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Selective memory, funder documentation and peacebuilding: recovering the art of reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

The decades following the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement saw an expansion of support for cultural activities aimed at fostering reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Yet in spite of an increase in funder-led processes of audit and evaluation, there exists a significant absence of accessible data recording the development, production and experience of such cultural and artistic practices. Using the concept of the archive as a site of memory and forgetfulness, this article explores how funders of Art for Reconciliation (AfR), and the power implicit in their relationships with funded practitioners, influence what traces of this work are officially archived and in what form. The selectivity of this archive reflects a managerialism associated with the liberal peace ideology that decontextualises and depoliticises peacebuilding. In order to develop effective AfR practices, we explore ways to recollect and disseminate those aspects of AfR practice that existing methods of documentation have tended to forget.

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Introduction

The decades following the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (hereon the Agreement) have seen significant interest in and support for activities aimed at fostering reconciliation in Northern Ireland through arts and cultural expression. The presumption that participation in arts activities can support reconciliation is embedded, not only in policy making and funding processes, but also amongst the actors involved in the development and delivery of the publicly-funded arts. Despite receiving support from national and transnational funding bodies, regional politicians, cultural organisations, and community development agencies, this distinctive set of practices has yet to be conceptualised as an object of cultural policy, a situation that is symptomatic of a wider failure to properly document the role of the arts in peacebuilding. Where records and collections exist, they risk languishing in public and private repositories that are difficult to access, geographically dispersed and, in many cases, disappearing.

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Art for Reconciliation (AfR) is a catch-all term that brings together the diverse range of applied artistic practices and organisations involved in supporting reconciliation. It is used to better conceptualise and locate the diversity of roles and approaches for addressing the legacies of the 30-year conflict, known colloquially as the “Troubles”. In seeking to measure AfR’s capacity to deliver tangible change, our research has discovered a significant shortfall of relevant data in records held by strategic development bodies and funders. Far from providing information that might elucidate the quality of participant experience, social impact, historical development or even the whereabouts of applied arts practices, the available information reflects a narrow managerial focus on counting participant and audience numbers, auditing expenditure and calculating value for money. The discovery of a funder-orientated, administrative record, in which the purpose, context and legacy of arts and cultural production had been disregarded, raises concerns about the devaluing of arts practitioner and facilitator expertise in Northern Ireland.

The question of what to remember or forget of the past has been central to the process of building a future in Northern Ireland in which the violence of the conflict might be consigned to history. Walter Benjamin’s famous thesis that “every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (1968, p. 255) has become a critical mainstay precisely because competing and sometimes totalising historical narratives continue to animate politics in the North (see Bell, 2011; Kirkland, 1996, pp. 1–18). In his Benjaminian analysis of post-Agreement photography, Colin Graham (2005, 2013) identified a distinctive perspective on the dual function of the archive as a site of memory and motor of social forgetting. In a “post-conflict” society keen to represent itself as “open for business” and safe for inward investment and tourism, archiving can function to paper over complexity and neutralise the power of “[t]he embarrassingly recent past, and the irritatingly non-conforming present” to unsettle official narratives of the North’s social, political and economic transformation (2013, pp. 198–200). Resisting the impulse to depoliticise, contain and tidy the past away, the archival turn in post-Agreement visual culture sought to foster an “ethical way of seeing” as a challenge to the relentlessly up-beat narratives of regeneration and reconciliation (Graham, 2005, pp. 567–569). These insights focus attention on relationships of knowledge and power that determine the value of cultural objects and decide whose voices and experiences should be represented and whose forgotten.

The archive is frequently understood as something separate from the production of artworks: a final destination on the road to fame or obscurity. Increasingly, however, the production of art and culture cannot easily be separated from official modes of evaluation and record-keeping. In the publicly-funded arts – particularly those designed to foster reconciliation – funders require the production of detailed records through which to audit, monitor and assess impact according to their own institutional priorities. Although rarely understood as a form of archiving, administrative record-keeping constitutes an important source of documentation whose integration into the production of art and culture has serious ramifications. Most strikingly, perhaps, it is this *funder-orientated* archive, rather than Belfast’s Ulster Museum or Linen Hall Library collections, or the work held in national and international museums and galleries, that informs which projects receive funding and support. This, in turn, determines how progress towards reconciliation is measured, which projects are deemed effective, and how the value of the arts in support reconciliation and peacebuilding is understood by future generations.

