



JOHN AIKEN

ABOUT FACE



ABOUT FACE

Orpheus Gallery
Orpheus Building, York Street
Belfast BT1 5.

'YOUR GAZE SCANS

THE STREETS

AS IF THEY WERE

WRITTEN PAGES:

THE CITY

SAYS EVERYTHING

YOU MUST

THINK, MAKES

YOU REPEAT

HER DISCOURSE.'

Italo Calvino,
'Invisible Cities', Picador 1979

The interior of the Orpheus Gallery with its large windows at street level can be viewed from a distance across an urban square. The visual appetite can be whet at arms length. 'About Face' by John Aiken is one of a series of works commissioned by the Orpheus Gallery that have been conditioned by the nature of the gallery space and its street/window aspect, as well as the highly charged location of Belfast city itself.

Recent installations by Roderick Buchanan/Douglas Gordon (Glasgow), David Mach (London), Per Barclay (Norway) and Philip Napier (Belfast) have in one way or another engaged with the physical space and the extended passing 'gallery' audience. They have established tensions primed to reverberate just beyond the extra-mural. The gallery is delighted to document this recent installation by John Aiken.

LIAM KELLY, DIRECTOR







ABOUT FACE

**'It was the fortress as
permanent fortification that settled
the city into permanence.'** Paul Virilio

For some time I have been interested in how architectural form functions in an anthropomorphic way, a door becomes a mouth, windows become eyes. These analogies can extend to the whole body and throughout history many cultures have made direct connections between architectural features and the human form.

The relatively recent structures built for surveillance purposes in Northern Ireland take this analogy to often absurd extremes. The towers and observation posts becoming all-seeing eyes, dominating and controlling both rural and urban landscapes. They have replaced the mythical giants of local folklore and legend.

The armoured windows and observation slits stare without emotion, it is not possible to see the human presence behind the thick glass screens. The structures themselves become humanoid; brutal but also comic like huge players in a bizarre ritual moving and reforming themselves as strategic or social circumstances change and develop.

Ordinary materials available from the local builders merchant take on new sinister connotations, intrusive and obstructive yet familiar.

When they began to appear some 20 years ago the structures were designed to look as if they could be removed immediately should the political or military situation allow it. However, through time they have gradually become more and more permanent.

Instead of sandbag and corrugated iron

screens, new buildings are constructed as reinforced concrete bunkers with an added facade of stone or a thin 'skin' of brick.

The 'hand-built' quality of early bunkers from the 1970s, for all their brutality and ugliness, were nevertheless expressive and personal in their ad hoc use of diverse materials and designs. They successfully reflected the sadness and confusion of the political and military situation; they aged quickly and reflected time. The new structures of the 1990s with their more socially acceptable urban aesthetic, are about 'face'; an acceptable face; saving face and the expressionless face of resignation to long term commitment.

The work I exhibited at the Orpheus Gallery takes account of the unusual nature of the space it occupies. The gallery is dominated by three large plate glass windows which reveal a long narrow interior parallel to the street outside. It is as easy to look into the gallery as it is to look out at the street beyond.

The sculpture 'ABOUT FACE' is a single large object constructed out of heavy steel sections bolted together to form panels which have multi-layers of wire reinforced glass set into them in such a way as to allude to a stylised two-sided face. The object dominates the space it occupies but also 'looks' at the world outside – it returns the stares.

