

Painted Words

Shane Cullen's *Fragmens Sur Les Institutions Republicaines IV*

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SHANE CULLEN *Fragmens Sur Les Institutions Republicaines IV*



Shane Cullen has filled ninety-six eight by four feet boards with approximately thirty-five thousand words of text, the wording meticulously copied from David Beresford's account of the 1981 Irish hunger strike, *Ten Men Dead* (Grafton, 1987).

Cullen's act of textual transcription focusses upon a series of letters produced by Republican prisoners during the period of their politically-motivated refusal of food whilst being held in Long Kesh prison in 1981. These secret communications or "comms" were inscribed in minuscule script upon cigarette papers in order to avoid the texts' detection by the Long Kesh guards. Rolled or crushed into balls and wrapped in cellophane, these tiny pellets of compressed text were then smuggled out of the prison (hidden in the various orifices of the body) and delivered to the IRA leadership.

Since the late 1960's there has been an increase in the use of textual material within the visual arts. One could point to a whole subsection of artworks made entirely of text, including pieces by Ilya Kabakov, Tom Philips and Robert Smithson. In his book *The Responsibility of Forms* (Basil Blackwell, 1985) Roland Barthes suggests that from a certain perspective painting can be considered to be a kind of writing. Cullen offers an interesting reversal of this observation. Furthermore, it would be productive to compare *Fragmens...* to the visually inventive works of poets such as Mallarmé and Apollinaire, rather than keeping one's comparisons strictly within the visual arts as conventionally defined.

Fragmens... should also be considered in relation to the increasingly popular gallery practice of installation, each individual painted panel being but one distinct part of a larger work designed to generate a single, coherent ambience rather than be seen as a series of discrete paintings. Around this production of multiple units hovers the ghost of Warhol's mechanically produced, serial works but also that of the 'dumb' copying of the jobbing signwriter.

Cullen claims *Fragmens...* is a piece of social research rather than a means of either celebrating or condemning those parties—of whatever political persuasion—involved in the 1981 hunger strike. One may look again to Barthes for a relevant observation. In his book *Writing Degree Zero* (Hill and Wang, 1967) he notes that "...a history of political modes of writing would...be the best of social phenomenologies." (p. 25). It should go without saying, however, that no work of art is, in the last analysis, politically neutral.

How are we to read *Fragmens...*? What is the relationship between the text employed as 'subject matter' and the surface of the support? Cullen has chosen to paint by hand ninety-six panels of text. The consequences of such a decision are in no way trivial for someone who is to actually take on this task. Nor should we, as viewers or readers, ignore this aspect of Cullen's practice. Cullen has committed himself to a not inconsiderable amount of labour by choosing to make these paintings by hand. Indeed, had Cullen instead decided to utilise methods conventionally employed in the reproduction of writing the resulting objects would not be paintings at all, but merely yet more printed text. What might be termed the 'slow intensity' implicit in Cullen's physical production of *Fragmens...* should be borne in mind when consider-

ing the piece. The painstaking manner of the work's production is of considerable importance with respect to its interpretation.

The "comms" were produced as private letters whose general status has, however, now been considerably altered, by their general publication but also through Cullen's decision to use them within his artistic practice. A double transformation has been enacted upon what were initially written and transmitted as a clandestine correspondence intended only for a select readership. When first published the "comms" became pieces of public information. No longer 'mere' private messages, they are now historical documents available for consultation by anyone with an inclination to check them out. Cullen's painted version of the texts gives their public presentation another twist. The artist would appear to be simply quoting an already available source (Beresford's book), since what is translated into painting is not the "comms" themselves but the version of them provided in *Ten Men Dead*. Not only has Cullen not quoted from the actual letters, but has also included within his transcription from the book Beresford's editorial insertions. The panels have been transcribed in the order that Beresford quotes the "comms" in his book. In both the book and upon the painted boards these additions are indicated through the use of square brackets. As Beresford comments in his "Author's Note": "An important foundation to the book as a whole is the huge volume of "comms" given in *Ten Men Dead*. Cullen is able to give only Beresford's selective rendition of the texts. In some sense, then, *Fragmens...* is concerned not so much with the 'first order' textual traces of ten Irish political prisoners but with the subsequent interpretation of a loaded historical moment. There is perhaps some intended commentary here—I mean on Cullen's part—concerning the apparent impossibility of gaining unmediated access to a specific historical event.

The utilisation of historically very 'heavy' textual material in *Fragmens sur les Institutions Republicaines IV* raises complex questions about politics, art, secrecy and censorship. I will end with a remark from Jacques Derrida's book *The Post Card* (University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 194); it seems strangely pertinent to Cullen's work. "What cannot be said", writes Derrida, "above all must not be silenced but written."