Draft Chapter

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TITLE: Participatory approaches to places of unresolved heritage: working with the communities of Long Kesh / Maze

ABSTRACT:

This chapter will critically engage with the role of dialogic and participatory artistic practices in the context of post-conflict Northern Ireland. In particular it will focus on the remnants of the conflict associate with the iconic site of Long Kesh / Maze prison and how this place has been reconfigured and (re)remembered in the evolving post-conflict present amongst a number of associated communities.

Long Kesh / Maze remains an important site in the context of peace-building and transition in contemporary Northern Ireland. Infamous due to its associations with paramilitary imprisonment during the course of the Troubles (c1968-1998), it has equally become a touchstone for how we work with the remnants of conflict, heightened security and advanced surveillance that impacted on the civilian as well as combatants in contemporary Northern Irish society. The transitions of Long Kesh / Maze from a functional prison to something more meaningful (‘unresolved’ heritage) have been stilted and at times sidelined to date. As of 2017 the site has been largely demolished with a small core of ‘retained’ infrastructure remaining in situ. The remnants of the prison are still not open to the public and there is a lack of official consensus on its ‘heritage’ status. However, this does not mean the prison has not retained its significant to those who were either imprisoned in it, worked in it, were part of the social network of prisoners or came from communities that were impacted by mass imprisonment. I have argued elsewhere that the governmental desire to ‘control’ the meaning of this site has not always been successful and this has been largely facilitated by the recontextualisation of a wide range of prison-related material culture from the site to wider society (2014). The role of the ‘dispersed self’ of Long Kesh / Maze and its status as unresolved heritage amongst a number of constituents – and how we can work with this context - are the two key focal points of this chapter.

The chapter will begin by critically assessing the current status of Long Kesh / Maze in the memories of the Troubles alongside examining the role of its material presence in wider society. It will argue that the ‘dispersed self’ of the prison is still a prominent factor in retaining memories of the conflict, however, this material presence provokes diverse reactions as to its previous role in the past, contested role in the present and potential role in the future. After this context has been presented the rest of the paper will engage with the processes involved – and the challenges encountered - in working alongside self-defined ‘communities’ associated with Long Kesh / Maze as part of a dialogic artistic project that aims to use these contested remnants to promote movement towards better understandings in the future. This section will provide insights into the role of the political climate, temporal connections to commemorations of events and people connected to the prison and the challenges of locating and working with pre-existing and newly formed communities associated with Long Kesh / Maze in an ever evolving contemporary. It will note the challenges this project has faced – both pre-considered and unexpected – regarding using dialogic / artistic approaches with communities and how these have been resolved or at least acknowledged through the course of the project. Lastly, it will draw out lessons on the issues of dealing with difficult remnants from the past and working with the communities that were most impacted by them as well as most connected to them.