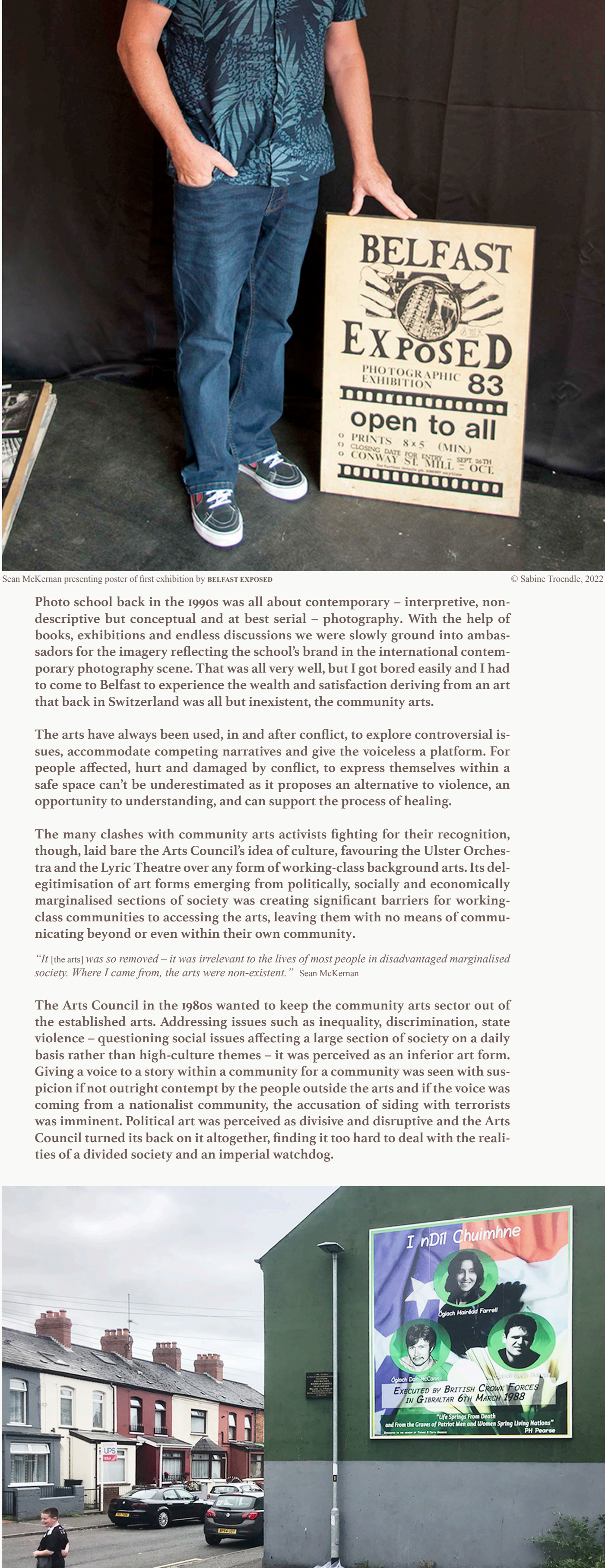


"We done an exhibition about the Pound Lane, which was a very small Catholic community at the bottom of the Falls Road that was uprooted and Divis Flats was built on top of this really old community. There's this old woman coming in and she was standing crying, she was about 80 odd years of age. And I went up to her and I says, 'Are you ok, I noticed that you're upset.' And she says to me, 'Son, I just seen a photograph of a little boy that I had, and he had died when he was something like eight years of age. And she never had a photograph of him. One of her neighbours had put the photograph in the exhibition. That to me was the essence of community photography."

