

# HISTORY THROUGH PERIPHERIES

Duncan Campbell interviewed by Tobi Maier  
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For some time now the Glasgow-based, Irish artist Duncan Campbell has mined the image banks of Northern Ireland for his animated film collages, featuring footage of youth and sub cultures in the bleak suburbs of Belfast or excerpts from documentaries paying tribute to the life of human rights activist Bernadette Devlin. His latest work is a more playful homage to German artist Sigmar Polke. With recent exhibitions at the ICA and Hotel in London and the Kunstverein in Munich, Duncan Campbell's work is finally getting the attention that it deserves. On the eve of his solo exhibition at New York's non-profit Ludlow 38, Duncan Campbell took some time to speak about early radio experiments and his film works *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003) and *Bernadette* (2008) and *Sigmar* (2008).

**Tobi Maier:** *Duncan, you were born in Dublin and you now live in Glasgow, where you completed your studies after coming from Belfast. In Glasgow you have been involved with setting up the artist-run radio station "radiotuesday". Can you tell us a bit how this project came about?*

**Duncan Campbell:** There were three of us Alex Frost and Mark Vernon and myself. We were all at Glasgow School together. Radiotuesday was born out of idleness after graduating; none of us was exactly bowled over with offers to do shows. It was very typical of projects happening in Glasgow at the time: the "do it yourself" ethos, the way that it crossed over between music and art. There is a very good music scene and also a small but good art scene in Glasgow. I was interested in the idea that we could actually put the technology to do it. For not much money you could set yourself up with the equipment to broadcast to most of Glasgow. We broadcast once a week -Tuesday- hence the name. At first we used to have the phone people and tell them to turn on their radios. As time went on we acquired quite committed audience.

We had no editorial policy; we broadcast everything that anybody ever gave us. Of course there was a lot

of music and mix tapes. But a lot of material that was much more challenging: long period of silence, field recordings. As time went on and we became more technically adept. As we did more broadcasts I developed a special interest in the spoken word. For example I discovered an underground newspaper from New York in the 1960's called East Village Other. They released a sonic issue of the newspaper on vinyl. The idea is that it was like any other newspaper and that the sonic issue of the newspaper functioned as a document, a reportage, But on the other hand it was formally very experimental and exploded the notion of reportage. Also I liked Bertolt Brecht's essay on radio. What we had in mind was an interactive democratic form. At the time it was a radical idea. It seems quaint now in relation to internet. When we were doing our broadcasts everything was going digital. I think now if you were set up a radio station it would be difficult to resist the temptation to do it on internet. But it changes it from being something very geographically contained.

**TM:** *In some of your recent film works you explicitly deal with the recent past in Northern Ireland, through the depiction of urban reality in archival footage from the 1980's (Fall Burns Malone Fiddles, 2003) and in the "portrait" of Bernadette Devlin (Bernadette, 2008). What intrigues you about this particular socio-political constellation in Northern Ireland?*

**DC:** I need to make a distinction here though between the two works *Fall Burns Malone Fiddles* and *Bernadette* in that the two treat the socio-political situation very differently. *Fall Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003) is situated in a very specific part of Belfast but it's parameters deal much more with youth sub-cultures whereas *Bernadette*, deals with the political situation in a way that is much more familiar from the media. If I had made *Bernadette* even 10 years ago, it would have been met with a very polarized reaction in either the Irish or British context. People would have either really liked or hated it, depending on their kind of political affiliation. But the political conflict was still very much alive then. It has also taken me some time to address this because I am not interested in producing rhetoric.

But now that the violence is more sporadic I think that it's possible now for people to look at a figure like Bernadette Devlin, or McAliskey as she is now, and to have an appreciation for the political nuances that she and other people represented, as opposed to her story fitting into a monolithic struggle between Republicans/ the IRA on the one hand and the British government and loyalists on the other hand. Her analysis of the situation was based much more on inequalities based on class as opposed to religion. This is still a radical position in Northern Ireland. Even in the context of the Stormont Agreement which is supposed to settle all of these arguments, but in fact enshrines segregation, her analysis is highly relevant. But it is commonly accepted that with Republicans now part of the government, there is no longer a liberation struggle and that history has come to an end in the sense. Bernadette Devlin becomes like a frozen icon as a result of this.

