

# Citizen Action

SEÁN BEATTIE INTERVIEWS ANTHONY HAUGHEY, ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND, ABOUT HIS ARTLINK RESIDENCY AT FORT DUNREE, AS PART OF THE DECADE OF CENTENARIES.



Anthony Haughey, *Anthem Art Intervention*, Fort Dunree, on the Eve of the Anglo-Irish Treaty Signing, 5 December 2021; photograph by Anthony Haughey, courtesy the artist and Artlink.

**Seán Beattie:** Anthony, could you give me a brief overview of your early work as an artist?

Anthony Haughey: Yes, Seán. I moved to Ballymun in 1989 when I was still an art student in England. I set up a community darkroom; I was interested in a socially engaged approach to art. I lived in my aunt and uncle's house for a year and was fully immersed in Ballymun life. I also photographed in the living rooms of several families, which resulted in my first major body of work, 'Home', in 1991. It is still being exhibited thirty years later. The living rooms were 'transitional spaces', embracing cross-cultural elements of urban life into which aspects of a traditional rural lifestyle entered. For example, pictures of the Sacred Heart stood side by side with images of pop stars like Michael Jackson on the living-room walls.

**SB:** Was it your experience of London and Ballymun that first introduced you to the importance of a particular place or environment – in other words, site-specificity?

AH: My process has been mostly context driven throughout my career. Research is hugely important; I explore the specific historical and sociopolitical context of all sites I work in and respond through durational art processes. For example, in my current residency at the National Museum of Ireland, I have established a studio in Collins Barracks, where I am researching the collections. The architecture of this site is also hugely important in how the work I produce unfolds between now and 2023. It is envisaged that the studio will become a base for future artists' residencies.

**SB:** So Fort Dunree is a jewel in the crown within that context, so to speak?

AH: Fort Dunree in Inishowen is a place of outstanding natural beauty but its origins are militaristic, dating from the Napoleonic era when Lough Swilly was fortified to combat a French invasion. In the context of the Decade of Centenaries, it is hugely important as a Treaty fort, which featured in the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), in which England retained certain territorial rights in an independent Ireland.

**SB:** What were your first impressions on visiting Fort Dunree? Perhaps the scattering of decaying army structures?

AH: Yes and no. Of course, one cannot ignore the physical reminders of its military past but what caught my eye, in terms of my process, was the sight of 11 flagpoles with banners waving in the wind. They are iconic emblems of the transition from a colonial regime to that of an independent state. In 1938, England returned Fort Dunree to the Irish Free State. A simple yet powerful symbol of change was the lowering of the Union flag and the raising of the tricolour.

**SB:** Will a similar event be part of your residency here?

AH: Yes, there is a powerful element of commemoration involved, and we plan to make an art intervention on 6 December to mark the centenary of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Historically Fort Dunree signifies militarism and colonialism; I am interested in how the architecture of this space can be transformed by a citizen action – through participation and collaboration. Since June 2021, when I started my residency here, I have hosted participatory flag design workshops involving the local community and others who live near the Fort. There are significant skills within the region. One of



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the participants was a pattern cutter in the Fruit of the Loom factory in Buncrana before it closed in 2006. I am always excited to work with people who bring their own experience and skills to enrich a collaborative or participatory artwork.

I have worked with more than fifty people so far. As we are discussing this in September in advance of the main event, it is my intention to have flags erected not only in Fort Dunree but also at the main entrance to the nearest town of Buncrana in the hope of engaging the interest of residents and visitors to the town.

**SB:** So you could say commemoration and collaboration in one shot?

AH: I have co-produced many collaborative art works connected to the Decade of Centenaries, including a year-long residency in Limerick City Gallery of Art, coinciding with the commemoration of the Dublin 1913 Lockout. The Artlink residency has enabled me to continue exploring and re-shaping acts of commemoration for participants and audiences to connect with complex historical events on an intellectual and emotional level.

**SB:** You are aware of the role of Fort Dunree in the refugee crisis in 1969, when Bogsiders fled across the Border, seeking refuge from attacks by the 'B Specials' and the RUC?

AH: Yes, that event represents an element of citizen action, the Fort as a sanctuary, as distinct from its earlier function as envisaged by Sir William Smyth when he drew up plans for the fortification of Lough Swilly in 1802/3.

**SB:** Do you see this as one of the 'layers of history' you referred to in your recent interview with Lynn Scarff of the National Museum?

AH: Transitional is the word I would use – you see the Fort becomes a forum for cultural identity, a place where layers of history are embedded but in a process of continuous change. All these elements will be evident in my major project with the National Museum in which I engage in a search for a 'Flag for Ireland'.

**SB:** How has the pandemic impacted your work?

AH: The online environment has been hugely challenging but there were some positives; for example, it was possible to connect with people from all over the world without the expense and carbon footprint of air travel. It has been a difficult time for everybody; many artists cannot make a living from their art practice and have to supplement it with other work. I am fortunate in that I am also a lecturer in TU Dublin. I did manage to work on a number of projects during lockdown, including the development of a co-authored book, an anthology of socially engaged art in Ireland, which will be published in 2023. Thankfully, the lifting of restrictions has given me the freedom to return to on-site work at Fort Dunree and elsewhere.

**Seán Beattie is an author and historian who currently serves on the Board of Directors of Artlink, Fort Dunree, Buncrana, County Donegal.**

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