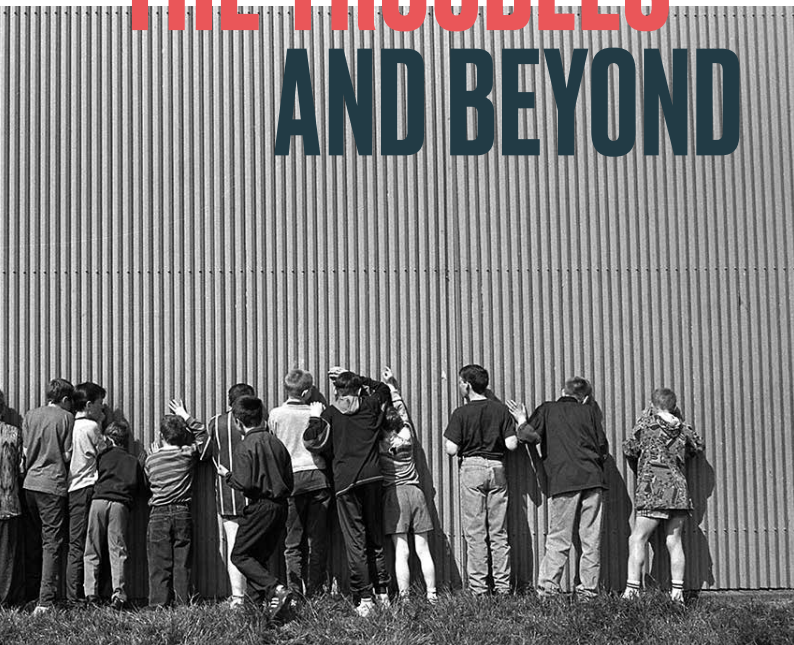
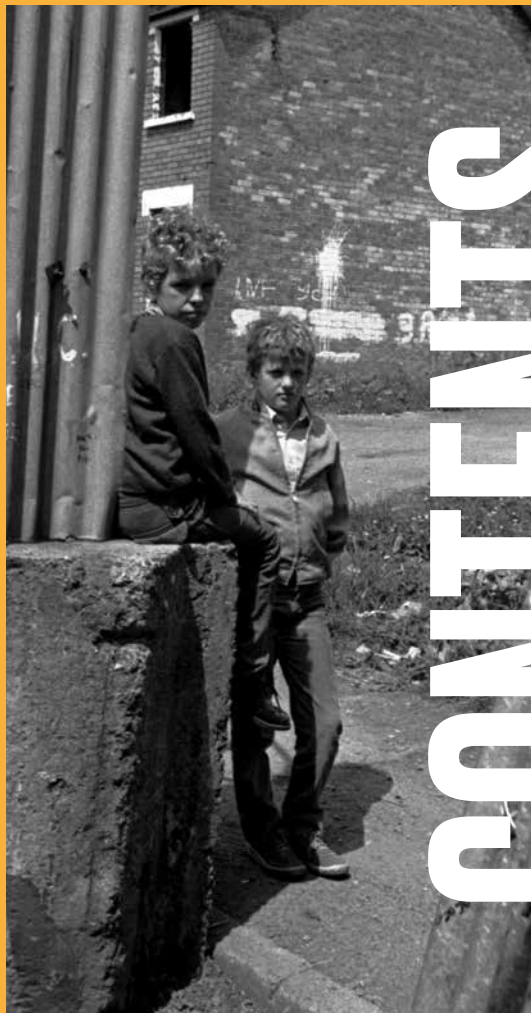


NNNi

NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI

THE TROUBLES **AND BEYOND**





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Cover: *Peacelines*
I. Alliance Avenue
- Glenbryn - North
Belfast © www.
frankiequinn.com

Left: *Peace Line* at
Alliance Avenue,
Ardoyne, 1983 ©
Martin Nangle



INTRODUCTION

Across the world people are asking questions about museums. What stories do they tell us about our history? What do museums collect and why? What responsibility do museums have to the people who are represented in their collections? How should they respond to societal change?

Above: The Troubles and Beyond exhibition

Northern Irish society is more obviously divided than most other places, so the way in which our museums develop, display and interpret their collections will inevitably be the subject of much discussion and debate. People have a right to question things. Why this and not that? Why here and not there? Why him and not her? In fact, our museums ought to welcome questions, discussions and challenges. They should be shared and trusted spaces to have those conversations.