We identify the present situation as an example of what Benjamin called a “moment of danger” (1968, p. 255). It is precisely when complacent narratives of “progress” are under threat that hitherto marginalised images of, and lessons from, the past press upon us, demanding to be recovered from oblivion. With the extended suspension of devolved government and paramilitary threats of “unrest” over Northern Ireland’s post-Brexit status (Campbell, 2023), promoting better understandings of how reconciliation has worked in (artistic) practice is a crucial task. However, as this article shows, the increasing dominance of funder-orientated documentation has produced a form of institutional memory loss amongst artists, arts organisations and funders. Drawing upon a series of 43 semi-structured interviews with funders and funding recipients, it contextualises the everyday experiences of arts professionals, practitioners and policy actors engaged in the development, delivery and evaluation of AfR projects within the macro-world of social, political and economic forces.¹ We begin by outlining Northern Ireland’s policy environment and considering how AfR practice has been shaped through the distinctive dynamics of peacebuilding and power-sharing. We then explore the complex power relationships between funders and funded organisations to consider how these power dynamics have entrenched bureaucratic systems for developing and measuring the value of AfR in ways that have fuelled short termism and institutional memory loss. Finally, the article proposes the archive as a system for *rethinking* these destructive dynamics of power and control and as a mechanism for *recovering* the value of these distinctive regional arts practices.

Shaping the funding environment: the dynamics of peacebuilding and power sharing in post-agreement Northern Ireland

The 1998 Agreement saw important orthodoxies around the nature of peacebuilding established across all fields of regional policymaking, including the funding of the arts. Under this new constitution, Unionist and Nationalist parties to the Agreement committed themselves to “exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences” (NIO, 1998, annex A). Whilst equality and reconciliation sit at its heart, the Agreement did not represent a resolution of the nearly thirty-year conflict, but rather it was “an agreement in the limited sense that it attempts to provide a framework through which disagreement can be *contained* without resort to violence” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 22, emphasis added). Significant points of contention that could not be resolved in the peace negotiations were creatively manoeuvred, through what has been described as a “constructive ambiguity” (Bell & Cavanaugh, 1999).

Even as the Agreement signalled political consensus for ending the conflict, it contained few proposals for reckoning with the effects of three decades of sustained violence. The task of reconciliation was limited to “the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society” (NIO, 1998, section 6, para. 13). This benign understanding of reconciliation in terms of attitudinal changes and soothing inter-communal animosities, obscures the deep, structural inequalities and divisions that gave rise to and sustained the conflict, including the role of powerful protagonists like the British Government. Efforts to “deal with the legacy of the past” have been piecemeal and multilevel (Lundy & McGovern, 2008). Community and voluntary initiatives have received significant funding (Morrow et al., 2007) to support groups grappling with the legacies of violence, division,

fear and loss, which continue to destabilise the fragile peace. However, successive public consultations and political attempts to set up an official process have repeatedly broken down in the face of deeply contested narratives of victimhood, legitimacy and culpability (Jankowitz, 2018).

Even allowing for the Agreement's limitations, however, the promise of reconciliation has been undermined by the destructive dynamics of liberal peacebuilding with its focus on maintaining political power-sharing between the Unionist and Nationalist political leadership, frequently to the detriment of communities on the ground. Contemporary peacebuilding processes are largely informed by liberal peace theory (Paris, 2004; Richmond & Franks, 2009), a conception of peace based on norms of democratisation and market liberalisation (Richmond, 2006). Increasingly *neoliberal* conceptions of this paradigm prioritise bureaucratic processes which impose a veneer of professionalisation, efficiency and good governance (Mac Ginty, 2012). Through the implementation of processes that are assumed to be neutral, this technocratic approach does not merely constitute a facilitative framework but has become "a major factor in determining the nature of the peace-building process, the actors involved and the 'peace' that it produces" (Mac Ginty, 2012, p. 288). Couched in a liberal grammar of respect for difference and equality of opportunity, the dominant peacebuilding model neglects the structural inequalities underpinning conflict and in so doing "fundamentally depoliticises peace" (Goetschel & Hagmann, 2009, p. 61). A beneficiary of significant international attention and investment, Northern Ireland's peace process is an exemplar of the liberal peace tradition, with its impulse to tidy away the complexities that disturb its guiding political-economic assumptions. Significantly for our study, the administrative approach of measuring "success" and "failure" in terms of value for money and efficiency, often to the neglect of deeper ethical questions (Mac Ginty, 2012), found a perfect home in Northern Ireland's post-Agreement cultural development strategies.

Politicians and policymakers in the newly devolved government committed to a programme of cultural development informed by a liberal conception of the educative and democratising role of the arts. Funding for the arts in general, and community or applied arts in particular, would henceforth underwrite political commitments to "parity of esteem" and "just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities" (NIO, 1998, annex A).² The new strategic development and funding regime would eschew sectarian cultural hierarchies and act instead as a motor of representational equality and reconciliation. However, this egalitarian policy shift was underpinned by a wider economic agenda in which investment in the cultural economy, and in the reconciliatory potential of the arts, was not only seen as a strategy for "tackling the problems of a divided society" (NIO, 1998, section 6 para. 2) but a key to attracting capital investment in Northern Ireland.

The potential for these two aspirations to contradict one another has emerged as a central concern for critics of the cultural economy in both academia and civil society. Many have highlighted the failure of the "double transition" (McCabe, 2012) towards peace and *neoliberalism* to improve the predicament of communities most affected by the conflict (Horgan, 2006; Horgan & Gray, 2012). Efforts to attract private investment to the region have produced meagre results, and the Northern economy continues to be beset by poor quality jobs and persistently high numbers of people unavailable for work due to physical and mental illness (Coulter et al., 2021, pp. 245–274). In

disadvantaged areas, economic austerity has further deepened mutual suspicion over who is benefitting from the elusive “peace dividend”. In this context arts funding may operate as little more than a sticking plaster for the injuries of socio-economic inequality. At the same time, marketisation drives the commodification of culture in regeneration and tourism initiatives, where experiences of conflict are repackaged to promote a visitor-friendly, post-conflict brand (Hocking, 2015; Meredith, 2011, 2012).

The Northern Ireland Executive’s embrace of neoliberal peacebuilding is visible in “good relations” policy frameworks that promote reconciliation by fostering a common interest in consumer activities, undertaken in safe, neutral zones, from which shared economic benefits might flow. The Executive’s 2013 *Together: Building A United Community* (TBUC) strategy envisages “equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation” (NI Executive Office, 2013, p. 11) as necessary precursors to the economic prosperity that, according to liberal peace theory, binds people to peaceful co-existence. The Executive argues:

We have seen Northern Ireland become somewhere investors consider a viable business base; where tourists want to visit; where significant inward immigration has led to the creation of a diverse, multicultural society and one in which the vast majority of our young people can grow up in a peaceful environment. (NI Executive Office, 2013, 10)

With its emphasis on security, inclusion and private investment-driven economic development, TBUC embodies the neoliberal political-economic model around which both Unionist and Nationalist parties sharing power in the NI Executive have found their clearest area of agreement. Rather than understanding economic stress as a contributing factor to ongoing tensions (a factor that artists can reckon with but not solve on their own), this kind of policy framing reduces the arts to securing the ground for inward investment. AfR becomes less about understanding and working through difficult questions, including issues of economic inequality and unfair distribution, than a simple means to shift perceptions, measured through “distance travelled” surveys and intergroup contact time.

Part of the problem is that reconciliation is a politically contested concept often conflated with “common sense” ideas of tolerance and respect. While far more substantive discourses exist (Bloomfield, 2006; Lederach, 1997), funders rely on thin conceptions of reconciliation, predicated, at least in a cursory way, on Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), a psychological approach which argues that, under specific conditions, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice amongst individual participants. The model unfortunately reproduces a “two tribes” view that emphasises CNR-PUL antagonism while underplaying the role of the British state (McEvoy et al., 2006), and structural conditions of gender and class inequality. Reconciliation is also employed to police what should be remembered about the conflict (O’Neill, 2022, pp. 293–298). Injunctions to “move on” are justified on the basis that raking up past injustices might unleash feelings that endanger the peace: the political needs of the present supersede a reckoning with uncomfortable historical episodes. Such uses of reconciliation limit the robust political dialogue needed for genuinely “reflexive peacebuilding practice” (Hamber & Kelly, 2004, p. 5).

Despite these problems, our interviews convey a combination of nuance and modesty amongst practitioners and funders about what specific arts projects can realistically achieve, particularly given the depth of social and economic inequalities underpinning divisions in Northern Ireland. There is even an impression amongst practitioners

themselves that artists may be “trying to do too much” (Interview, Theatre Company General Manager, 30 October 2018). Some speak candidly about the difficulty of engaging groups whose cynicism towards the peace process has been exacerbated by growing economic precarity and resource competition. This modesty, however, may also reflect anxieties concerning the arts sector’s ability to make good on claims about artistic contributions to political, social and economic transformation. As one Arts Council (ACNI) funding officer observed:

... some of the issues arts are engaged in are so structural and multi-dimensional. When you think about poverty and social exclusion as an additional layer to issues of sectarianism it is not realistic to consider the arts can fix everything overnight. (Interview ACNI Funding Officer, 9 May 2018)

The current focus upon measuring levels of inclusion and attitudinal change, whether quantitative or qualitative, encourages funding bodies, like the SEUPB, district councils and even ACNI to follow the instrumental logic set out in TBUC. This frequently results in the exclusion of artists’ practical knowledge concerning what art can and cannot achieve, which in turn results in a lack of useful contextual information that might link reconciliatory outcomes to specific artistic strategies, techniques and practices.

In such circumstances, crucial knowledge is consigned instead to back rooms and informal conversations, surreptitious processes of practitioner-led evaluation, learning and capacity building that could provide the sector with a rich pool of knowledge about the value and practice of AfR. Our interviews demonstrate a shared desire among practitioners and funders to recover this knowledge and to establish a more realistic and bottom-up understanding of art’s place within the long-term project of fostering sustainable forms of interdependence between formerly warring groups.