Sean McKernan, co-founder of BELFAST EXPOSED



Sean McKernan presenting poster of first exhibition by BELFAST EXPOSED

© Sabine Troendle, 2022

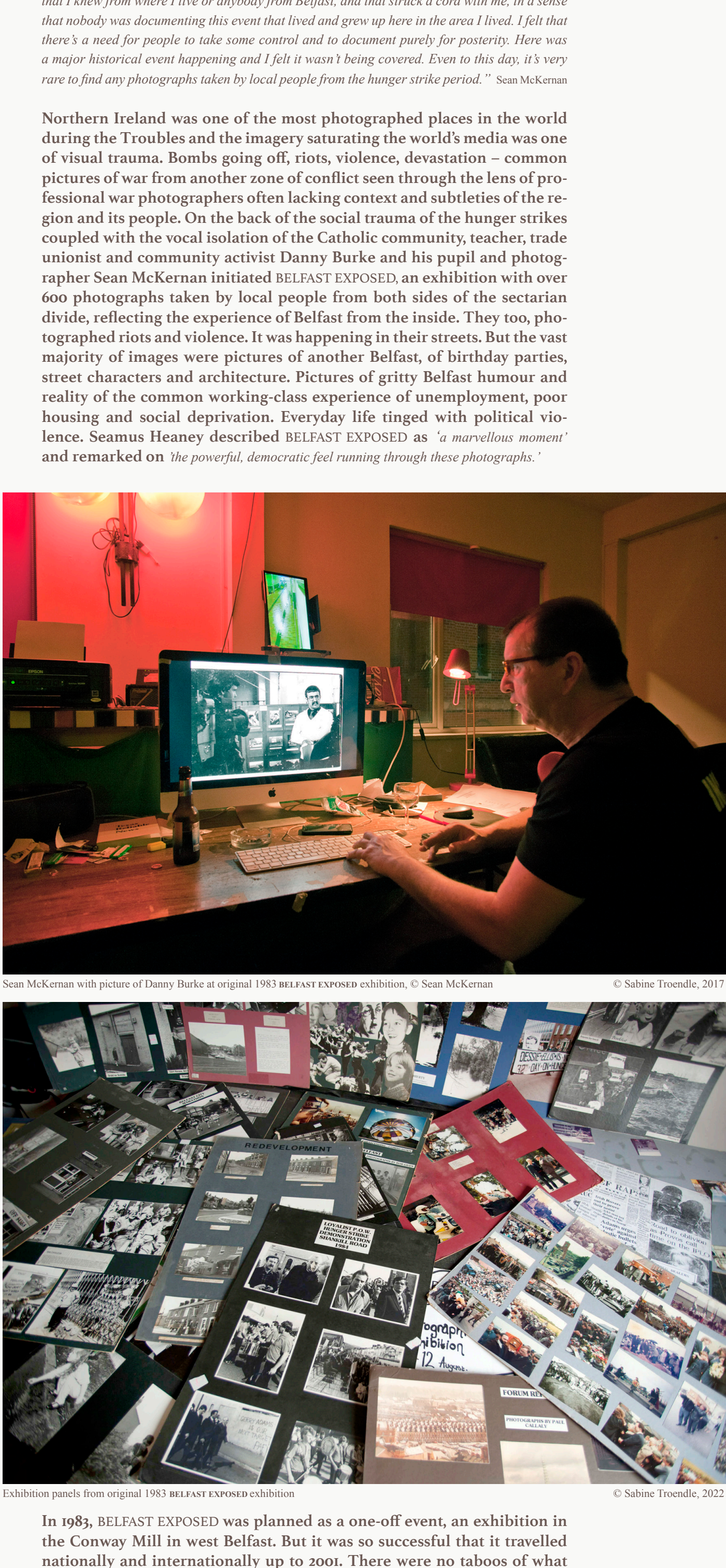
Photo school back in the 1990s was all about contemporary – interpretive, non-descriptive but conceptual and in all serial – photography. With the help of books, exhibitions and endless discussions we were slowly ground into ambassadors for the imagery reflecting the school's brand in the international contemporary photography scene. That was all very well, but I got bored easily and I had to come to Belfast to experience the wealth and satisfaction deriving from an art that back in Switzerland was all but inexistent, the community arts.

The arts have always been used, in and after conflict, to explore controversial issues, accommodate competing narratives and give the voiceless a platform. For people affected, hurt and damaged by conflict, to express themselves within a safe space can't be underestimated as it proposes an alternative to violence, an opportunity to understanding, and can support the process of healing.

The many clashes with community arts activists fighting for their recognition, though, laid bare the Arts Council's idea of culture, favouring the Ulster Orchestra and the Lyric Theatre over any form of working-class background arts. Its legitimisation of art forms emerging from politically, socially and economically marginalised sections of society was creating significant barriers for working-class communities to accessing the arts, leaving them with no means of communicating beyond or even within their own community.