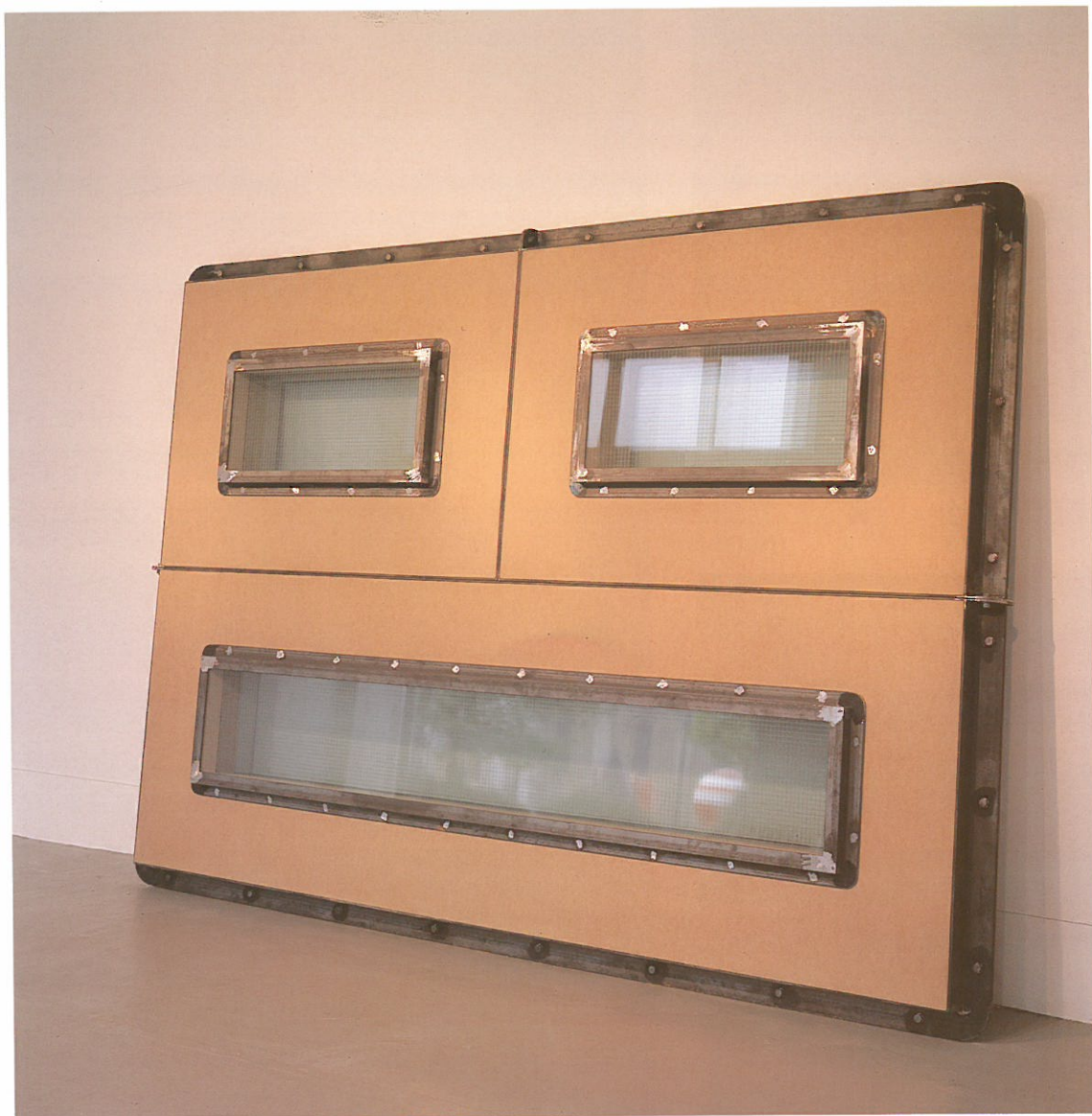
The ambiguity of the work functions in disturbing and benign ways, it questions our perception of the structures we have grown to accept as a part of everyday life in Northern Ireland.

