In a small shop on a side street in Belfast’s city centre an exhibition entitled *Everyday Objects Transformed by Conflict* opened in May 2014. The exhibition, which had started its tour at the First Derry Presbyterian Church in 2012, contained a metal bin lid and wooden dove, a lamp made from a CS gas canister and bullet-proof clip board. These things, and others such as a scrap of twisted metal collected from the 1971 London Post Office Tower bomb site, are fragments of the experience of war.

It is not difficult to stumble across exhibitions of this type: activist curations or activists art. I did so just last week. In the foyer of my local public library is a contemporary still life, a brightly coloured papier-mâché sculpture of food, bulging and spilling over a table. Familiar packaging had been altered Adbuster style to tell
stories of corporate profits and welfare cuts. Entitled ‘Art on the Breadline’, the work had been created by participants from Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project, who, facilitated by University of Sussex researcher, Bella Wheeler, debated food poverty through weekly art sessions over a period of a year. Behind the table were text panels with one prominent 2011 citation from Mary Brydon-Miller and collaborators: ‘Art can be used to interfere with how the social is assembled and to provoke new constellations of the visible and the sayable.’

That art intervenes into realities and disrupts their representations is nothing new. Art historians have traced this political imperative to the realism expounded in Gustave Courbet’s 1855 Pavilion of Realism, an early Salon des Refusé, and contemporary critics have found it in many of Jeremy Deller’s installations. Historical and contemporary examples of political, even revolutionary, art abound. Furthermore, venerable institutions that are the national keepers of world treasures have exhibited avowedly political artefacts: the Victoria and Albert Museum’s 2014 Disobedient Objects showed a selection of a material culture of protest. None of these should be called activist art, even if they generate activism. Revolutionary realism from Courbet to Deller is just art, doing what it ought to do as an individual and intellectual, creative and material, statement about life; the protest materials of Disobedient Objects are now icons for contemplation.

Activist art is differently created and curated; it usually circulates outside the institutions of art; it is produced in local spaces, in streets, libraries, social centres and unofficial art venues where collective, participatory practices are embedded all kinds of activities: political campaigns, environmental concerns, food cooperatives, reading groups. Activist art is made within the ground level organisation that defines local communities but is articulated against high and mighty political formations: national governments, transnational corporations, military complexes. It is a small act of creativity against large formations of power.

Much activist art, creating and curating exhibitions, is addressed to conflict and its consequences. Again, examples abound and I can give three in which I have played some greater or lesser part. The Guantanamo Public Memory Project produced a National Dialogue and Traveling Exhibit from the participation of 11 student groups, researching the long history of imprisonment on the US naval base in Cuba. Re-making Picasso’s Guernica pieced together a textile reproduction of this most well-known twentieth century painting through public sewings: collectivity was inseparable from creativity. And, the Everyday Objects located in an empty Belfast shop was premised upon the collective participation that produces activist art.

Everyday Objects Transformed by Conflict is far from the only exhibition to deal with the conflict ‘in and about’ Northern Ireland. The conflict’s recent phase, euphemistically known as The Troubles, which lasted thirty years from the deployment of the British army on the streets of Belfast and Derry in 1969 to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, has its own gallery in Ulster Museum, just over a mile south of the city centre, in the Botanic Gardens. Whilst there are no objects displayed in this monochrome basement space devoted to large
photographic reproductions mounted on large doubled sided partitions in the shape of gable end terraces, both the art and the material culture of conflict have been collected, selected and arranged for viewing fairly regularly in galleries and museum since 1990s. To take two examples: The Ulster Museum’s 2005 temporary exhibition, The Irish at War, concluded a human history of conflict with a Troubles section and 2001 Troubled Images, drawn from the Linen Hall Library’s Political Collection vast collection of conflict-related printed materials, toured the globe.

Unlike these and other Troubles exhibitions, all of which curated and activated objects in an attempt to interpret conflict and understand violence, Everyday Objects Transformed by Conflict could be considered a form of activism, an activist exhibition or even activist art. I would like to explain. Those who worked on the exhibition, a long process of open ended discussions about dealing with the past, were doing so before the term activist was widely used in community forums or cultural domains but their work is characteristic of what is now considered art activism. Activist art has, I want to suggest, two fundamental principles: it is collective and participatory. Both change the nature of art. Creating and curating art as a collective and participatory act transforms art from an object into a process; its appearance and form, that is, the look and the shape of the thing, is significant only insofar as it is a nexus of relationships: the point around which people gather together to do something. The making or assembly of art for exhibition is an act of political activism in itself.

Everyday Objects Transformed by Conflict had invited 79 collectors, public institutions and individuals, to select one object from their collection, loan it and write its label. These collectors had been identified through an Artefacts Audit, a Healing Through Remembering project. Healing Through Remembering (HTR) is an extensive cross community project, made up of individuals with different political affinities who have come together to discuss ways of dealing with the past relating to the conflict ‘in and about’ Northern Ireland. HTR published its first report in 2002, a compilation of over a hundred submissions responding to the question: ‘How should we remember the events connected with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland so as to individually and collectively contribute to the healing of the wounds of our society?’

Five projects emerged from the report, of which one was the creation of a memorial or museum, or a scheme that would incorporate both that had the working title ‘Living Memorial Museum’. This project initiated the Artefacts Audit: A Report on the Material Culture of Conflict researched and written by Kris Brown from which the Everyday Objects exhibition developed. From the very outset, an activist principle of participation prevailed: the Everyday Objects was an attempt to continue a dialogue about conflict, to find a way of dealing with the past. The curatorial questions that shape any exhibitions still applied. How can things be arranged? What are the effects of a particular visual and material order? And, in particular, what happens when images or objects are placed in close proximity, juxtaposed. What is revealed about them or imposed upon them?
However, HTR’s exhibition process, realised by Triona White Hamilton, did not apply conventional curatorial criteria, which evaluates arrangements according to whether they educate, please or shock. An arrangement that worked effectively (or just ‘worked’ as it is often put) was one that functioned as an invitation. Can objects open dialogue? Everyday Objects undid the established exhibition dichotomy of objects before audience, of putting up an exhibition with outreach events following in its wake. The exhibition of Everyday Objects was just a stage in the longer process of activist art. Process as both method and object, both means and end, is characteristic of HTR’s mission as it is of other organisations in the field of conflict resolution. Conclusive outcomes are not sought; indeed, there is a tendency to postpone or resist resolution because if it is too quickly imposed without ensuring broad participation it is not a resolution. Indeed, the word resolution is often eschewed; transformation or transition are the preferred terms since both suggest process rather than outcome.

I am suggesting, then, that the principles and practices of activist art, have a particular place in sites of past and present conflict, in contested spaces. In Northern Ireland, the ending of the intense period of violence was not marked by a dramatic change in political system. The political geography of Northern Ireland remained the same and the devolved authority of the Northern Ireland Executive rests upon consociational arrangements, power-sharing between Republican and Unionist parties that recognised and institutionalised political division.

An official political domain, political society to borrow a Gramscian description, is often characterised by stalemate and has been vacated by all but party politicians. This account of the departure of political participation from political society is not unique to Northern Ireland or sites of conflict but typical of western liberal, or neo-liberal, state formations. Collective participation has moved beyond the official domain to the spaces of local everyday life: streets, libraries, social centres and unofficial art venues where art practice offers a political process of representation and resistance. Collective participation and political activism has been exiled and has taken refuge in art.

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