

A QUESTION OF DESIGN:

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF ART ON RECONCILIATION IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES
A CASE STUDY FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

Art for Reconciliation (AfR) uses art-based approaches to promote peace-building in the wake of political conflict. It aims to produce work that reflects, represents, or responds to multiple forms of political conflict in order to transform conflictual relationships between adversarial parties. Yet no long-term study of this practice currently exists. As a result, there is very little evidence that such artistic approaches work, or can even be analysed and evaluated in a meaningful way. There is also very little understanding regarding how funding practice, community response, and the management and production of art affects the landscape of this arts practice and vice versa.

Taking Northern Ireland as a case study, this presentation will unpack the series of methodological problems this lack of evidence presents professionals, policymakers and communities involved in the development of Art for Reconciliation. Northern Ireland has received extensive and international financial investment in arts-based peace and reconciliation projects since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Still, a cultural conflict has emerged in place of the former military conflict that plagued the Troubles era, and religious and ethnic segregation in education and housing remain an everyday reality for many living there. Such a situation raises major questions regarding the impact of Art for Reconciliation work, but equally presents opportunities for developing reflective, critical and dialogic exchange regarding the practice.

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'5 Apples', installed at People's Park, Ballymena, Northern Ireland. Artist Shiro Masuyama designed the artworks after workshops with local residents. The apples have been described as aiming to reflect "themes of community, trust, and the future and serve as 'a symbol of aspiration for continued peace,'" but they have also suffered from vandalism.

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