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Personal Design, Political Design, Dark Design

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Abstract

The western-feminist slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970) emerged in the late 1960s, connecting women's varied experiences of, for example, reproductive autonomy, pay inequality, childcare/household labour, and domestic violence, with social and political issues. These include social justice, civil rights, abortion access, gay and women's liberation, the dismantling of systemic racism and structural oppression.

As an Irish, feminist, auto-ethnographic artist-designer-writer-academic, my lived experience of three decades of political violence and social repression in Northern Ireland (1967-98) and the different but no less complex cultures of the UK (1996-2022) and Egypt (1922-), is informed by deliberatively, intentionally designed activism for freedom, autonomy and equality. Of the several meanings of design (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), I am drawn to the verbs devise, contrive, plot, scheme, calculate, and the adverbs deliberately, purposefully and intentionally, as they allow for cunning narrative and crafty advocacy.

Keywords: ***Feminist, political, social justice, civil rights, liberation, auto-ethnography, cunning, crafty, narrative, advocacy***

The western-feminist slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970) emerged in the late 1960s, and entered my consciousness in 1980s Belfast when I formed a nascent philosophical framework that remains current. Using the cunning lingua of creative text and crafty textiles, I narrate the impact of Ireland's bloody and stained social-cultural transformation in the final decades of the last century on women of my generation. Design is not about drawing, planning or arranging for me. It's much darker.

Born in an Irish border town, with Catholic-Presbyterian parentage,
I studied textile design in Belfast with women who were "caught out" or "got":
Jeans gaping at the zip, she returned from her family with two black eyes, and dropped out.
Slim, gaunt, haunted by her "year out" in Dublin, she mourned for the only child she would ever have.
She was wilder, went to London, never came back.
She stood at barred convent gates weekly to see her boy.
She "gave up" two children, both conceived in rape, the first just after she started menstruating.
Her wee baby went to the Bethany Home, and then on to somewhere in the world.

I held my tongue, held my breath for my period, held myself. In my first winter in Belfast, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl called Ann Lovett – three years my junior – gave birth alone to a baby boy on the frozen ground beside a Virgin Mary grotto in the Irish midlands (O'Reilly, 1984). The familiar story broke to the usual national consternation, but – unexpectedly – thousands of dark stories of Ireland's long-standing culture of secrecy and shame around rape, infanticide, teenage pregnancy, unmarried motherhood, secret burials and suicide broke with it, testimonies of cruelties to women,

mothers and children in an Ireland purporting to love the family.

In the mid-1980s, having digested the gothic horror of Ann Lovett bleeding to death on the snow beside her dead newborn infant, and the infamous Kerry Babies scandal of adultery, double infanticide, and – unbelievably – a woman accused by the police of her 'illegitimate' twins' conception by two different fathers (McCaffery, 1985), Irish women reeled with the revelation of Ireland's female genital mutilation, the birth barbarism of contemporary symphysiotomy (Dunphy, 2021). This was the nightmarish non-consensual slicing or sawing through pubic cartilage, ligaments and pelvic bone, and splitting apart of a woman's pelvis to enable her, screaming and restrained, to give birth vaginally, and – pelvis strapped up again – carry unlimited subsequent pregnancies through prolapse, incontinence, agony and trauma (O'Carroll, 2014).

Out of the shadows emerged the extensive and systemic sexual, emotional and physical abuse of thousands of children by clergy, in Catholic and Protestant industrial schools, orphanages, Magdalene laundries and Bethany Homes (Cooper, 2013). Labouring, loveless and unpaid, existence unspoken, location unknown, burial unmarked, washing immoveable stains from ecclesiastical, governmental, civic and commercial cloths, girls and women engaged in repetitive rituals of laundering, stitching and ironing linking their maternity with mourning until the last laundry closed in 1996 (Fischer, 2016).

The endurance of suffering, trauma and vulnerability, frail and isolated victims, illegitimate, disfigured or unbaptised Irish babies denied burial on consecrated ground, and those who looked away. Seven hundred and ninety-six infants and young children, bundled

in greying cloth, found in a Tuam convent's Mother and Baby Home sewage system (McNamara, 2014). So worthless and uncared for, interred without ceremony, dignity or baptism – shrouded in an unholy and abject place for the disposal of Ireland's waste, hidden in plain sight (Corless, 2012).

Stained memories of desire or grief marked cloth or skin, imprinting smell, sweat, sorrow and death. The leakage of persistent sores and raw wounds on the unhealed flesh of the national body, swaddled, shrouded, stifled and sheltered by cloth, lingered as indexes of moments of existence and proof of happenings, memories and evidence of the corporeal, and – like prolonged death throes or the never-ending-ness of a death-rattle – resisting the Irish body's erasure.

