

“We will examine...”: a class life in art

by Veronica Dyas

Part II of
Towards Equality Diversity and Inclusion (TEDI) Commission
Project Arts Centre, 2021

There's a photograph, that I can't find, but it definitely exists, of a march passing Marrowbone Lane. Taken from above, it's skewed and at an angle, but I know what it is. It's taken from the same perspective I remember seeing it, hearing it. From the top floor window of our flat. Maybe I took it, but it was probably my mother.
Concerned Parents Against Drugs March. Circa 1984.

Another photograph, this one I can hold in my hand, taken from the balcony. The opposite side. The same skewed perspective, the odd angle but internal within the flats, within the bounds. It captures more of the industrial back end of the Guinness's complex than it does the photograph's intention. Blue steel and piping dwarf the band visible in the far ground, the flag on a pole obscures the graffiti on the wall, and the majorettes follow,
marching from A Block towards C.
St. Patrick's Day Parade. Circa 1984.

I don't want to talk about class
About how it feels and how it's lived
About how one of my earliest memories is witnessing the Concerned Parents Against Drugs march below our window
Passing by me special tree and down along Pimlico chanting
The sound of the collective voices unforgettable in how ye could feel it in the pit of your stomach, like nothing else I ever heard before, the desperation, the rage, the fear, the depth of suffering
The grief
Viscerally echoing up to our window on the top floor balcony
How that tree was special to me because there wasn't much greenery around us in the urban inner city, that one tree probably the oldest, most brilliant tree you'll ever see in Dublin 8, except for in the Phoenix Park¹
I don't want to talk about class anymore
I've been talking about class for years
About how over the Summer between third and fourth class everyone's older sibling *went on gear*², and there was no amount of jaysus jayz fluid swept down the balcony, the landing and the stairwell that could make us feel clean again after
No amount of marching that could bring that lost generation back once they were gone, except the rare exception who could turn it round, turn it over and *get clean*³

¹ It's an anomaly of the Dublin Postal Code system that the Phoenix Park, although north of the river is technically in Dublin 8.

² I know I'm not supposed to call it gear now, but that's what we called it then, I'm using the idiom of the time.

³ I know I'm supposed to say Drug-Free now, but that's what we used to say then, I'm using the idiom of the time.

The rare exception in a sea of pain and mourning and the intricate patterning on the tapestries made after to remember⁴.

I don't want to talk about class

About the new little tree planted to mark the tragedies, locally, to remember our dead

How their faces insert themselves into my peripheral vision when I walk around my area, no matter how long its been since they've passed, still

I don't want to talk about class

About how I walk around my area now because I can't afford to live there anymore

What was once ghettoised becomes gentrified

About how I sit at a table with colleagues who discuss how

'It's actually really nice around there' as if it's shock

And inevitably describe my people, the natives, as *'salt of the earth'*.

Close up on a gaggle of girls dressed in white dresses in the left of the frame. They all but one are wearing veils. The half face of one boy in a suit takes up two-thirds of the right. Hands clasped, smiling. You know it's not the Communion day because the girls wear black shoes, and three of them are wearing Summer white, still too young for the full regalia.

May Day Procession. Circa 1982.

I don't want to talk about class

I don't want to talk about how my accent shifts and changes according to the situation

Unconsciously before, I notice it now, still

Notice how in certain company I attempt to neutralise it, to make it comprehensible

About how the nuns kept us back after school to give us *elocution lessons* that we called *'electrocution'*

The shock of it

Social engineering

Accent reduction

Underlining the fact that we did not speak proper

That there was something wrong with us

How we didn't say our t-h's

How our speech patterns ran into each other at the end of sentences

Them not being able to understand what we were sayin'