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**

**TM:** *Do you feel you have created a kind of tribute to “Mother Courage” Bernadette, the youngest ever female MP in the British parliament and Irish civil rights activist, when you were approximating yourself to the footage?*

**DC:** There were a number of things with Bernadette (2008) that I was quite keen to avoid. There are two common ways in which she packaged or consumed. The first is as a “Mother Courage” figure: the plucky girl from mid-Ulster. All the issues that she has been dealing with become part of some vague triumph over adversity. I was keen to avoid this. The other way in which she is lumped in with all the other 68er’s and associated with the “radical chic” of the time. The fact that all of the footage was shot on 16mm film really accentuated this. As she pointed out at the time: what was happening in Northern Ireland at the time had very little to do with students rioting over segregated dorms in Paris.

I have an enormous amount of respect for her and I wanted that to come across in the film but there are also other questions, in particular about my role in constructing the portrait of her career in a 38-minute film. I make no claim that the film is exhaustive and also to make it explicit that I was manipulating the material.

Having said that, the material I had at my disposal is premediated. It comes from television news sources and is already heavily edited. So Bernadette is a portrait based on the media’s take on Bernadette Devlin, which is not transparent at all. In fact this is something that caused her an enormous amount of irritation at the time. The media played up parts of her character, parts of the causes she espoused and played down others.

**TM:** *You said you tried to avoid portraying a certain image of Bernadette Devlin. How did you try to achieve that with the archive materials? How much did the work expand your cinematic language after Falls Burn Malone Fiddles (2003) where you were working a lot with animation?*

**DC:** I think there were a number of ways: in *Bernadette* (2008) there are three distinct parts of the film, the beginning which is quite silent, which comprises of footage that I shot myself and also archival material for her. Even if people know a little bit about who she is before sitting down to watch the film tried to defy their expectations by not immediately giving to the expectation of a very fiery character. The mood is more quiet and contemplative. Part of the intention was to give the impression of something more subjective. This runs against the grain of most documentary film where any subjective feeling is conventionally concealed.

Then there is the narrators' s voice, which comprises of a script that I partly wrote myself and partly stems from her autobiography. It has an interior quality and then there are of confusions of position from the first to the third person. The intention was to have quite a contrast between this and the archival footage. Instead of the film building up to some sort of conclusion or to achieve some sort of closure- "this is the definitive Bernadette Devlin" – the intention was the opposite i.e. to leave it pointedly open-ended.

**TM:** *How did you come across the archival footage from Northern Ireland that you have been appropriating for the film work Falls Burns Malone Fiddles (2003)? Who created these archives? Did you plan to bring the images to speak in fusion of your own memory and imagination?*

**DC:** The archives where I found the material for *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* were Belfast Exposed and Community Visual Images. They were set up to counteract Belfast's image as seen through the prism of the mainstream media – the very cliché view of Belfast, of Wrangler jacketed youth throwing stones, or man in balaclavas, the British army patrols, etc. The idea was to work with teenagers in West Belfast with the intention to give a different view of life in Belfast. The archive was a by-product of this. The young people would go away and photograph what was happening in their lives. They were also encouraged to have a written component to go along with their photographs even if it was only a simple caption. In terms of the original intention it was a mixed success because a lot of the teenagers they worked with then happened to be on the spot when 'events' happened. So they became de facto members of the press corps and went on to produce images for the organizations they were supposed to be working against in the first place.

The idea of the voiceover in my film originated from these caption that went along with the photographs. I did no anticipate finding these at first. The captions were very existential in tone, "who am I?" and other questions teenagers might ask... Then there is also the obvious influence of Samuel Beckett in this work, particularly from his novels. The idea of a self-conscious and doubting narrator, trying to convey a story they knew nothing of. Trying to convince himself to take on different kinds of narratives all comes from Beckett. In that sense *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003) is a series of false beginnings. The narrator never gets anywhere. I have been asked if this film is autobiographical but it isn't, however the images come from a time when I was a teenager so I can kind of relate to them in that way.

**TM:** *In your film Falls Burns Malone Fiddles (2003), the viewer encounters images of young people in the Northern Ireland of the 1980's, mixed with animations that blur this reality and this voiceover narration. The narrator, Edinburgh-born actor Ewen Bremner also introduces Becker. Which Becker are you referring to here?*

**DC:** Howard Becker is an American sociologist from the 1950-60's who studied deviance and sub-cultures

in Chicago at the time. He became very important to the generation of sociologists in Britain in the 1970's who were writing about youth sub-cultures. He pioneered an observational approach to sociology-participant observation, where he would observe by becoming part of what was observing. He is somebody that features heavily in texts that I read in the relation to *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003), by writers like Stuart Hall. Towards the end of the film there is a section, which is a collage of quotation from these studies.

**TM:** *The narrator uses shorts like “the matrix within which subjects operate” or “question: ‘what do you do?’ Answer: ‘Nothing’ or ‘nothing much’”. What aim did you follow by spinning such a tight web of reference?*

**DC:** The whole question & answer part of the film is not a direct quotation but is based on similar sets of questions asked to youths to find out how they spend their time.

The culmination of the interrogation in *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* is that somebody kick over a bottle. This is the only thing that happens besides nothing happening. This is a personal reference, something that has very strong associations for me. Also the sound of bottles being kicked over and of glass breaking is a very reoccurring motive in punk and post punk music. In terms of to the “tight web” I was trying to be faithful to the kind of material that I was quoting from. The original source for the animation was, for example diagrams of traffic flow in a given city, which are in their own right, very beautiful. There is a certain kind of hubris at the heart of this kind of statistics animation. It is like another attempt to map certain things out, put a kind of grid over something that is not necessarily comprehensible in a rational way.

**TM:** *I am also interested in the technique of montage and animation that moves between your film and collage works. You often drag color forms and shapes across grainy black and white photography. What is your kind of intention when elaborating like this?*

**DC:** Particularly with *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003) one of the things that I was interested in doing was to make the statistical animation, figurative. I think the animation is anthropomorphic anyway but particularly when it's removed from its original context. So for example the lines that are composite over a static urban scene might resemble a figure moving through space.

**TM:** *At points there is also a complete overkill of information. The viewer is confronted with an overabundance of information that is perhaps also referring to the “educated” viewers who is “analyzing” The Troubles/working class environment and these housing blocks that you are showing us in that work perhaps today don't even exist anymore. . .*

DC: No, they don't actually. All of the photographs in the film were taken in and around the Divis Flats, which have since been knocked down. The Divis Flats in west Belfast was a housing scheme. It was a failure from the start because it was built so cheaply. It was also a microcosm of the troubles but I was keen not to let this overwhelm the piece. There is the idea of somebody imposing a kind of interpretation onto this environment and landscape but from a much more general sociological perspective. In that way, especially with Ewen Bremner speaking the narrator's part in an Edinburgh accent, it could be set in any number of cities in Britain or Ireland.

TM: *Looking at Sigmar (2008) your latest work on 16 mm, which you have been showing at the ICA in London, at Kunstverein Munich and now here at Ludlow 38 in New York, I feel this body of work is introducing new aspects to your work. Can you say a bit about this homage to Sigmar Polke, why did it develop into this surrealist collage is now?*

DC: I made *Sigmar (2008)* quite shortly after finishing *Bernadette (2008)* and in that way it was an antidote to *Bernadette*. *Bernadette* was extensively researched but ultimately I believe that the more complete the archive the more inconsistent and impenetrable it will become. The fact that *Bernadette* is not conclusive is the point of the film.

My ideas for *Sigmar* were vague to begin with. I wanted to do something that was quite abstract using animation, I had some drawings by Polke that were going to feature so I decided to follow his through and to base the film on him. I like Polke's work but I know very little about him. I'm sure this is clear from the film, but again that's the point. The film is constructed from a hand full of fragments as opposed to vast amounts of research.