



THE REDEMPTION MACHINES:

A MULTIMEDIA ART EXPERIENCE IN BELFAST'S CATHEDRAL QUARTER

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"Places have a soul and men make it for them by living in them. And even after the men pass away and the place with the soul has become depopulated and deserted something, if it be only a memory, remains."

So begins Cathal O'Byrne's 'As I Roved Out,' describing the experience of a Belfast street haunted by happier times. A little bit of prior knowledge of an area is the subtle yet profound difference between mere space and place, reactivating it as a place wrought with meaning and understanding and exposing the ghosts of the past. This profound exposition on the nature of a place and its historical ghosts is confronted by new multimedia art 'experience' the Redemption Machines, developed by interdisciplinary artist Astrid Bin.

The Redemption Machines takes the participant on a tour around the streets of Belfast, exposing layers of the past which, particularly in Belfast, remain hidden under seemingly unstoppable urban redevelopment. Beginning in the PS2 gallery on North Street, the participant arrives in an austere waiting room; a woman in a lab coat sitting behind a desk offers a muted greeting as you approach. She issues you a smart phone and headphones, quickly explains how to operate the equipment and instructs you to take a seat to begin.

A soothing if slightly sinister voice explains that you are in the 'Department of Membrane Protection and Integrity,' and that you are in an in-between limbo, or membrane, between the human and the machine world which has started to deteriorate causing ghosts of the city's past to become stranded.

It is up to you to walk around the city, reactivating the history of these places in order to expose the latent stories and offer these ghosts redemption.

You are then instructed to leave the gallery and are given directions around the city. Stops along the route include the Assembly Buildings a.k.a. the Northern Bank on North Street, the long lost theatre on Ann Street, 'Blitz Square' on Bridge Street and the long-gone York Street Mill. Along the way, tales of Belfast's industrial past and the machine's alienating effect on its citizens are regaled, connecting the user intimately with their surroundings and allowing them to see these hidden layers in the urban fabric. We hear about the old routs and balls which were held in the Assembly rooms, exhausted millworkers whose lives were blighted by the relentless progress of the industrial revolution, and the hazardous working conditions of the riveters and catchers in Belfast's iconic shipyard.

The stories all tie back to the relationship between machines and humans and how, while the industrial age made many utopian promises (when discussing this Astrid quotes Brautigan's 'All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace'), they fell significantly short, putting a strain on social relations as opposed to freeing us of our labors. The use of digital technology in the Redemption Machines perhaps suggests

something similar will happen with regards to the current digital age (perhaps it's already begun) while also suggesting that it's not the machine's fault. Just because digitisation makes social engagement easier does not mean we don't need to put any effort into it whatsoever.

The entire process of experiencing and interacting with the city in this way is rich with meaning and allows a dramatic reappraisal of (for myself) overfamiliar streets and locales. The office you enter to begin is like something from the pages of a Phillip K. Dick story, immediately removing you from the context of Belfast. When you then re-enter the city you are interfacing with it through the alienating technology of the phone and headphones, causing a profound disconnect and putting you in the role of the outsider, the observer. As the story unfolds, it begins to feel like you are the sole audience member watching an elaborate city-wide production, the drama of post-industrial Belfast.

Once you remove your headphones and return to the 'real world' this unique experience leaves you with a feeling of renewed connection to places which would have previously remained unnoticed. But while the experience is dominated by the historical narrative, it never feels overly nostalgic like other urban walking tours, but rather speaks of a coming-to-terms as you exercise these ghosts, allowing the city to move on in a meaningful way. Perhaps the individuals involved in Belfast's current redevelopment overhaul would benefit from a run-in with the 'Department of Membrane Protection and Integrity.'