Maybe that's where their fear came from

They felt alienated when we spoke together in the yard

I don't want to talk about class

How *the teachers did their best for us*

But sure what could they do

They just couldn't imagine a life for us beyond the vocational

Beyond the physical skills and trades of our natural inheritance

⁴ <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>

So they never really mentioned college or going to University
Didn't say much beyond the presumption that we would go to work
If there was work to go to
And that we shouldn't use our real addresses on the applications

Centre frame. A woman leans over from the waist away from the camera, her face turned towards it. A child in a red tracksuit lies propped up on her arms, facing forward between the woman's legs, her face turned towards her Mothers. In the background the flower bed and grass greenery of the park stretches towards Bride Street. Before the top part of the park was reopened, before the coved walls memorialised famous Irish writers, before the cafe, and artists' residence. There's no exit at the far end.
St. Patrick's Park. Spring. Circa 1986.

Zoom down and back in time two years, you can see the coves of the park's back wall still covered by steel doors. A group performance, now unstageable, unmentionable, ignorant, bizarre. Silver hats and waistcoats, girls in frilly dresses, pink and yellow shirts pop above the tarmac. I played a boy, and struggled to coordinate my choreography with the troop.
Liberties Festival, Liberties Music & Drama Society Performance. Circa 1984.

I don't want to talk about class
About when she said on our first day at University
'I'm glad you were at the auditions 'cos you talk like me'
And that we both, and a few others too, knew what that meant
How we were instantly in allegiance with each other, without any further articulation
Because we were the odd ones out, the minority, still
The ones who left straight after lectures to get to work on time
Didn't hang around, or go to the Pav, didn't get involved in societies because we had to take two buses to make it on time, and if we missed one, we wouldn't get paid
Spooking in and out
Without a sense of entitlement
Without our differing experiences being acknowledged in that space
The precarity of choosing an education instead of stability
It still being a choice for us
We took all the notes, hung on every word
Read every assignment over and over, did more than our best
'Cos we were constantly aware of the privilege of being there
Learning about ourselves as something *other*
Names we didn't call ourselves
Socio-economically disadvantaged
Underprivileged
Underclass
We read about and learned to understand

I don't want to talk about class
About how I got through a whole year of my Masters in London by making my intonations
more palatable
And still they '*did my accent*'
As if it was something novel, as if it wasn't something integral
Subjectifying my personhood, making a mockery
and me performing my Self to be understood
I'll never accept education as a sole indicator of a person's class.

To the left of the frame, two girls dressed in various haphazard browns stand leaning into
each other so that their heads are touching, making a triangle with their bodies. A hand
around each other's necks, one hand holding the others. They are standing on a concrete
floor, outdoors, the remnants of chalk under their feet, the walls orange, a darker shade of,
on the door, a middling shade of on the overpainted stone wall to their left.

The front part of the front wheel of a bicycle middle right in frame.

St. Brigid's Primary School, The Coombe (Where Pallas Projects is now). Circa 1989.

I don't want to talk about class
I've been trying to talk about class for years
About how I observe my need to mention my education when I'm around middle class
people, more than I observe they seem to need to
Partly because it meant so much to me to be there, to *make it* into University and because I
feel like there's a presumption of inferiority, intellectually
Maybe that's just the chip on my shoulder bu'
Maybe people don't instinctually associate my accent with *criminality* and a lack of education
Maybe there is no unconscious bias at play
Maybe their socialisation wasn't altogether that different from mine
I still keep my hands out of my pockets when I'm walking around a high end shop.

Two girl children stand on the balcony. It must be Summer, they are wearing Summer clothes,
as if coordinated, the girl on the left in light blue and white, the girl on the right a darker blue
polka dot skirt and a white cotton top. She holds the edge of the balcony with her left hand.

They are smiling beneath the washing line hugging the wall. In the left foreground a large
white pipe supports the orange nylon that holds it up. Puddles stretch along behind them.

The shoot is right there, it can't be seen but ye could smell it. In the top right corner, a
triangle of almost white descends into the courtyard below, stretched all the way back to C
Block. More washing lines, the tarmaced pitch before the playground was built, the shed.

