Belfast recently played host to several high-profile touring exhibitions, as well as a season of prestigious contemporary opera, dance and theatre productions, all courtesy of the ‘Festival at Queens’. The participation of YokO Ono, David Byrne, Philip Glass and Bill Viola helped to secure the Festival’s position in the ‘pantheon of world culture’. The international selectors of the ‘Perspective Exhibition’ (October/November 1998) at Belfast’s Ormeau Baths Gallery also displayed a concern with the placing of the city on the ‘world stage’.

‘Perspective ’98’ was the first of the Ormeau Baths’ proposed annual open submission competitions, aiming to “highlight the diversity and quality of contemporary visual art practice”.1 It was followed in November by the city-wide project ‘Resonate’ which in some ways functioned as the antithesis of the gallery-based exhibition: an artist-led initiative incorporating a website, a touring artwork and a series of site-specific interventions. Criticism of ‘Perspective ’98’ has tended to focus on the paradigmatic opposition between the curated show and the artist-initiated project. Reviewer Derval Fitzgerald, writing in Circa, notes that the ‘artist-run project in Belfast was set up, at least in part, to supersede the kind of send-in competition/exhibition of which ‘Perspective’ is a (slightly) updated version.’2

The ‘Resonate’ project, unlike ‘Perspective ’98’, appears to privilege the local rather than the international context, through its emphasis on site-specific art practice. However despite the frequent labelling of artist-run projects as ‘alternative’ or ‘oppositional’ it is apparent that critical discourse can be regarded as inherently unproblematic. In this article, it is perhaps more useful to address each in terms of its relation to what Sharon Zukin terms the ‘Symbolic Economy of the City’; “the intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital”.4 Zukin has focused primarily on the development of ‘place entrepreneurship’ in New York City but her emphasis on the role of visual culture and artists in framing urban space is increasingly pertinent in the European context.

Zukin emphasises that the symbolic economy operates at several levels. Cities, she claims, have always manipulated “symbolic languages of inclusion and entitlement”, a phrase which clearly takes on particular resonance within the Belfast context. She suggests however that modern cities also owe their current art practice within the domain of the gallery. The curators set themselves the task of providing audiences with access to a broad spectrum of current art practice within the domain of the gallery. As Louise Dompierre states “many of the works that captured our imagination were intent on generating new, broader and perhaps easier dialogues between art and its audiences”.5 According to Dompierre the curators “developed a non-linear narrative of forms, ideas and emotions”.6 In practice however the exhibition format could be said to have encouraged a rather linear reading of the works on display. Many visitors followed the guidelines of the gallery handout, progressing from ‘Gallery One’ through ‘Gallery Four’ in the correct order, reading the explanatory notes on each artwork.

Each of the numbered galleries appeared to display works which shared thematic or formal concerns. In some instances this was a successful strategy; encouraging the interplay of ideas and extra-textual references. Eamon O’Kane’s digitally altered ‘Nederland’ cityscapes, Russell Hart’s pseudo-documentary photographs entitled ‘I want to believe but...’ and Andrew Vickery’s model ‘Theatre’ all worked particularly well together. Many of the works in this section of the gallery explored the relationships between memory, fantasy and narrative, often utilizing photography. In this context the snapshot documentation of Fiona Larkin’s prize-winning performance piece ‘The Sand-Bagged Arse’ seemed somewhat out of place. Dan Shipsides’ ‘The Stone Bridge’, another performance piece, suffered from superficial video documentation. Approaching the gallery as a hostile terrain, Shipsides climbed across one wall, leaving a series of footholds and scrapes marks, exploring the notion of the artist as ‘pioneer’ or ground-breaker.

Works displayed in ‘Gallery Three’ were more concerned with the language of the museum. Mary McIntyre’s large scale photograph ‘The Grand and the Mean’ foregrounded framing as means of fixing cultural value. Prize-winner Blaise Drummond’s ‘Unfitted History Paintings’ utilised the techniques of fine art to explore the common territory shared by imperialism and cultural tourism. Thoughts and Second Thoughts’ by Mark Dale consisted of a series of painted fragments contained within two sets of ornate moulding, inviting the viewer, according to the handout, “to actively engage with the work, making...
the relationship between museum culture and the maintenance of class distinctions.

‘Perspective ’98’ sought to display a full spectrum of contemporary art practice, within the gallery. The exhibition thus featured two installation pieces. Ruth Jones’ ‘On Mercury the Days are Longer than the Years’, incorporated a drinking fountain and investigated biological rhythms. Susan Philipsz’s atmospheric sound and light installation ‘Alone is not Lonely’, was positioned in the stairwell. Both pieces functioned effectively in their respective sites but the inclusion and the positioning of this work could be read as an attempt to incorporate ‘site-specific’ work within the domain of art practice without any real degree of commitment to this type of art practice. Overall ‘Perspective ’98’ succeeded in displaying diversity but the exhibition format tended to efface contradictions between the works rather than promote debate.

The ‘Resonate’ project, organised by Susan Philipsz and Eoghan McTigue under the title of ‘Grasshopper Productions’, featured a total of seven site-specific artworks at various locations throughout the city. The project, according to the press release, aimed to ