

mother's annual 2014

Declan Clarke *Group Portrait with Explosives*

November - December

Tractors, Tanks and Surveillance Towers: Declan Clarke's *Group Portrait with Explosives*

What does it mean to make a *Group Portrait with Explosives*? On paper at least, the title of Declan Clarke's 42 minute film calls to mind a tradition of realist painterly (and latterly photographic) representation involving the careful orchestration of figures, props and settings.ⁱ Such orchestrations tend to emphasise either the relationships between figures, generally bound by familial, occupational or political ties, or the specific action they are gathered to perform or witness.ⁱⁱ The title of Clarke's film also evokes a more commonplace contemporary genre of representation; the public relations shot of police or customs officers, posed with a haul of confiscated items. Although rarely conceived as 'portraits' in the traditional sense, it is easy to imagine that these carefully staged images might have a value for individuals as well as organisations, finding a place in personal albums as well as official archives. *Group Portrait with Explosives* doesn't feature any trophy-like displays of seized goods. Yet many of the photographs featured in Clarke's film (particularly those depicting summer holidays spent with maternal family in rural South Armagh in the 1970s and early 1980s) similarly occupy a boundary position, between personal memento and evidence. These photographs are not simply a medium of representation. Instead, as objects they form part of the 'group' portrayed by Clarke; a gathering that includes not just individuals but rather a heterogenous assembly of actions, images, infrastructures and object relations, including those associated with surveillance, to which I will return.

There are, at the same time, several discrete portraits within the film, including some memorable snapshots of Clarke as a child. Dressed in camouflage gear, he poses solemnly with various gun-like objects, handcrafted (at Clarke's insistence) by his father in their suburban Dublin home, at a distance from the militarised farmlands of South Armagh. The prop is a somewhat under-theorised thing, but it seems a suitable designation for these ambiguous and potentially dangerous objects, not least because it is widely associated with practices of fakery and fabrication.ⁱⁱⁱ The theatrical or filmic 'property'^{iv} typically belongs to the production, deriving any subsequent economic or cultural value from this association or from a more overtly auratic relationship to a specific author. At mother's tankstation, we encounter not only the filmed portraits of Clarke posing but also a selection of the wooden objects, affixed to the gallery wall in a manner equally suggestive of a gun room and a folk museum. As handcrafted artefacts, these wooden things clearly differ from the mass-produced Zetor tractors and Semtex explosives that serve to animate and structure Clarke's film.

Group Portrait addresses not only the circulation of these objects but also their significance in the self-imagining of post-war Eastern and Western European states, noting for example the tractor's prominence in socialist cinema. By focusing on the circulation and use of these mass produced commodities, Clarke reveals the unexpected linkages between the political economies of former Czechoslovakia and South Armagh. His fascination with objects also extends beyond guns (real and fake), tractors and explosives to entities that occupy an uneasy territory between object and infrastructure, such as helicopters, tanks, surveillance towers and barracks installations. He is similarly attuned to the possibility that objects might shift category, as evidenced by the tractors surreptitiously and temporarily repurposed as rocket launchers in the farmlands of South Armagh.

Clarke's film is replete with absurd and often jarring collisions of the mundane and the military. At one moment, his mother stands near a huge British army tank and some of its uniformed occupants, posing in a jaunty snapshot taken before the escalation of conflict. At another moment, a large surveillance tower becomes visible in the distance, positioned on a hillside overlooking the family farm, its arrival accidentally documented in photographs taken during intermittent family visits. Other collisions are verbal rather than visual; Clarke describes his maternal grandmother communicating her silent disapproval when, while watching her doing housework, he enthusiastically announces his intention to become a policeman or soldier. These incidents prepare the ground for the most disturbing disclosure of military surveillance and violence, involving a car that backfires when it passes an army barracks. The sound is mistaken for gunfire, resulting in excessive and violent retaliation, irrevocably changing the relationship between soldiers and civilians in South Armagh.

How should *Group Portrait with Explosives* be situated in relation to Clarke's earlier explorations of revolutionary conflict and its consequences? The most obvious parallels are perhaps with his 2006 video *Mine Are of Trouble*, which also features a voiceover delivered by the artist and combines references to the life of revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg with personal disclosure, centring mainly on Clarke's relationships with women. There are also formal continuities with *I Went Toward Them, I Went Directly Toward the Lights* (2010), which deploys degrading film stock in a poetic treatment of post-socialist statehood, presenting 'a montage of deteriorating architecture, stripped down urban landscapes, and ruined and toppled statues of past leaders'.^v Another 16mm film work, *We'll Be This Way Until The End Of The World* (2008), shot in colour, is similarly concerned with the materiality of places and objects exposed to the violence of revolution. It depicts a sculpture, erected in 1880, celebrating the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell, focusing specifically on two bullet holes (remnants of the 1916 Easter Rising) still visible in the winged female figures adorning the base. A much more playful treatment of monumental objecthood can be found in Clarke's *Willingly Done* (2002). It presents a carefully framed shot of the nineteenth-century obelisk in Dublin's Phoenix Park, built to celebrate the victories of the Duke of Wellington, apparently disappearing inside an upside-down wellington boot, slowly lowered in the foreground.^{vi}

Clarke's fascination with the materiality of revolution also finds articulation in *We Missed Out On A Lot* (2009), a silent colour 16mm film ostensibly demonstrating how to construct a Molotov cocktail. It was first exhibited as part of Clarke's solo show *Loneliness in West Germany*, curated by Georgina Jackson, with works dispersed throughout the interior and exterior of Dublin's Goethe Institute. Noting that the show was as an exploration of 'activities and legacy of the Movement June 2nd, an anarchist group closely associated with the Red Army Faction, founded in Berlin in 1971', Chris Fite-Wassilak identifies a subtle self-mockery of Clarke's own 'fandom of radical politics'.^{vii} This tone was at times difficult to discern, overshadowed by the appeal of retro exhibition technologies (such as slide projectors) and 1970s furnishings in little-used areas of the building. Yet Clarke also made explicit attempts to stage the scene as a film set, most obviously in *It Was Beautiful and Terribly Sad* (2009), consisting of a destroyed car placed in an alley behind the building.

Clarke is of course not the only contemporary artist fascinated by monuments and the material and political processes of production and destruction through which they are constituted. A less politically-engaged treatment of these thematics can be found in *Crazy Horse* (2008) a video projection and performance event by French artist Cyprien Gaillard (in collaboration with the musician Koudlam). The video component, projected on the side of a building in the Skulpturenpark in Berlin-Mitte during the fifth Berlin Biennale, depicts the ongoing use of dynamite in the construction of a memorial for the Native American Chief Crazy Horse. This memorial, located in the Black Hill mountains of South Dakota, was commissioned by the Sioux, and intended to massively surpass Mount Rushmore in scale. The contested history of Mount Rushmore, located in a mountain range known to the Sioux as the Six Grandfathers, is largely absent from Gaillard's video. But this place is the subject of an altogether different work addressing monumental portraiture and its destruction. Matthew Buckingham's *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E., features a wall text exploring both the history and future of the mountain range and it incorporates just one image. This is a digitally altered photograph depicting an imagined future moment when the features of the mountain have eroded to the point that human faces are no longer discernible. The image is, however, framed to resemble familiar postcard images of the monument, with the result that the faces of the four U.S. presidents still seem somehow present.*

Like Buckingham, Clarke is attuned to the significance of the photographic image and its integration within broader technologies and practices of surveillance, mapping and territorial exploitation, including those involving the organisation of information. Although *Group Portrait* does not explicitly reference Ireland's exemplary role as a thoroughly surveilled colonial territory,^{viii} this history perhaps finds oblique expression in Clarke's excessively and self-consciously bureaucratic ordering of information. If the language used in the intertitles is somehow both administrative and colloquial (specifying, for example, 'The First Part' instead of 'Part One'), then 'The Second Part' is organised in an onslaught of alphabetical sections, which threaten to exceed twenty six. This insistence upon order parallels the studied neutrality of Clarke's voiceover commentary, which even-handedly acknowledges that the university education received by his mother in Northern Ireland would have been inaccessible to most women south of the border.

Ultimately, however, this carefully neutral delivery only serves to heighten the impact of the violent events recounted in *Group Portrait with Explosives*. In particular, it amplifies the anxiety palpable upon the faces of incidental victims, such as Clarke's uncle, who is steadily observed as he poses reluctantly

for the camera. This long take, exposing the man's nervous smile and unsteady posture to unflinching scrutiny, evokes antiquated – and widely-questioned – traditions of ethnographic and scientific representation. But Clarke's film goes beyond familiar critiques of the role played by photography in the colonial project, and does more than simply chronicle the crumbling of modernity's grand narratives through the cataloguing of monumental figurative and post-industrial fragments. Instead, the significance of *Group Portrait with Explosives*, lies in its subtle reframing of everyday interactions between humans, objects and infrastructures – including those associated with surveillance. Paralleling a broader 'infrastructural turn' in art and theory^{ix}, Clarke's film provocatively interweaves the material, political and social histories of tractors, tanks and surveillance towers, proposing a fundamental and compelling reorientation of familiar relationships.

Maeve Connolly

ⁱ While families are perhaps the most common subjects of group portraiture, the term is also used to describe professional and civic gatherings such as, for example, Rembrandt's *The Syndics of the Clothmakers Guild* (1662) or Frans Hals's *Group portraits of the Regents and Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* (1664).

ⁱⁱ Christian Schussele's *Men of Progress* (1857) is a group portrait of North American intellectuals, posed with symbolic objects signifying science, while Thomas Eakins presented scenes of celebrated surgeons and anatomists actually at work in *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and *The Agnew Clinic* (1889).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Vivian Sobchack, 'Chasing the Maltese Falcon: On the Fabrications of a Film Prop', *Journal of Visual Culture* 6.2, 2007, 232. In this text, Sobchack charts the convoluted histories of a series of bird sculptures supposedly produced for the 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon*.

^{iv} Alice Rayner, 'Presenting Objects, Presenting Things' in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, edited by David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, P.181.

^v Chris Clarke, 'Still Living', *Mother's Annual 2011*, Dublin: mother's tankstation, 2011.

^{vi} Maeve Connolly, 'Declan Clarke, mother's tankstation', *Artforum*, April 2011: 227

^{vii} Chris Fite-Wassilak, 'Declan Clarke, Goethe Institut', *Frieze* 123, May 2009.

^{viii} Taken in the years 1656-1658, the Down Survey of Ireland is the first ever detailed land survey on a national scale anywhere in the world. It sought to measure all the land to be forfeited by the Catholic Irish in order to facilitate its redistribution to Merchant Adventurers and English soldiers. See <http://downsurvey.tcd.ie/>

^{ix} This 'infrastructural turn' finds expression in the work of artists and theorists engaging with material, social, governmental, political and technological supports for flows of data, goods and people. See (for example) Valerie Connor, 'Askeaton Freeport: "meringue in a crème anglaise"', Askeaton Contemporary Arts, forthcoming 2015 and also Hito Steyerl, 'Duty-Free Art', *e-flux journal* #63, 3/2015, which draws partly upon the ideas of Keller Easterling. Shannon, which was established in 1959 as the world's first Free Trade Zone, is referenced in Connor's essay and also features prominently in Easterling's *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, London: Verso Books, 2014.