A Block looking left. Summer. Circa 1985.

Switch perspective. Facing right. Close up on a girl child wearing red, a boy child just behind.
Him dark browned and her light browned hair.

A whitish triangle stretches from the bottom left corner to the middle of the top of the frame. Close up of a white door, white windows, bleached white lace curtains, the stairwell's outer structure behind the boy child's head.

A Block looking right. Autumn. Circa 1985.

I don't want to talk about class
About the awkwardness and trepidation of liaising the spaces between
Spaces the majority of your colleagues have never stood in
Holding a triangular thought process

I'm not supposed to be here.

I'm not allowed to be here.

This isn't for us.

Grappling with the trio of my own self doubt, the chip on my shoulder that pushes me to hold the ground I've gained, and the awareness that few of my people access these spaces, still

The lingering survivor's guilt of working in *the auwrts*⁵

About the weight that's carried, and the unquantifiable impacts of the two pillars

Trauma and Accommodation

Accommodation and Trauma

Playing themselves out in real time present and remembered past

The fear of losing a roof over your head cemented by the pain of remembering losing a roof over your head

Walking in the door of an arts centre to have a meeting carrying that baggage

After being in the Dole office trying to manage your claim without being cut off

The phonecalls from Seetec⁶ aren't easy to explain to the uninitiated

I wear the mask, mask the fear, talk about the work, about the work I want to make, and the work you've seen collectively eases us into a middle ground of shared experience

I don't talk about the gas bill I can't pay and the phone bill I'm worried about and the fact that I'm nearing homelessness, again

Sitting notebook on lap with the smell of bleach in my nostrils because I was doing a cash in hand cleaning job earlier to pay the rent

I don't mention when I take the call to tell me I can collect the keys for the building where I'll be resident artist that I'm standing under the Boundary Wall⁷ witnessing another Ireland the person on the phone will likely never see

Front it.

Front it out.

Ye have to speculate to accumulate

And if it wasn't for the Credit Union and my working family's support

I'd have no cash flow whatsoever

But I don't mention that in real time

⁵ The Arts

⁶ <https://seetec.ie/>

⁷ https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/19595/1/The_Boundary_Wall_Report_March_2013.pdf

I try to put it in the work, try to talk about it through the work
Try to articulate the nuance through the art
I remember a particularly horrendous second night of doing a one woman show struggling
standing shaky legged on stage in front of a largely middle class audience, trying to articulate
our family's journey through social housing, from the tenements to private ownership, and
back to private rented, and looking out under the lights and realizing
'Ahhh, they don't know, they don't know what I'm talking about, and all I need to do is try and tell
them, it's not their fault they're rich.'
A revelation I felt in my body as I scrambled to find purpose in what I was trying to do.
Front it.
Front it out.

My first time performing in public made the news. I was an Angel at the Mansion House with
the school. There's a grin on my face that can't be quantified as I stand there in profile, in a
white tunic, golden threads that hold my wings behind me criss-crossing too close to my
neck. The boy child beside me faces front, dressed the same, he holds his index finger in his
opposite hand and does not grin or smile.
Mansion House. Christmas. Circa 1982.

I don't want to talk about class
I've been talking about class for years
About the accents on stage that aren't real and the characters that aren't representative
About the sorta undertone of comedy that, generally speaking
Traditionally accompanied the middle class imagining of
Who We Are
Absorbing cultural specificity for someone else's entertainment
About how a whole production could be made about a whole area
Without any one actually engaging with any one actually from there
And that's okay because the tickets sell
Because it's not work made to interrogate or even to represent
Played for a largely middle class audience
Able to afford the ticket prices, and cultural leisure time
About how a whole spectrum of women with actual lived experience
Could be dismissed in favour of misrepresentation
Because really if ye were to mix the real with the imagined
The whole house of cards would collapse and
It's easier to sell the fiction
Sure it's only a comedy, a good night out

Three girls in silver dresses stand on stage, in white face make-up, hair in buns, one mic
between on a yellow cord and a plastic shopping bag at it's base. The steel piping in the walls
behind almost shades them in. The backs of womens permed heads are closer in the frame.