Dynamics of power between funders and funded organisations: cultural policy and production as sites of resistance and compliance

Understanding the systems of thought, management and policy processes that have led to the exclusion of AfR practices from the official record requires a critical view of arts and cultural policymaking as sites of social action and political negotiation. Unequal power relations are implicit in policymaking, where power emanates from sites across government departments, political parties, civil society organisations and political and community gatekeepers. Working within financial constraints and frequently under pressure to justify the (instrumental) value of their work, arts practitioners and managers become highly attuned to external threats and opportunities, often developing entrepreneurial approaches, which make best use of limited resources (Belfiore, 2006; Selwood, 2001). In making artistic programming a focal point of public policy, arts and cultural managers inevitably make compromises with external interests. Funding bodies and funded organisations operate within shared systems of rules and procedures (Miller & Yudice, 2002) and assumptions about arts and cultural participation as instruments for shaping attitudes and effecting social and economic transformation (Mommaas, 2004). Decision-making in these shared systems is decentralised, dispersed and policed through a complex apparatus of auditing, benchmarking and reporting that provide guidelines and procedures for allocating resources and setting and measuring objectives.

In Northern Ireland, shared assumptions of the positive benefits of participation in cultural production have frequently converged with regional policy discourses associated with reconciliation. Thus, whilst direct spending on arts projects remains a relatively small share of peace funding in Northern Ireland,³ belief in the power of arts and cultural participation to deliver benefits is both implicit across a range of funding regimes and embedded in political and institutional systems of thought. As our interviews show, however, this widespread agreement on the value of the arts as a driver of reconciliation is matched by a striking divergence on the question of how this value might be realised, documented and measured *in practice*.

Practitioners frequently describe reconciliation in terms of an accumulation of activities and interactions “among different groups, operating at different levels. There is no single, pure act of reconciliation” (Interview, Photography Organisation Director, 23 November 2018). AfR is understood then not as an *endpoint* but as a *process* through which artists, audiences and participants are able to “reflect on the past, to re-appraise the present and reimagine the future” (Interview, Gallery Director, 16 January 2019). Reconciliation, in this view, grows incrementally when people come together in meaningful cultural exchange. In evaluations for funders, however, these complex dynamics are frequently reduced to simplified formulae where funders spell out a deeply instrumental view of “the arts as the hook” for getting people into a room together (Interview, Central Funding Officer 1, 11 September 2018). From this perspective, the benefits of funding AfR might simply be realised through “the development of physical shared spaces ... where people have the opportunity to meet and share ideas and experiences” (Interview, Belfast City Council (BCC) Good Relations Officer, 26 June 2018). Where reconciliatory outcomes are measured against participant numbers at events, the arts content may simply be seen as a prelude to contact between individuals from different communities or social groups, rather than as something “qualitatively different from other types of reconciliation projects” (Interview, ACNI Funding Officer, 9 May 2018).

Often divorced from meaningful engagement in artistic or cultural processes, the measurement of reconciliation outcomes may be reduced to little more than an audit of levels of cross-community contact hours, as in the case of some SEUPB Peace IV-funded programmes, “whereby every participant in the programme must be with a member of a different community in a room for a minimum of 26 h” (Interview, Local Authority Peace IV Officer, 6 November 2018). The circumstances and nature of the intergroup contact within that time is left to local administrators to determine and monitor, with funders demonstrating limited interest:

Their objectives are to deliver a Peace programme in each council. Their objective is to have an Action Plan. There is nothing in their objectives about the value of the actual programme, you know. Under the post-project evaluation there will be, but certainly it is not something that we have been asked about in terms of, well what are the people saying? (Interview, Local Authority Peace IV Officer, 6 November 2018)

Regardless of how effectively these programmes facilitate positive intergroup contact amongst their participants, funders collect little learning about *how* and *why* the programmes are effective nor where obstacles and/or failure may propel innovation.

The presumed consensus around the capacity of the arts to effect reconciliation is built on fundamentally different concepts of what constitutes art and reconciliation

respectively *or* together. The power wielded by funding bodies, however, allows them to impose their conceptions of both through their procedural systems and regulatory frameworks. Arts managers and practitioners frequently cite these bureaucratic systems as constraints to more imaginative approaches to developing AfR projects. There is a powerful sense across the interviews with practitioners that reconciliation processes cannot be initiated if pre-determined project outcomes are defined too narrowly. Many suggest that the assumption that you can “point towards a reconciliation event, or an event which promotes reconciliation ... would be very off-putting [for participants]. And it is also demeaning” (Interview, Theatre Company Artistic Director, 17 October 2018). Thus, whilst funders search for ever more precise ways of measuring reconciliatory outcomes, arts practitioners bemoan the increasingly bureaucratic, coercive and “tick-box” nature of funding regimes. From this perspective, the failure to capture and capitalise on artistic value and participant experience is attributed not so much to a lack of documentation, but rather to official *methods* that overlook “memories, material traces, and experiences that do not obtain to narrow conceptions of efficacy” (Coupe, 2020, p. 2).

The issues with funder-orientated documentation exist below the surface of funder-practitioner interaction, constituting an open secret in the sector. Many funders recognise that supporting more sustained and self-reflexive evaluation and development processes would allow artists to “work seamlessly from one project to the next” (Interview, ACNI Funding Officer, 9 May 2018). However, despite broad agreement on the problem of short termism and the opaque use of data, as one funder put it: “a lot of people do just play along” (Interview BCC Good Relations Officer, 26 June 2018). Given this unanimity on its methodological weaknesses, questions remain as to why this process continues to dominate arts funding.

Where neoliberal agendas predominate, funders measure cultural value in terms of value for money and audience numbers, over and above the artistic or creative quality of the experience (Belfiore, 2004; McGuigan, 2004). Discussing the kind of information funders seek in evaluations, one interviewee said:

... they want to know economic impact and they want to know visitor spend, accommodation ... how much they were eating and drinking over the weekend. Bed night is a massive one. So, you are trying to ask people how much has an experience changed their identity, but you are also saying did you stay overnight in a hotel? (Interview, Literary Festival General Manager, 20 February 2019)

In this context, artistic ambitions to engage with social and economic exclusions and inequality may be sacrificed in favour of more soothing cultural representations designed to “increase the saleability of the city” (Chatterton & Unsworth, 2004, p. 377). To take one example, the term “place making” has become shorthand for the practice of employing cultural projects to improve the image of divided communities,⁴ often developing “neutral” space for people to come together for social, cultural and economic exchange. One such programme, the ACNI and SEUPB-funded *Building Peace through the Arts* (BPtA) programme (2013–2015), which emerged from ACNI’s *Re-Imaging Communities* pilot scheme (2006–2009), supported communities to transform physical manifestations of sectarianism by painting over murals depicting masked gunmen, for example, with commemorations of the Titanic and local sports personalities like George Best and Rory McIlroy. Where the *Re-Imaging Communities* scheme had fostered more challenging

interventions that reflected on contentious uses of symbolism and allowed artists and communities to “move at their own pace”, BPtA instituted more bureaucratised application, consultation and commissioning processes that prioritised peacebuilding through rebranding and placemaking (Wallace Consulting, 2016, p. 6). The formal evaluation described this multi-agency, consortium-led rebranding scheme as “a clear image of community progression” and “the most visible evidence of physical and social regeneration” (Wallace Consulting, 2016, p. 87). However, it favoured simplified and essentialist community images that are deemed easier to consume, particularly by visiting tourists, than more complex or unsettling representations of local identity (Hocking, 2015, pp. 114–115). Such aesthetic fixes literally paint over the deep-seated divisions and economic marginalisation that evidence glaring failures of the peace process.

AfR practitioners often approach evaluations in terms of two separate processes: one involving an audit of funder-orientated measures and the other involving an internal assessment of creative processes in which they “laboriously go through every event and look at what worked and what didn’t” (Interview, Community Arts Manager, 21 November 2018). As an interviewee put it:

We would always have the discussions before we filled out any forms. And it was in the discussions that I felt they [participants] were most open and that I found they ... understood the complexity of the situation ... and the complexity of the nature of what we were trying to achieve through the creative process. (Interview, Theatre Company Director, 18 October 2018)

Whilst the data captured for auditing purposes becomes part of the official record, the internal assessment, whether a post-event debrief or team residential used to “assess ourselves, what was happening, what needed to happen next” (Interview, Gallery Director, 16 January 2019) is retained as organisational knowledge. This more complex process of documentation and assessment is consequently absent from the official record.

The division between unofficial and official documentation reduces the capacity of arts practitioners and funders to compile and analyse learning beyond individual programmes and organisations, acknowledge and learn from failure when it occurs, and confront the ethical and political questions raised in AfR practice. The emphasis on measuring efficiency and value for money, and the failure to document the complex experiences and agency of arts practitioners, participants and audiences in AfR practice has fuelled a loss of historical and institutional memory as funders, managers and practitioners move on.

Decontextualisation, short termism and the loss of institutional memory

Reflections of practitioners and funders in our interviews also bring to light the effects of funder-oriented approaches to measuring AfR outcomes. Focusing on artist and participant experience and organisational capacity, we identify three cumulative and mutually reinforcing effects which hinder research, development and delivery of AfR practice in Northern Ireland: decontextualisation, short termism and the loss of institutional memory.

Decontextualisation

The sacrifice of contextual detail in favour of comparability relegates salient social and political issues to the margins. For example, despite the substantial focus of re-imagining

programmes within Loyalist communities, only one paragraph in the *Re-Imaging Communities* report is dedicated to Loyalist protests which ground Belfast to a halt in 2013 (Wallace Consulting, 2016, p. 80). The question of how specific projects engaged with the experience of political disenfranchisement and socio-economic inequality in working class areas is left largely unexplored. As one interviewee observes, the absence of critical context:

... strips these projects of meaning, turning them into nice little memories. And I wonder if kids look back and say, I remember when I did that project, it was great. But what are they doing now? Is it like a nice remembered holiday, something pleasant but no longer there? So when you are reporting it back, you are often reporting it back in the moment, which feels good and positive. But you can't find out what happens to that individual in the long term. (Interview, Photography Organisation Director, 23 November 2018)

Prevailing approaches overlook the complexities of participation and the way participants arrive at interpretive judgements about the value of their experiences over time. The failure to foreground participant experience and agency – effectively writing them out of the official record – either expresses a lack of concern or a managerial impulse to smooth away contradictions. Whatever the motivation, this omission from the official record raises problems for the research, development and delivery of arts practices that directly engage with participants.

The tendency to minimise context in funder documentation stands in contrast to the largely unrecorded political and ethical considerations of artists and arts organisations engaged in AfR practice. Our interviewees stress the importance of political criticality and cultural understanding in establishing effective and ethical artistic responses to conflict. Practitioners speak of having to address challenging political and economic circumstances facing communities emerging from conflict and having to confront resistance or even suspicion from potential participants towards AfR activities. Practitioner knowledge is steeped in more complex understandings of political, social and economic contexts than quantitative measurements of participation, expenditure and economic targets.

Some funders share the concerns of arts practitioners and managers about the elision of context in outcomes based approaches to funding and evaluation, and the subsequent loss of the experience and value of AfR in the official record. Acknowledging that the need to “set down criteria that are consistent across different areas of work” drives a tendency to oversimplify AfR processes, one interviewee observed that “we’ve lost that sort of grassroots ... you know it’s all about corporate reconciliation and ticking boxes, rather than actually being there and working with people” (Interview, Local Council Arts Development Manager, 9 May 2018). Others question the usefulness of “tick box” evaluation strategies in more sardonic terms, observing that “there’s only so many boxes a person can tick before the boxes don’t mean anything anymore” (Interview, BCC Arts Officer, 26 June 2018). This leads to another effect of the dynamics identified in this research: the short termism of evaluations produced for funded programmes that focus on efficiency and value for money to the detriment of critical examination and long-term development of practice.

Short-termism

Rather than informing AfR policy and practice, funder documentation serves the short-term goal of justifying further funding by evidencing cost-efficiency and “success”. This

may explain why practitioners accept the burden of gathering funder-orientated data, seeing it as a necessary evil to prove their compliance with and capacity to meet funder expectations and instrumental targets:

I think most agencies want evaluation to be positive, insofar as they want it to provide a vehicle for promoting the programme and identifying additional sources. (Interview, ACNI Funding Officer, 9 May 2021)

Such incentives feed into the general sense of scepticism amongst practitioners that their feedback is actually used to inform future projects, or establish art's contribution to long-term reconciliatory change. They variously declare that "[funders] tell you they want to see in an evaluation and they aren't ever going to read it" (Interview, Playwright and Theatre Producer, 5 November 2018), and that they "spend a huge amount of time diligently compiling statistics and reports and it doesn't seem to go anywhere" (Interview, Community Arts Organisation Director, 1 March 2019). Without a clear sense of how funder documentation is actually used, evaluation alienates practitioners from the work they produce. As one interviewee notes: "rather than ask you how to solve the problem, [the funder] tells you how to solve the problem, [...] not allowing the arts organisations to do what they are best at, which is to come up with a creative way to solve that problem" (Interview, Community Arts Officer, 21 November 2019).

The problem is less with accountability mechanisms *as such* than the knock-on effects of short-termism on the capacity of arts organisations to pursue alternative forms of evaluation and documentation. Funders monopolise time and energy that would otherwise be employed preserving work for future study, reference, and knowledge exchange. The material demands of such processes are compounded by the precarity of arts organisations and the competitive nature of the funding environment (Jennings et al., 2017).⁵ As organisations are forced to search for several sources of funding, and manage processes of documentation where there is "a lot of disparity between what different funders want" (Interview, Theatre Company Artistic Director, 3 October 2018), resources become ever more thinly spread. The patchiness of AfR funding sources thus increases the pressure on artists and organisations to prove compliance and justify their practice across different funders' priorities and often at the expense of its own internal coherence:

So you come to your six month review for Arts Council or for Belfast City Council, or your annual funding for CRC, you know, you'd think when you've done one it would cover all three. But it doesn't, they are asking for different information. (Interview, Theatre Company Artistic Director, 3 October 2018)

