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*Exhibiting Gender, Curating Conflict: Body Politics and Affective Objects in Art and Museums: A response to the work of Gail Ritchie by D.M. Withers*

The memory of the Great War is personal for all of us, regardless of whether our family **members fought or died in this conflict. As the conflict has moved beyond the 'living memory'** of participants and witnesses, the practice of remembering is ensured through the rituals that take place every November—an activity further amplified by centenary activities, organised by the British government between 2014-2018. It is in this sense they are personal - embedded in the rhythms and symbols of British society, which of course acquires further meaning within **the Northern Ireland context, where 'the texts and practices of Remembrance [...] had come to be seen as part of the symbolism of Loyalism, imperialism and Britishness'**, writes John Poulter in a recent article about the **'Island of Ireland Peace Park' anti-war memorial** in Belgium (2017, 4).

This personal relationship is acquired through a fundamentally public form, but nonetheless interpolates **'citizens' into circuits of belonging**—through-mourning that is familiar, homely and expected – in the run up to November the paper poppies appear, pinned to the chest of newscasters, sports people and just about everyone else. Attachment, ambivalence, pride or an automated gesture, as a badge or symbol the worn poppy signals a (war) weary consensus that looks like memory, but since memory is contingent, mutable and contested—just like history—it may well be something else.

In *Looking for Frank*, Ritchie takes the personal search for the memory of her great-grandfather Frank, a member of the 36<sup>th</sup> **Ulster division who 'died on 29 March 1918, in France somewhere between Amiens and St. Quentin', in order to reclaim a 'private' relation** to memorialization. In so doing, she de-contextualises the memory of the Great War as a public event which unfolds as one always expects it to, and makes the memory appear unfamiliar, and strange. Of course there is something very strange about the image Ritchie constructs, as the centerpiece of her project. It is a kind of temporal and gender drag that places her, in military garb, within the image alongside her great-grandfather, playfully exposing the infidelity to indexical presence promised by the digital image, and its technical potential to re-compose the mnemonic terrain, enabling distinct **historical times to 'touch'**. **She looks queer alongside him**—out of place, in place—out of history, in history—touching a past within an image that will, concurrently, extend that mutated memory into the future (but will future onlookers notice the insertion, the re-mark, the re-remembering? I wonder) The image is an example of what **Alexandra Kokoli calls 'the feminist uncanny,'** – a making strange of the familiar and public through placing them in a domestic context—an ironic action that makes the public memory **'unhomely'**.

Or, as Ritchie writes:

**'engaging with the historically *unknown*, rather than with the *known*, creates a space in which the borders between history and memory can be redefined or even removed.'**

Returning to the poppy, Ritchie's work on the 'Wounded Poppies' series similarly aims to defamiliarize a familiar object, through a series of gestures that makes memory 'work'.

Again, as Ritchie writes,

**'[Wounded Poppies] began with poppies picked along the banks of the Somme, others were picked in Germany, Spain, and Ireland. Pressed into sketch books, their petals crumpled and the colours faded from blood red to pink. They were then painted individually in watercolour. I kept the seeds and scattered them in fields around my locale.'**

I was struck by this action—as someone who had grown up in a world filled with poppies—poppies concentrated by a particular meaning that seems so fixed, much in the same way that violence and violent systems can appear an inevitable part of human life. What to do with the poppy? How to claw back some kind of gesture that wrenches the flat paper from the lapel, to dislodge its social life, to puncture its coherence, to wound, while retaining respect, humility and honour for the far too many lives lost and continue to be lost?

**And it was in this sense I was drawn to Derrida's notion of the 'aporetic experience', invoked by Vikki Bell in a recent article exploring 'Five Theses on curating the violent past,' where justice is 'the incalculable,' and the aporetic experience 'the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice' (Derrida, 1990: 947)**

Vikki Bell goes on to write:

**'Aporetic experiences is 'all' we could expect of**

them: experiences that call for Justice while knowing that ultimately it is both unattainable – since

even the most condemnatory legal judgments will never fully compensate – and uncontainable,

since – as when faced with the *pitiable, mere materiality of remnants* – one is continually faced with an appeal that extends beyond any legal decision, and beyond any museum exhibit.'

**Such memory practices are 'attuned to the dangers of simple inscriptions that purport to tell History and deliver its "lessons" and embrace instead various philosophies that intend precisely to welcome new contexts without reiterating existent narratives and to allow openings that potentially foster new conditions of possibility' (Bell, 2016: 10).**

**Perhaps Ritchie's folding, distributing and planting of the poppies embodies the gesture of the aporetic experience, in that it creates room for dwelling and doubt, making the known unknown—an avenue through which it is possible to think again what the poppy means, what remembering as a personal and civic practice can become, beyond the regulated ceremonies of calendric observance. To me it provokes the compelling question of *what do we do with material symbols of memory that exist around us*, that are not simply exterior to the social world, but are planted within us, our consciousness; inextricably part of how we have come to think of questions of justice, suffering, remembering and forgetting for the past 100 years within a world that is endlessly at war. The poppy, in this sense, has become the threshold—a point of limit in the mnemonic imagination whose material life—Ritchie rightfully emphasises—continues to play an important role in wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in Afghanistan.**

Vikki Bell (2016) 'Between documentality and imagination: Five theses on curating the violent past,' *Memory Studies*, DOI: 10.1177/1750698016673238.

**Jacques Derrida (1990) 'Force of law: the 'mystical foundation of authority'.** *Cardozo Law Review*, 11: 920–1045.

Alexandra Kokoli (2016) *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice*, London: Bloomsbury.

John Poulter (2017) 'The discursive reconstruction of memory and national identity: The anti-war memorial the Island of Ireland Peace Park,' *Memory Studies*, DOI: 10.1177/1750698016688240

Gail Ritchie (2015) 'Looking for Frank', *Critical Military Studies*, 1: 3, 260-268

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