National Museums NI welcomes those conversations, however difficult they may be at times. We do this because our collection is a unique asset and learning resource that allows us not only to reflect on the past, but also on our shared future. A museum isn't an omniscient voice, it's an enabler of thought and debate. We encourage people to consider diverse perspectives on culture, history and society. We promote understanding,

respect and empathy. This isn't easy, and that's why we work with partners who bring additional knowledge, insight, networks and sensitivity to examine the legacy of the past in ways that help to create better understanding and a new narrative. This is a painstaking but ultimately rewarding process. However, museum practice is built on attributes such as care, patience, scholarship and the ability to see the big picture and the long view. A museum should be a natural place for reflection, reassessment and ultimately perhaps, reconciliation.

This case study provides a summary and evaluation of our work on 'The Troubles and Beyond' project between the years of 2014 and 2019. It focuses on how we have developed our approach in this important area in close collaboration with stakeholders, partners and communities, and how we might develop it further into the future.

WHAT DID WE DO?

ART

Throughout Northern Ireland's Troubles, artists could be found giving voice to a viewpoint that was profoundly human. Sometimes they produced work that commented directly on the violence and suffering that was happening around them. At other times, they commented on the symbols and signs of the prolonged conflict that revolved around identity and history. Sometimes this commentary was impassioned, sometimes it could be laced with irony and humour, but however artists approached the conflict, they brought a different perspective that provided a much-needed antidote to the rhetoric and reportage associated with the decades of civil and political conflict.



Above: *Art of the Troubles* exhibition, 2014, Ulster Museum. *The Other Cheek?*, 1989 by John Keane © John Keane



Left: *Art of the Troubles* exhibition, 2014, Ulster Museum. *Woman in Bomb Blast*, 1974/1 by F. E. McWilliam. Copyright of the FE McWilliam Estate

Art of the Troubles (2014)

The *Art of the Troubles* exhibition provided a broad representation of artists' responses to the Troubles from their own perspectives. Sensitivity to the very real impact of the Troubles and the position of victims were at the forefront when planning the exhibition. We engaged with a range of victims' groups including WAVE,

Healing through Remembering, the Victims and Survivors Unit and the Commission for Victims and Survivors. The exhibition, developed in partnership with Wolverhampton Art Gallery, comprised 60 works, including paintings, drawings, photographs, videos and sculpture. It brought together the work of 50 artists from Northern Ireland and beyond including Joe McWilliams, Willie Doherty, F.E. McWilliam, Rita Duffy,

Paul Seawright, Ursula Burke, Michael Farrell and Richard Hamilton. Some works were direct responses to violence inflicted on innocent victims. Some were shaped by the social and political outlook of the artists. Others captured visual aspects of conflict and division. Together they evoked a variety of experiences and emotions and reflect on the causes, impact and complexity of the Troubles.

The exhibition was accompanied by a programme of tours, workshop activities, online resources and public engagement, which enhanced its capacity to encourage dialogue. It became obvious that there was genuine interest from visitors and within the community in exploring the history and impact of the Troubles, and we began to see the role that the Ulster Museum could play in facilitating that.

Colin Davidson, *Silent Testimony* (2015)

Silent Testimony – created by the internationally renowned artist Colin Davidson - reveals the stories of eighteen people connected by their individual experiences of loss through the Troubles. Whilst each of the portraits is personal, *Silent Testimony* offers an emotive response reflecting on how the conflict has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on, not just the eighteen sitters, but thousands of individuals – the injured, their families, the families of those who died and the wider community. The captions reveal what loss has been suffered by the individual but there is no detail on specific circumstances and no blame is apportioned. Surrounded by the silent testimony of these individuals, communicated through their expressions,



the viewer acknowledges the impact of the conflict on those who were deeply affected. It is the viewer who completes the interpretation, by being present among the portraits and receiving their testimony.

The exhibition had a deep emotive, human impact when first displayed at the Ulster

Museum in 2015. Visitors were openly overwhelmed by the power of the portraits and the human loss they portrayed. As with *Art of the Troubles*, it was supported by a public programme of activities, which allowed the theme of common humanity to be further developed and explored.

Above: Colin Davidson, *Silent Testimony*, 2015, Ulster Museum



Above: Outreach event at Belfast Central Library on the theme of Alternative Ulster

HISTORY

The public response to *Art of the Troubles* and *Silent Testimony* confirmed the need for the Ulster Museum to further its presentation of difficult or contested histories in an ethical and effective way. We had built confidence in our approach to this subject and this needed to be reflected in History as well as Art.

Right: This Ulster Volunteer Force 90th anniversary flag was found and documented by the artist and photographer John Baucher in November 2015. Interested in the use, treatment and disposal of flags, he has folded it into this triangular shape; in American tradition this would then be burned and buried. According to the British Flag Protocol when a flag is no longer in a suitable condition for use it should be destroyed in a dignified way by burning, tearing or cutting into strips.