Even where District Councils take on some of the work of evaluation, the constant monitoring of outcomes by funders, such as the SEUPB's Peace IV programme, inevitably places a heavy burden on participants, facilitators and artists. One practitioner notes the considerable irony of a project designed to support the processing of difficult and often traumatic experiences eroding health and wellbeing of facilitators and artists:

[I]n six months I have been asked to research a play, write a play and direct a play, with 50% of the cast as a community cast. And what that is going to do to my health and the amount of time I need to take off after, which is a considerable amount of time, which nobody cares about when they take you on board. And yet this is meant to be the truth and recovery process. And throughout it I feel that I am ill, working throughout the whole thing. And I

am under extraordinary pressure. And that is a Peace IV process. (Interview, Playwright and Theatre Producer, 5 November 2018)

Stripped of the specificities of social geography and shifting political circumstances, the documentation of AfR in the official record does not simply reinforce a shallow view of art and reconciliation, it fails to record and embed practitioner knowledge into developmental processes.

Having time and space to reflect upon difficult material and ethical issues is especially important in peace-related projects, but the churn of funder-oriented documentation diminishes the capacity of artists to stand back and record the “rich and valuable exchanges [that] have occurred between administrative staff, facilitators and participants” (Jennings & Baldwin, 2010, p. 87). In the words of one interviewee:

We have got no facility for long-term tracking and this is long-term investment. We can tell you how many people turned up, we can tell you how many people, if there was an end product, saw what had turned up and we maybe had some anecdotal notations of the process. (Interview, Gallery Director, 16 January 2019)

In spite of agreement between funders and arts practitioners on the potential of AfR to open up imaginative spaces for reconciliation, our research has exposed the lack of a common set of values through which to measure the experience of AfR *in practice*. In the absence of a shared value system, funders and practitioners have jointly defaulted to evaluation systems dominated by the logic of auditing and underpinned by the exigencies of power-sharing and neoliberal economic agendas.

Loss of institutional memory

The qualitative details of AfR practice is preserved in the consciousness of practitioners and memories of participants, while documentation that might be crucial for critical reflection and development of an informed AfR strategy languishes in the back rooms of arts organisations. Without adequate resources to organise and share practitioner experience and knowledge, funder archives disclose only the barest traces of AfR practice. Meanwhile collections held by institutions designed to collect artworks relating to the “Troubles”, such as the Ulster Museum’s Art of the Troubles Collection and the Linenhall Theatre Collection, are geographically dispersed, difficult to access, and, in many cases, disappearing. The relentless logic of auditing and compliance has fuelled a loss of institutional memory that threatens the development of AfR practice in Northern Ireland.

That funder documentation functions in practice as a mechanism of forgetting, or at the very least of marginalising certain memories, recalls Pierre Nora’s (1996) famous distinction between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire*. Nora argued that the expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of official, state-sponsored sites of memory including archives accelerated the decline of social practices through which communities actively shared, reconsidered and appropriated the past on their own terms. His accusation that the compulsion to systemise memorialisation arises out of “a profound worry that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory” (1996, p. 7) resonates with funding systems that mistrust the claims of practitioners over the impact of their own work and obsessively records the efficacy of projects according to apparently “neutral” metrics of social and economic value. Unlike the working memory of practitioners, the

official repositories of evaluation forms and other documentation kept by funders remain semi-closed and largely inaccessible. A situation has arisen in which the official archive, well-resourced and empty, stands in stark contrast to the rich memories of practitioners and arts organisations that remain under-resourced and uncollected.

The forms and modes of documentation that currently exist have arisen neither by chance or by design; rather, the political and economic assumptions underlying the peace process in Northern Ireland have helped to produce a disorganised and discontinuous set of “official” documentation practices. While “official” archives privilege creative responses to “Troubles” that, because oblique, can be repackaged as cultural assets, funder-orientated documentation practices lock the socially-engaged work of AfR practitioners into methods of record keeping that are materially demanding and prevent the development of a theoretical understanding of the distinctive practices of AfR. Those applied and community arts organisations that draw upon peace funding are left with few resources and little time to remedy this situation by organising material to be deposited in “official” archives, a situation that is compounded by the lack of a centralised, accessible, and interoperable archive of creative responses to the “Troubles”.

The domination of funder priorities and lack of an archive of practitioner knowledge to inform AfR strategy resonates with Stanton and Kelly’s (2015) observation that the development of a locally embedded peacebuilding theory in Northern Ireland has been stymied by the bureaucratisation of peacebuilding activity. The greater financial support enabled by the professionalisation and regulation of peacebuilding by funders comes “at the cost of the marginalisation of those who learned by experience, as though their own knowledge was irrelevant” (Stanton & Kelly, 2015, p. 47). Conversely, the lack of documentation on responses to complex political and social issues “leaves current approaches, methodologies and practices ... under-scrutinized, with the result that practice can become rote and unreflective” (Stanton & Kelly, 2015, p. 37). Funder-led documentation in the field of AfR similarly institutionalises a top-down hierarchy of knowledge that imposes the epistemological and ideological frameworks of funders upon the knowledge of practitioners and facilitators. This prevents the experiences of practitioners from informing, or developing into, local AfR theory. Instead, the fragmenting and precaritising effects of a short-termist and de-contextualising funding system undermines institutional memory, and prevents the sharing of practical, ethical and political lessons.

