



Governing the Tongue

Shane Alcobia-Murphy

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How free is the Northern Irish writer to produce even a short poem when every word will be scrutinised for its political subtext? Is the visual artist compelled to react to the latest atrocity? Must the creative artist be aware of his or her own inculcated prejudices and political affiliations, and must these be revealed overtly in the artwork? Because of these and other related questions, the recent work by Northern Irish writers and visual artists has been characterised by an inward-looking self-consciousness. It is an art that relays its personal responses in guarded, often coded ways. Characterised by obliquity and self-reflexivity, the art does not simply re-present events and the artist's emotive response towards them; rather, it calls attention to the manner of its presentation. It is an art about art, and its role and place in society. *Governing the Tongue* examines how the creation of art in a time of violence brings about an anxiety in the Northern Irish artist regarding his or her artistic role, and how it calls into question the ability to represent events. The series of essays is inter-disciplinary in its approach, exploring the place of art its role and location in the work of key Northern Irish writers (Ciaran Carson, Seamus Deane, Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, Eoin McNamee, Glenn Patterson) and visual artists (Willie Doherty, Rita Donagh, Paul Seawright, Victor Sloan).

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