Collecting the Troubles and Beyond (2016)

The Collecting the Troubles and Beyond project (supported by National Lottery Heritage Fund) set about ensuring that our collection is representative of what is a complex period of history. The project focussed on modern and contemporary collecting, from the 1960s to the present day, and an associated programme of exhibitions and events relating to Northern Ireland's recent past. We aimed to develop the collection in a way that brought together the wider social, economic, cultural, and political, influences that have shaped the Northern Ireland story.

A wide range of groups representing different sectors of the community, ex-combatants and ex-service personnel and victims and survivors were invited to contribute to discussions around contemporary collecting and to inform and oversee inclusivity. We organised a diverse programme of related events and activities, which aimed to encourage dialogue and provide opportunities to explore certain themes in more depth. For example, in relation to LGBT+ history we hosted the Outing the Past history festival two years running and celebrated 20 years of QueerSpace. These events allowed us to integrate as many diverse viewpoints as possible in retelling the past and re-imagining the future.



The Troubles and Beyond (2018)

Informed and enabled by the Collecting the Troubles and Beyond project, an exhibition opened at the Ulster Museum in March 2018 to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement. The exhibition explores politics and conflict and the impact of both on everyday life, people and communities. It examines our recent past through a range of objects reflecting diverse perspectives and experiences.

The new exhibition doesn't shy away from the difficult aspects of our past. A commemorative

booklet, *Massacre in Derry*, provides a poignant reminder of the terrible events of Bloody Sunday in 1972; so too a poppy wreath that survived the explosion at the Remembrance Day service in Enniskillen reminds us of the horrors of that day in 1987. The striking presence of a British Army bomb disposal robot paints a stark picture of how the Troubles disrupted everyday life. A visitor book from Ulster American Folk Park, which is signed by a twelve-year-old Spanish student killed later that day in the Omagh bomb in 1998, offers a powerful reminder of the ability of objects to stimulate profound emotional connections.

Left: *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition

Right: Anne Devlin (left) and Judith Jennings at the launch of the *Voices of 68* exhibition



But rather than solely tell a story of violent conflict, we were also keen to give people a sense of the everyday culture that pervaded in Northern Ireland – it is as much a social history as it is a political history. A leather jacket from the punk band 'The Outcasts' recalls the heady days (and nights) of Belfast's 'Good Vibrations' counter-culture. The futuristic Ulster-built DeLorean sports car appears in a 1981 Ulster Motor Show programme. And the gold medal awarded to the pentathlon champion Mary Peters at the 1972 Munich Olympics shows a remarkable personal achievement and a ray of light in the darkest year of the Troubles.

Voices of 68 (2018)

Working in partnership with Dr Chris Reynolds of Nottingham Trent University, this project explored Northern Ireland's experience of 1968 through the production of filmed personal testimonies relating to events which occurred in this pivotal year. Other elements of the project included a touring exhibition, educational resources and workshops and a series of extended videos to allow visitors to further explore this seminal moment in Northern Ireland's recent history.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES?

An independent evaluation was commissioned to assess the impact of our work on the Troubles and Beyond to date and to gather information and feedback to inform the development of future work. The evaluation has found that:



Above: Visitors engaging with *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition

1. PEOPLE ARE ENGAGING MORE DEEPLY:

Museums can provide a forum for discussion on issues of memory and history. The evaluation shows that people have been thoroughly engaged through the project and that it has provided a platform for dialogue. Stakeholders and participants frequently expressed personal, meaningful and emotional sentiments which evidence how deeply they have engaged with the subject.

“The number of people visiting it and stopping and commenting on texts and artefacts. Good to see this gallery triggering interest and dialogue.”
(*The Troubles and Beyond*)



People have been able to engage more meaningfully and deeply through the new approach to *The Troubles and Beyond* gallery. Black and white photographs with accompanying text have been replaced with a rich variety of artefacts, artwork, video and voices. 96% of visitors to *The Troubles and Beyond* gallery said it had an emotional impact on them.



From Left: Colin Davidson, *Silent Testimony*, 2015, Ulster Museum

A Making the Future community engagement group visiting *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition

“The portraits and stories opened my eyes to just how many people were affected by the Troubles. I had chills and shed tears the entire time.”
(*Silent Testimony*)

It is clear, whether a visitor had direct experience of the Troubles or not, the experience was both educational and emotional. Responses to *Silent Testimony* indicate that it created an emotional response, bringing back personal memories and helping people reflect on a common sense of humanity.

2. PEOPLE ARE GAINING NEW PERSPECTIVES:

Visitor responses demonstrate that people come to the museum and discover new information and new perspectives. Across the evaluation there is evidence of visitors engaging with collections and stories in fresh ways, often leading to a reflective response.

“They have changed my perspective as now I understand more of the backstory.”

(Pupil response to Voices of '68)



“I was very moved to see their faces and read their stories. I was sorry for my own bigotry in the past. I hope for a better future.”