Irish 'blood sacrifice' played out in the offering up of menstrual detritus by incarcerated republican women, turning degradation into resistance to penal control, hygiene and political dominance, and in the hypnotic abjection of the 1980s Maze Prison blanket protest turned hunger strike (McAuliffe, 2010). I was sixteen when the first republican hunger striker, 27-year-old Bobby Sands died on 5 May 1981. My generation was self-protectively inured to what was termed 'an acceptable level of violence' (Maudling, 1971), but Kevin Lynch was local and Kieran Doherty was the name of a classmate, so it felt near and real.

Their blankets were destroyed as materially degraded, politically incendiary objects. Murder, street violence and rioting across Northern Ireland, black flags on homes sympathetic to the hunger strikes and as intimidation devices to those known not to be, intensified around hunger striker funerals, with their paramilitary colour parties, volleys of shots and political speeches. The

'television images of emaciated Christ-like figures with longer hair and beard confined to hospital beds' (Savage, 2017), the youth of those dying in their rough prison-blanket shrouds, as with men going to war, was perversely sexy. They appeared 'feminised' rather than emasculated, devotional, performing a yielding and violated martyrdom, a romantically noble self-sacrifice.

My grandmother washed, dressed and laid out the dead of her neighbours in rural County Derry. At wakes, watching over the dead, she would drink tea, enjoy the *craic*[1], and exchange stories of the 'black arts'. Stories that made up the warp and weft of the tightly woven social fabric and passed on to me: the ragged and hooded banshee, the man with 'second sight', holy wells and rag trees to cured warts or infertility, hauntings, witches, fairies, a tissue of lore. Butter failing to churn because of a spell. The supernatural covered a world of sins. A woman was impregnated without knowing it 'by the devil'. A missing baby had been 'eaten by a big black dog'. A neighbour's vanished child found a week later under a hawthorn bush, clothes torn and stained, unable to speak, had been 'taken away by the fairies'. What other explanation could there be?

Superstition, fearfulness, cowardice and misogyny saw dirtied, unkempt and ruined cloth, and scarred, impaired, deformed or imperfect bodies, as sure signifiers of Sin. Manifesting as licentious, immoral, deviant, diabolical corruption was as near proven as not. Sin crossed the sectarian divide, and included women victims of rape, incest or just their own desires. Demonic threat, eternal persecution, a real and tangible sense of Hell's fire and Christ's

[1] Craic is an Irish word that means spinning a yarn, telling a tale, enjoying the conversation or passing on local news and general gossip.

blood. The hidden exorcism of shameful birth, the casting out the illegitimate product of Original Sin, was women's feared experience.

I was a typical young woman in 1980s Northern Ireland, where female sexuality was considered dangerous, and our female bodies were known to be incendiary, volatile and provocative. With our burgeoning, blossoming and bleeding, we were a hair's breadth away from being out of control, and all kinds of societal, clerical and parental mind games kept us confused and contained. Irish women of my generation remember Ann Lovett's and other stories vividly as a warning to us not to sin. But sin we did, flushed with the exhilarating danger of desire and the potent threat of being caught. All this informed my creative exploration of the materiality of dereliction, ephemeral and intangible memories, emotions and experiences, interwoven with a revulsion-fascination for the body, blood, and dangerous designs on the sanctity of Irish womanhood.

Natalism and nationalism, the Irish unborn, the Irish born, and the Irish mother, umbilical ties that bind. I was unaware of anyone who had an abortion until I was living in England, but my paternal great-grandmother, Sarah, died in labour one night on the floor of her husband's butcher's shop. It is inferred, not directly articulated, that she continued heavy-lifting sides of meat throughout her pregnancy, seeking the miscarriage that eventually killed her.

In the 1980s, I supported – in the abstract – the right to choose, but shame and silence predominated in a culture where wearing the life-sized embryonic feet badge, the internationally recognised symbol of the pro-life movement, was normative. In the North, where I was, the dominant discourse was that of the sectarian struggle, and the harshest criminal penalty for abortion in Europe

continued until 2020 (Gentleman, 2016). The vast majority of women travelled, and still travel, to Britain for abortions, and persistent shame surrounds the issue that legislation has not dispelled.

I grew up not wanting to look directly at the murder, martyrdom and misery of the violently conflicted society around me. I created artworks that referenced older bodies, those Bronze and Iron Age bog cadavers – most likely sacrificed or executed – preserved in the acidic, anaerobic, cold and wet peat lands of Ireland. I was able to obliquely reference the murdered "Disappeared" of the Northern Irish Troubles, some now exhumed from their bogland burial places. The significance of bog, between solid and liquid, history and the now, reality and mythology, the vital body and the cold corpse, echoed the feminised liminality of a conflicted, tortured province. Bog, like Ireland, seemed steeped in and rejuvenated by death and decay.

My research and practice spans textile design, material culture and auto-ethnographic practice, manifesting in both textual and visual form and referring to (Northern) Irish women's rights to bodily autonomy and reproductive choice, and my culture's history of shame and repression, melancholy and mourning, abjection and death. For me, the personal is political, design is dark, and storytelling is advocacy and liberation (Harper, 2025).

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