John Aiken

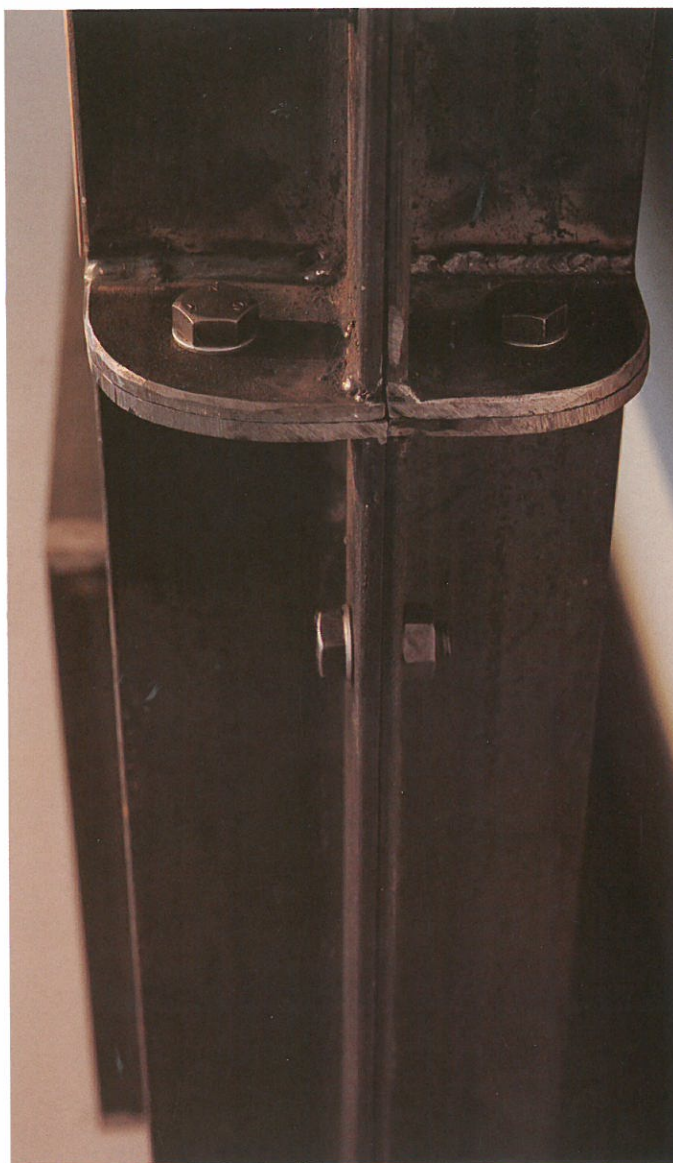
ABOUT FACE: METAL HARD AND LOOKING OUT

John Aiken, who always invited time based intrusions through his sand installations turned, by the end of the decade, to free standing sculptures in stone and metal. In his 'Ocean's Edge' exhibition (Dublin and Belfast 1988/89). Aiken's former use of geometrical grids persisted from the early 1980s but his work was less systematic and found new relationships with the organic nature of stone. The materials were stone, steel and wood – cool, elegant mixtures of compounds of materials and assemblages of incised and marked creamy purbeck stone.

In the work entitled 'Return', a wall piece in purbeck marble and steel, we see the impregnation of marble by steel, wedged gasket tight: a synthetic implant. That idea of impregnation could become implantation in a work such as 'Borderline', which referred to border observation posts in N. Ireland. Catherine Lampert sees in it a sense of movement as well as a sense of being 'out of place'. She wrote in her catalogue essay:



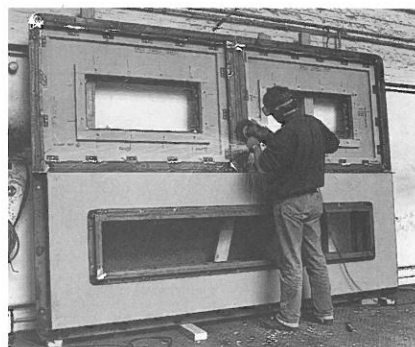
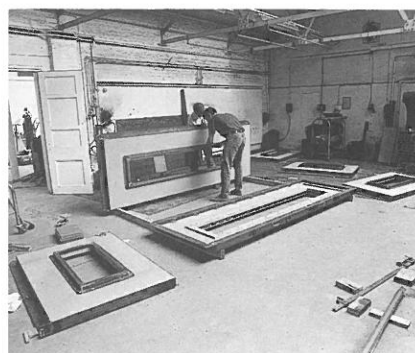
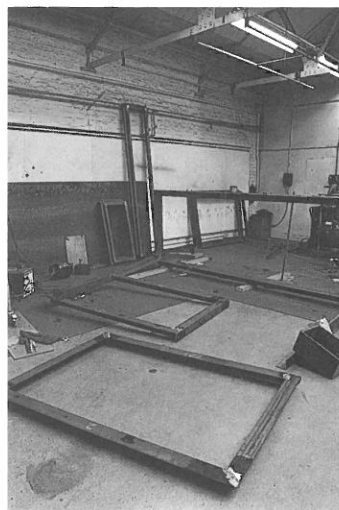
**THE URBAN
ORTHODOXY OF THE
MODERN CITY
FOCUSES ON THE
DANGERS OF
INTERNAL VIOLENCE.**



"The top of the marble block was faceted into a precision-edged polyhedron, a citadel perched on a fluted skirt with striated triangles. This rather ornamental stone is balanced precariously on a eucalyptus branch. The work has a sense of locomotion as well as incongruity."