Conclusion: towards an archive of art for reconciliation

Beyond its practical function as a repository for documents and texts, the archive represents a discursive formation or system of knowledge, organisation and control (Foucault, 2002, p. 143). In this way, the study of the archive provides evidence of the systems of power through which its content has been selected and organised (Foucault, 2002, p. 146). This article has shown how processes of documentation, evaluation and archiving by arts organisations and practitioners become entangled with the interests of arts funders who are, in turn, influenced by the cultural policy orthodoxies and political priorities of the day. In doing so, it has drawn attention to the social structures, processes and shared realities that shape the choices of the agents that have brought existing repositories into being. In particular, it has traced how the funding system prioritises selective

archival processes – the funder-oriented archive – at the expense of methods that would better suit the complexities of AfR.

What currently exists are fragments of material dispersed across a number of collections held by national and regional institutions, community organisations and individual practitioners, material that is divided by artform and organised in a myriad of different ways. Lacking interoperability or accessibility, many of these repositories remain beyond the reach of all but the most inquisitive investigators. Without a functional and accessible record of historical projects we have no sense of how AfR has developed with, and responded to, the changing demands of the peace process. This limits the capacity of artists, funders, researchers, educators and the general public to learn from historical practices. By their nature the applied arts seek to intervene in specific social and political circumstances and are deeply embedded in the localities from which they draw their participants and audiences. For the potential users of an archive of AfR, existing forms of funder-oriented documentation and “official” archives lack the contextual or historical information needed either to properly understand the political, economic and social significance of a given project.

Taking account of the complex negotiations between funder and funded that have shaped and ultimately determined decision-making about what is collected, why and in what form, the archive might, however, become a site for *rethinking* the destructive dynamics of power and control described by our interviewees and also as a mechanism for *recovering* AfR practice. Where Graham challenges the politics of forgetting and Nora explores the tension between official and unofficial impulses for remembering, Alison Jeffers’ study of social archiving practices and peacebuilding in loyalist north Belfast makes the case for actively recalling the past to mind (Jeffers, 2016). Following a period of protracted violence, the act of recalling to memory those who suffered and died is not simply an obligation, but a way of “summoning up one’s spirits or courage [...] in the sense of remembering and re-collecting, of gathering and reassembling depleted resources and energies [...]” (p. 147). Applied to an archive of AfR practices, this form of re-collection would involve a process of recovering lost and disappearing artistic projects and artworks and re-contextualising them within the circumstances in which they were produced, and to which they responded.

The question of what form an alternative archive of AfR might take is beyond the scope of this paper, but any future effort must consolidate existing information and recover this contextual detail in a manner that remedies the problematic power dynamics outlined in this article. Our interviews illuminate the burden of official record keeping and the problems it poses for arts organisations, practitioners and participants. They provide an important record of the way arts workers navigate funding environments and reporting procedures that frequently leave them with insufficient time and material resources to effectively document and evaluate the work they produce according to their own artistic priorities and organisational interests. There is also unanimity, among funders, funded organisations and practitioners, on the urgent need to design more effective, practice-orientated documentation and evaluation processes. Yet the question of how a comprehensive archive of AfR might be constructed independently of the perverse incentives of the current, funder-orientated system remains open. We propose that answers may be found by first considering why and for whom the funder-orientated archive exists, and

imagining what an archive of art *for reconciliation*, rather than for accountability and accountancy, might look like.

Notes

1. This research was conducted as part of an AHRC project entitled: “The Art of Reconciliation: Do The Funded Arts Transform Conflict?”.
2. The two “traditional” communities in Northern Ireland are widely, if inadequately, categorised as Catholic, Nationalist, Republican (CNR) and Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL).
3. As a function of the issues identified in this paper, there are significant challenges to determining categorically what share of peace funding has gone to arts activity, however based on available data we can say with confidence that less than five per cent of funding across all PEACE Programmes, and approximately six per cent of Community Relations Council funding from 2000 to 2018 supported to arts-related activity (Jankowitz & Campbell, 2019).
4. For example, the Belfast City Council’s draft cultural strategy for 2020–2030 refers to the city “as an international testing ground for cultural engagement, development and place making” (BCC, 2020, p. 2).
5. Prior to the implementation of funding cuts for the arts following the 2008 Financial Crisis, a joint report commissioned by the ACNI and Arts Council of Ireland found that the average worker in Northern Ireland had earnings in 2008–2009 of 1.5 times that of the average artist’s income (McAndrew & McKimm, 2010, p. 152).

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