They are playing the Trumpet Blowing Herald's in the fountain in front of the Thomas Davis Monument on Dame Street, in front of Trinity College, there's four of them statues, so someone must have not turned up for the show.

Rupert Guinness Hall. Circa 1987.

I don't want to be talking about class

About how even now it's a big deal when a working class writer has a show on in a big venue

How even now ye see them welcoming their kin into that theatre *'for the first time'*

And even now, even though, there's a fair few working class people making work

We're pitching it to people in positions of power who mostly don't talk like us so we can get it made, still

About how the inroads and inreach⁸ and broadening of audiences and access has been stifled in the pandemic

About how higher ticket prices and lower capacity potentially subvert inclusion

I don't want to talk about class

About the guilt that pervades the success when there is success and the shame that pervades the failure when there is failure

Going home talking about the things you do in work that are alien to people who use their bodies

Who earn their living by giving of their bodies, still

Not in a performative sense

Te lo sacas del cuerpo - You take it out of your body

Literally, it's not a metaphor

Your work is your worth

Your work is your worth

Your work is your worth

Close up of two girls stood tight together holding hands, squinting for the camera in the sun.

One ringleted dark haired draped in a knitted white shawl, the other wears a light blue lampshade cover on her head. An intricate red haired plait can be seen behind her right

shoulder. Bertie Ahern, the then Lord Mayor of Dublin unveiled the plaque⁹,

and I was convinced then he was me friend.

Centenary of St. Brigid's Primary School, The Coombe. Circa 1987.

I don't want to be talking about class, still

About how we live in a county run by a government at least one third of which don't believe

That we are equal

Believe that we don't *get up early enough* to be counted the same

That, largely, we are *welfare cheats that cheat yis all*,

⁸ I don't say 'outreach' anymore, or 'anti-social' neither nor 'gangland'

⁹ The plaque has been removed since, history eroding...

Whose 2020 Programme for Government¹⁰, on page 77 of a 128 page document, wrote one line that says:

“We will examine the introduction of a new ground of discrimination, based on socio-economic disadvantaged status to the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts.”

How you'd miss it if you weren't looking for it

If you didn't deliberately search for it because you read an article¹¹ that legislation is passing through the Dáil¹² to have socio-economic status included with the other nine grounds for discrimination

If you hadn't already read a legal comparison to similar legislation in other regions in a report from 2004¹³

Not long before the crash that decimated any incremental ground gained by the community
Before the crisis ate it up and spit out unfinished regeneration projects across our land
Before the people in direct provision were forced to stay in an inhumane system even longer
Before the people lost their homes and moved into hotels with their children and a disproportionate number of Traveller families have to access homeless services, still
Before the pandemic and the tents were pitched on Henry Street, along the canals, the river, in corners in parks, outside the Custom House before they put up hoarding to block the people from sheltering beneath that colonial relic

I don't want to talk about class

About the way her hands bled from hand washing sheets and she lost her eyesight from doing invisible mending but she still taught herself to paint by chewing the top of a matchstick to use as a paint brush when she lived in the tenements

About how he'd turn his neck from side to side, up and down to ease the arthritis after a lifetime constructing cars in a factory that made him lose his hearing

About how he did long day and night shifts working to ensure the supply of alcohol could reach the other working class communities on time and died young of cirrhosis of the liver partially from the fumes inhaled as he worked

About how she was bright and always reading books but college wasn't for girls so she was sent to the tech to learn to type other people's thoughts without time to think her own

About the way she's worked since she was 14 years old, paid tax, was never on the dole and she still had to wait 18 months for an operation to take the cancer out of her face because she didn't have Health Insurance