(Silent Testimony)



The direct references to reflection in visitor feedback, as well as the level of personal comment, suggest that many people see the museum as a space for reflection.

By documenting the ‘everyday’ experience of the Troubles, interviewees also noted how it engaged not only a much wider age range in the gallery’s footfall, but also provided new perspectives and talking points for visitors.

Above right:
Shoppers in Donegall Place, 1973 © Martin Nangle

Left: Personal testimonies in *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition

3. A NEW APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIPS, ENGAGEMENT AND CO-PRODUCTION HAS BEEN UNLOCKED

Through the Troubles and Beyond project we have worked with community groups and representatives to establish the significance of events and objects through workshops and dialogue, resulting in an important element of co-production within the project. Various community groups donated artefacts and much wider consultation was undertaken on the gallery's

development, demonstrating the museum's increasing confidence in partnering with others including victims' groups, academic advisers, history teachers and community groups. Through the evaluation, stakeholders have expressed a keenness for these partnerships and community connections to continue and be extended to further partners in the future.



Above: Launch of the *200 Words and One Picture* exhibition developed by Towards Understanding and Healing, Strule Arts Centre, Omagh

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The Troubles and Beyond project has prompted greater clarity and coherence in National Museums NI's role with regard to the social peace process.



Above right: *Gun games, the Art College* © Bill Kirk

Left: Multiple perspectives and experiences interpreted responsibly in context



Museums have a responsibility to engage with history and society in ways that do not shy away from difficult issues. There would be little point in the Ulster Museum pretending that we all share the same view of our past. Much of our recent history is contested. That is to say different individuals and communities have different ideas about

how the society in which we live today came about. This is a particularly sensitive area because it involves violence, loss, anger, hurt and a deep-rooted sense of injustice and bitterness in many different communities and individuals here in Northern Ireland. The question is, what is the best way for our museums to reflect this?

The answer to this lies in knowledge, understanding and a commitment to recognising that there are complex multiple perspectives in play at all times. It is not our aim to establish an agreed narrative or provide solutions. It is our aim to find ways to look at the past that help people understand it better and perhaps see a more positive future for this place.

We have already sought to apply our learnings and build on our success. *Culture Lab*:

Don't Believe the Stereotype (2020) broke new ground with its playful and provocative approach, using the famous "differences" blackboard from *Derry Girls* to frame the narrative about cultural identity in Northern Ireland. Following hot on its heels, *Collecting the Past / Making the Future (2021)* tackles the topic of the centenary of Northern Ireland and the partition of Ireland and is purposeful in encouraging debate about the past and the future.



 **Twitter user**

"Finally made it to @makingfuturehq #culturelab @ulstermuseum - huge kudos to the team... it's great. And a little emotional actually. I felt, for the first time maybe, that my culture and identity was reflected back at me in a museum exhibition."

Above right: The 'differences' blackboard in the *Culture Lab* exhibition

Right: The *Collecting the Past / Making the Future* exhibition

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

We recognise that our work in this area has only started. To fulfil our role in society we must continue to develop our approach and increase our impact into the future.

Above right:
Visitors engaging
with the *Collecting
the Past/Making
the Future*
exhibition



- We will be proactive and strategic in how we work with stakeholders at the local level. This will be enabled by a clear, outcomes-based approach.
- We will expand our partnership working beyond Northern Ireland. This will bring informative global perspectives to the approach to contested histories and the legacy of the past.
- We will develop content, embrace a broader narrative and provide greater context for collections.
- We will examine our current partnerships in terms of both who is present and who is absent and also how we engage. We will seek opportunities to have broader discussions that are not always centred on the work of the museum.

A NOTE ON THE EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

National Museums NI commissioned Ruth Flood Associates to undertake an independent evaluation of the Troubles and Beyond programme. This included:

Review of existing evidence:

analysis and identification of the key themes from existing survey data. This has included reviewing data from *The Troubles and Beyond*, *Art of the Troubles*, *Silent Testimony* and *Voices of 68*.

Engagement with staff:

in-depth interviews with key staff at National Museums NI to gather their views.

Engagement with project groups who have worked with National Museums NI:

focus group discussions with representatives of the following groups: National Museums NI Academic Advisory Group, Voices of 68, Healing Through Remembering focus group and WAVE.

Engagement with wider stakeholders:

telephone interviews with stakeholders to gather wider views and perspectives. This included interviews with representatives from academia, community organisations, funders and other bodies.

We would like to thank everyone who gave their time to contribute to this evaluation, and continues to support us in our work.



Above: Sealed door at Cupar Way. © Frankie Quinn www.frankiequinn.com



Above: Leeson Street during the redevelopment period, 1983. © Martin Nangle

