

ARTFORUM

Willie Doherty

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

Every city is a palimpsest of its own history, each urban territory an accumulation of linguistic and visual signs that constitute the representation of place. Since the 1980s, Willie Doherty's practice has addressed the complex significations of Derry, a city in Northern Ireland that was at the nexus of the social unrest and violence associated with the "Troubles"—the conflict between Protestant unionist and the Catholic nationalist communities between the '60s and the '90s. This included the infamous Bloody Sunday incident of 1972—which the artist witnessed firsthand as a twelve-year-old (he was born and raised in the city, and it served as his base until 2010). Eschewing the neutral, objective reportage of normative models of documentary, and influenced by the interrogation of photographic language found within certain Conceptual-art practices, Doherty began, early on, superimposing text over image as a means of investigating the relationship between the denotation of a specific place, and what might be described as a poetic nonspecificity. The signification of the photographic image is recoded by text, and, conversely, language is inflected by the pictorial field. This exhibition, "One Place Twice and Photo/Text/85/92," comprised black-and-white works from the '80s and '90s that had not been previously exhibited in New York, as well as four color works from the 2010 series "OUT OF BODY."

Fixed Parameter, 1989, suggests a boundary or edge of the city: In the foreground, we see a pile of rubble and other detritus strewn across an otherwise vacant lot, framed by a brick building on the left, and a wall with barbed wire on the right; in the far background, beyond a field of grass and across a river, we can just make out a cluster of buildings. At the lower center of the composition, in generic white lettering, the phrase **FIXED PARAMETER** hovers just above the detritus, as if delineating an invisible border. *Protecting/Invading*, 1987, is a diptych: The left panel features the word **PROTECTING** superimposed on a photo of a rural road, while the right panel locates the word **INVADING** in front of an image of trees (and perhaps also fencing), which seemingly constitute a boundary zone, through which we detect a suburban community in the distance. It's as if Doherty were peering through the forest in a covert act of surveillance, yet the panel leaves it unnervingly unclear whom or what is being protected or invaded. As with all of the works, such ambiguities suspend or dislocate linear, narrative readings, while opening up a space for viewers to project their own conjectures. In *Remote Control*, 1992, the titular phrase hovers just above a dead-end street bracketed by fencing and walls—was a bomb remotely detonated at this site?



Willie Doherty, *Fixed Parameter*, 1989, black-and-white photograph, 48 x 72".

In *God Has Not Failed Us*, 1990, the words of the title overlie an image of an alleyway behind a dilapidated, possibly residential building across from a brick wall with metal fencing; the pinnacle of a castle parapet appears in the far background. Architecturally, Derry is the only intact walled city in all of Ireland, and this image suggests, obliquely, that such walls amplified tensions among communities already balkanized along religious, economic, ethnic, and other lines. Likewise, in *Last Bastion*, 1992, the title is positioned just below what could be a section of Derry's ancient wall, a depressing reminder of militarized urban space.

The four works from the recent series "OUT OF BODY" focus on nature rather than on the constructed space of the city. In *OUT OF BODY (IV)*, *without trace*, for example, the subtitle hovers over an image of water; and in *OUT OF BODY (II)*, *haunted* and *OUT OF BODY (III)*, *decomposed*, the subtitles are superimposed over images of the sky. The fact that these are color photos brings forward an intense quality of idyllic pictorialism gone askew, and suggests that the artist's portrayals of warped, traumatized territories are meant to remap the city's psychogeography, offering a zone in which to contemplate another way to live and to remember, beyond trauma.

—Joshua Decter