In his most recent work 'About Face' (exhibited Orpheus Gallery October 1991), he turned again to his former bunker concerns: shelter, defence, surveillance, refuge – the formal expression and attractions of what Paul Virilio calls the archeology of the bunker. Virilio considers the city within a 'space of war'... 'a space having its own characteristics'.

"I suddenly understood war was a space in the geometrical sense, and even more than geometrical: crossing Europe from North to South. From the shelters of German cities to the Siegfried Line, passing by the Maginot Line and Atlantic Wall, makes you realise the breadth of total war. By the same token you touch on the



mythic dimension of a war spreading not only throughout Europe, but all over the world. The objects, bunkers, submarine bases etc. are kinds of reference points or landmarks to the totalitarian nature of war in peace and myth."

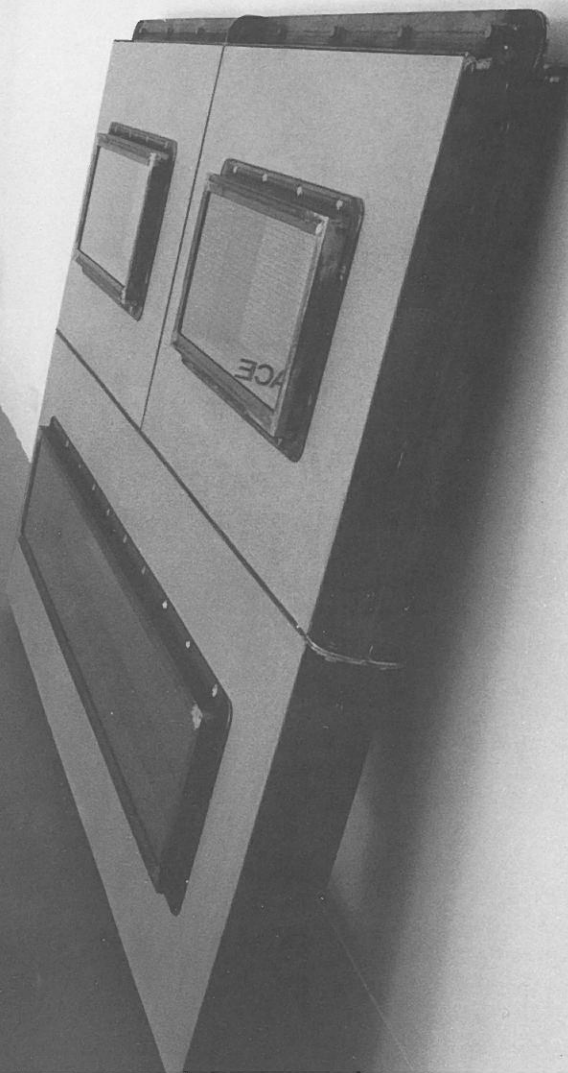
In 'About Face', made of steel, wood and wire-reinforced glass, the notion of surveillance is embedded again gasket tight, into and through the anthropomorphic of the military deity of defence.

'About Face' may be read as a capsule – a symbol of Belfast as fortress, metal hard and only looking out. The symbolic nature of the military voyeurism of the piece is further extended by the street aspect of the gallery – the gallery condition as street capsule except that passers-by can see in and indeed come in.

There is a power in the casualness with which 'About Face' leans against the gallery's rear wall and a resistance in the fact that it will never hang on the wall. In 'About Face', we will never know if we are being well looked after.



ABOUT FACE



'The political sensibility which is imbued into the fabric of Northern Ireland informs all his work. Hence the preoccupation with emblem and fortification, with edge and border'. Patrick Murphy

Biographical note

Born Belfast 1950

Studied Chelsea School of Art 1968-73.

Awarded Prix de Rome in sculpture 1973,
lived and worked in the British School at
Rome 1973-75.

John Aiken has since 1975 exhibited
consistently in Ireland, Britain and abroad. He
has recently completed several large public
commissions and currently lives and works in
London.

'ABOUT FACE'

Steel, wire reinforced glass and wood.
316 x 216 x 25 cms.

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