"If [the arts] was so removed – it was irrelevant to the lives of most people in disadvantaged marginalised society. Where I came from, the arts were non-existent." Sean McKernan

The Arts Council in the 1980s wanted to keep the community arts sector out of the established arts. Addressing issues such as inequality, discrimination, state violence – questioning social issues affecting a large section of society on a daily basis rather than high-culture themes – it was perceived as an inferior art form. Giving a voice to a story within a community for a community was seen with suspicion if not outright contempt by the people outside of the arts and if the voice was coming from a nationalist community, the accusation of siding with terrorists was imminent. Political art was perceived as divisive and disruptive and the Arts Council turned its back on it altogether, finding it too hard to deal with the realities of a divided society and an imperial watchdog.



Remembering the GIBRALTAR THREE, Máiréad Farrell, Danny McCann and Sean Savage, West Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2022

The Troubles were in full blow when in 1988 the WEST BELFAST FESTIVAL/ FEILE AN PHOBAIL offered the community an alternative to riots that usually took place around the internment bonfires – a reminder of the biggest injustice perpetrated against the Catholic population since the British Army's OPERATION BANNER launched in 1969. It was the year of the assassination of three IRA members by the British Army in Gibraltar under very suspicious circumstances and journalist Michael Stone's subsequent killing of three mourners on Milltown Cemetery at the funeral of two of the GIBRALTAR THREE, resulting in the execution in broad daylight and media coverage of two British Army corporals who drove into the funeral of one of Stone's victims. The people of West Belfast thereafter were described as savages by British media. Photographer Sean McKernan remembers:

"Gerry Adams called together about 23 people who were engaged in Arts, cultural activities and he put forward this idea of a festival taking place over the 9th of August which always was a challenging time. You had the internment parade and after the speech, half of the crowd, all the young people attacked the British army, the police, riots kicked off, buses were burnt, all hell broke loose and on the back of that there was more shootings, bombings. So what Gerry did at the time was thinking is that the 9th of August is going to be a very difficult time for the West Belfast community because of the tensions and the violence, the accusations that we're all savages. It was a very intelligent manoeuvre: we're gonna try deal with this culture of violence and rioting, let's do something positive to stop that."

So the festival came about. It was a very successful week-long happening with simple events such as egg and spoon races, street parties, a concert and a parade up the Falls Road – a vehicle to help local groups to do their own thing and it sure helped to calm the rioting and the tension down. Like in so many other walks of life, instead of shutting up, people worked their way around the status quo by self-organising and innovation in order to articulate their communities' needs and views. Quite a few established positions in the arts today have their roots in the long years of communal activism, volunteering and determination of people who believed that what they had to say was worth hearing.



8th night, Falls Park, WEST BELFAST FESTIVAL - FEILE AN PHOBAIL

© Sabine Troendle, 2021

The British Army's level of force mainly against the Catholic working-class people – torturing plastic bullets against the civil population; shooting unarmed people; use of prisoners; calling with loyalist paramilitaries; falsifying evidence – clearly violated democratic standards which the government had a keen interest of keeping from the outside world. What they wanted the world to see was of peacekeeping army fighting the IRA, a terrorist group with no legitimate grievances and a lack of community support.

"Those in positions of power, both in government and the media, have proved most reluctant to provide a full picture of events in the North or their context, and have made considerable efforts to prevent journalists, dramatists and film-makers from exploring the situation from any angle other than that favoured by the British establishment." Liz Curtis, 1984

By regulation and controlling the media independent reporting, with a few exceptions, was as good as inexistent. The Catholic community – censored and silenced – not only grew away from the state even more but also from TV, radio and national newspapers. When in 1981 Bobby Sands MP died after 66 days on hunger strike, international media was parachuted-in to capture a bit of controversial history. A key experience for Sean:

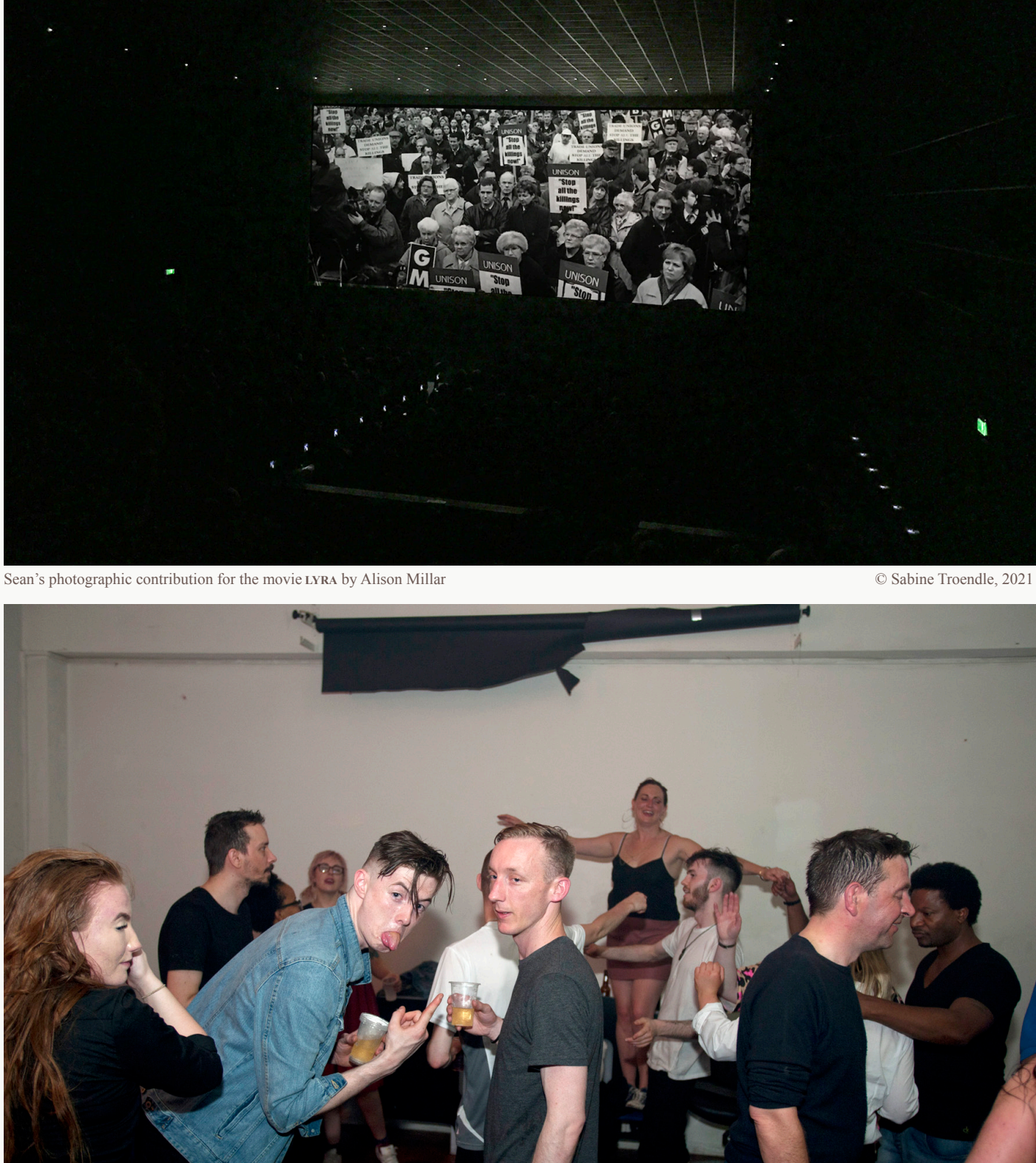
"They had a stand full of the world's press, there must've been at least a hundred photographers, cameramen, covering this major event. I looked around and I couldn't recognise anybody that I knew from where I live or anybody from Belfast, and that struck a cord with me, in a sense that nobody was documenting this event that lived and grew here in the area I lived. I felt that there's a need for people to take some control and to document purely for posterity. Here was a major historical event happening and I felt it wasn't being covered. Even to this day, it's very rare to find any photographs taken by local people from the hunger strike period." Sean McKernan