¹⁰ 'Programme for Government, Our Shared Future', June 2020:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>

¹¹

<https://www.newstalk.com/news/sinn-fein-td-says-new-bill-aims-to-outlaw-discrimination-on-grounds-of-access-or-social-class-1140822>

¹²<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2021/6/?highlight%5B0%5D=equality&highlight%5B1%5D=miscellaneous&highlight%5B2%5D=provisions&highlight%5B3%5D=bill&highlight%5B4%5D=2021&tab=documents>

¹³ 'Extending the Scope of Employment Equality Legislation: Comparative Perspectives on the Prohibited grounds of Discrimination', 2004: <https://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Discrimination.pdf/Files/Discrimination.pdf>

About how he had to work in the 'black economy' because there was little else work going on
building sites in the seventies, how his back aches now because he'd no safety gear and they
didn't pay his stamps so although he's worked all his life he's no way to prove it now he's
older

About how we spent nearly a year of the pandemic listening to vintners on the national
airwaves before we heard how any one in the community sector was managing

About how they tried to tell us "We're all in this together"

But we knew from our contemporary history and the chronic austerity that we aren't even
over yet, that

That simply is not the truth

Never was and is not now

The statue of Justice stands with her back to the city, still

Mash potatoes and eggs, real butter

Stew chewed in her mouth and fed to mine

A tin of steak and kidney pie, watching the crust rise in the oven

I don't want to talk about class

I don't want to talk about class

I don't want to talk about class

Because it makes me angry

I do be ragin'

Shoutin' at the radio ragin'

And it's hard to find the nuance through that anger¹⁴

Hard to articulate lived experience in a way that's comprehensible

Hard to talk about poverty when you've actually experienced it

And it's not just the shame of not having any money

It's the retraumatization that inevitably comes with the conversation

Insidious

Felt in the body

Less than, deficient, lack

Reinforced by the questioning of your self identity as working class

When we don't even use the word

Academically argued with, reframed without our participation

Remaining unquantifiable

Unlisted

Unexamined

It's hard to point to something, if you can't name it

And if it's not nameable

It stays tenuous, remains elusive

Yet paradoxically ideologically pervasive

¹⁴ Some people are able to use anger as fuel, but that doesn't work for me, anger saps me energy, cuts off me light.

And without naming, without acknowledgement
The presumption of sameness perpetuates and further creates inequality
We're not all starting on the same page here
Simple as that
But it isn't simple
There's layers of nuance betwixt each one of the nine named grounds for inequality
And there's intersectionality with and within the '*will be examined*' tenth
I want to unravel the nuance
Interrogate my own privilege
As a white, Irish, queer, working class, cis woman, working artist¹⁵
Who got paid to think about this
Who grew up with artists on both sides of the family
With a fair amount of cultural capital
Who grew up in a neighbourhood steeped in history with community activists who knew the
value of art
Who got to go to Dublin Youth Theatre, and eventually to University as a mature student
Who got funded to make the work I wanted to make, with a fair amount of support and
Still I struggle to survive in this system
I don't want to talk about class
But I do and I will
Because I don't want to just stay angry
I want to *change the things I can*
Because we can't just keep on witnessing lived experiences
Unraveling the nuance
Because we can't just keep on contributing to the discourse
Because we need, ultimately to stop talking about
Who's not in the room
Still
And start taking down the walls instead.

At the kitchen table I do art in black n white. A beetroot jar with water and a thick
paintbrush, my concentrating face in profile focused on my little hands folding a piece of
paper. Thin paneled windows create the backdrop. Light pours in on the made in plastic
bottles garden on the ledge. Middle right the very edge of the corporation building opposite,
before they built the second one in front that blocks the light. My school tunic worn over a
jumper, a silver clip holds back my long light brown hair.
Marrowbone Lane. Winter. Circa 1987.

¹⁵ And that's still only a fraction of my identity