Northern Ireland was one of the most photographed places in the world during the Troubles and the imagery saturating the world's media was one of visual trauma. Bombs going off, riots, violence, devastation – common pictures of war from another zone of conflict seen through the lens of professional war photographers often lacking context and subtleties of the region and its people. On the back of the social trauma of the hunger strikes coupled with the vocal isolation of the Catholic community, teacher, trade unionist and community activist Danny Burke and his pupil and photographer Sean McKernan initiated BELFAST EXPOSED, an exhibition with over 600 photographs taken by local people from both sides of the sectarian divide, reflecting the experience of Belfast from an inside. They too photographed riots and violence. It was happening in their streets. But the vast majority of images were pictures of another Belfast, of birthday parties, street characters and architecture. Pictures of gritty Belfast humour and reality of the common working-class experience of unemployment, poor housing and social deprivation. Everyday life tinged with political violence. Seamus Heaney described BELFAST EXPOSED as 'a marvellous moment' and remarked on 'the powerful, democratic feel running through these photographs.'



Sean McKernan with picture of Danny Burke at original 1983 BELFAST EXPOSED exhibition. © Sean McKernan

© Sabine Troendle, 2017



Exhibition panels from original 1983 BELFAST EXPOSED exhibition

© Sabine Troendle, 2022

In 1983, BELFAST EXPOSED was planned as a one-off event, an exhibition in the Conway Mill in west Belfast. But it was so successful that it travelled nationally and internationally up to 2001. There were no taboos of what was shown. No censorship whatsoever. People were allowed to put up photographs of IRA funerals, UVF murals, sectarian killings – nothing was a 'wee bit too gory, too republican or too loyalist', the whole idea was to confront this sense of self-censorship and the censorship imposed by the mainstream media. Some people would take offence at one or the other picture. Instead of removing these pictures, the offended were encouraged to participate, to bring their own images to counter or confront the image that has done offence. BELFAST EXPOSED would offer cameras and basic training, so everybody could tell their story without being censored.

BELFAST EXPOSED was a cross-community project, with exhibitions and workshops across the sectarian divide. But in the early days, Danny Burke and Sean McKernan worked from the Falls Road, the heartland of Irish republicanism and on various occasions they were accused of being a front for the IRA. A personal vendetta between a powerful politician and Danny Burke, who in the 1970s had been associated with the republican movement but had moved on since, led to BELFAST EXPOSED being banned from the leisure centres and all funding was withdrawn. To level accusations of involvement with the IRA was dangerous in an environment like 1980s Belfast, where people got themselves killed for no other reason than their religious background:

"For a politician who should be aware and responsible because of the position of authority, to level accusations was tantamount to giving the green light for the UVF/UDA to come along, 'ok, let's kill somebody in BELFAST EXPOSED', because Belfast City Council politicians accuse them of being involved with the IRA. To have that hanging over you, that somebody in the City Council was accusing the project to be an IRA front was very dangerous. I was never involved with anything and there's hundreds of people involved with BELFAST EXPOSED mainly by contributing their work to the exhibition. We were just used as an easy way for politicians to reinforce their own bigoted stance. By having this 'ok, we're attacking the IRA', maybe they thought will get them some more respect and some more votes." Sean McKernan

The ban led them to have a one-day protest exhibition outside Andersonstown Leisure Centre. In front of the press they publicly refuted the dangerous allegations of IRA involvement and flagged political bias. 'Belfast Exposed is banned by City Hall because it originated in West Belfast' and 'Belfast Exposed banned by City Hall' it read on a board. They asked for an apology and a lift of the ban what eventually happened. Soon after, BELFAST EXPOSED moved out of West Belfast into the city centre –

"If we are to keep our premises in West Belfast, it would fuel the nay-sayers who were saying it was a West Belfast republican scheme. We would be victimised because it happened to originate in West Belfast. If it had originated in the Malone Road, the University, or some neutral place, by two people who weren't from West Belfast, we wouldn't have gotten all these accusations. We would have got more support quicker. So I said to Danny, that we really want to be a neutral organisation in the eyes of the public, we needed to be in the city centre to be accessible by everybody, north, south, east and west." Sean McKernan

The owner of their new premises in Donegall Street was the COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRELAND, and of course, some people suggested that they were a communist party front.

Protest exhibition by BELFAST EXPOSED in front of Andersonstown Leisure Centre after being banned

© Sean McKernan, ca 1984

By 1992, bigger premises were needed and BELFAST EXPOSED moved to King Street where for the first time they had their own gallery and where legendary parties took place. Meanwhile the Cathedral Quarter was developing fast and Sean, now the director of BELFAST EXPOSED, was urged to move back into the area. There was a lot of gentrification going on and the arts were used as an economic tool to develop a run-down area into a thriving commercial space, with the government benefiting of the rates from restaurants, bars and hotels. Trying to secure some of that gentrified future prosperity for BELFAST EXPOSED, Sean discussed with various funders the benefit of a bar or restaurant licence and was told it was a non starter. Since the arts obviously weren't supposed to reap any of their own crops, wouldn't be given the chance to become financially independent, wouldn't be allowed to get away from governmental funding/control, after 18 years Sean decided to leave BELFAST EXPOSED.

Today's BELFAST EXPOSED GALLERY is Northern Ireland's first contemporary photography gallery, a nice and safe, contemporary, uncontentious middle-class project. It epitomises gentrification in all shape and form. In 2001, with a new management, they moved back to Donegall Street into a fancy building, got rid of the history, the legacy and everything that the original BELFAST EXPOSED ever stood for, no mentioning of Sean McKernan, co-founder of the whole project, no recognition – but they kept the archive and they kept the name.

"It felt like a total slap in the face for anybody that was involved. They totally discarded the whole ethos, using all that work that was done over 20 years, like ok, this is great, we're here now, let's go down this nice contemporary route which wasn't anything new. It would never approach these galleries, because it was a different style of photography. A different concept. Our concept was about using photography to highlight social issues, to highlight campaigns, and to give people the opportunity to have a say in their own communities, to have their say about what was happening in a very divided city, we were trying to bring people together through photography and also to deal with realities, to deal with social issues. That changed within a few years into a very nice, flowery, non-challenging style of photography." Sean McKernan

'Good Friday 69' and tNA mural, Shankill

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

Night Taxi' mural by Dan Kitchener, Enfield Street, Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2021

There was a controversial scheme after the GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT – 'Re-Imaging Belfast' – replacing paramilitary and other contentious murals with 'untainted' tourist scenes, comic figures, flowery landscapes. Raw reality of everyday life in Belfast was replaced by a new vision of a commercially successful, thriving, culturally and artistically mature city that doesn't want to be reminded of the dark days. The old BELFAST EXPOSED must have met the same fate.

"I had arranged an exhibition in Washington DC. I had the largest public union in America come up with funding to have the exhibition in their headquarters next to the White House. That was the last time the BELFAST EXPOSED exhibition was shown. In fact, that exhibition and some of the old boards of the original exhibition were found in the skip outside the gallery of BELFAST EXPOSED. Basically, that's what happened to the BELFAST EXPOSED exhibition." Sean McKernan

The total disregard for all the hard work that has been done building up the project to where it was in the early 2000 and simply being written out of contemporary BELFAST EXPOSED's history, coupled with an inactive archive and abuse of copyright issues, sees for unfinished business. Meanwhile, Sean continues to work with communities in the spirit of the original BELFAST EXPOSED, while running his own gallery SHOOT BELFAST and selling and exhibiting his own work nationally and internationally. And if you're lucky, you'll find yourself at a BX party – not quite the legendary King Street kind of party, as I'm told again and again, but hey, it's BX!

Film shoot for short film by Sean Murray

© Sabine Troendle, 2021

Community exhibition in London, Sean McKernan and Frankie Quinn, original BELFAST EXPOSED photographer

© Sabine Troendle, 2021

Exhibition at Screenings of I&RA by Alison Millar

© Sabine Troendle, 2021

Sean's photographic contribution for the movie I&RA by Alison Millar

© Sabine Troendle, 2021

BX!

© Sabine Troendle, 2019

A big THANK YOU goes out to Sean, who's been so supportive throughout the process of BELFAST RELIABLE NEWS, I wouldn't be where I am without him!

Liz Curtis, The Postcards War, 1984
Winston Irvine, Gaumier Thrown Down to Custodians of Arts in Northern Ireland posted on FB by Fannonn Mallie on 17 Aug 2017
Sean McKernan, Interview on 1 August 2012
Northern Visions, In Our Time - Creating Arts Within Reach, 2011
Northern Visions, A Century Later: The Day I Captured Life, 2013

Irish News, Irish Times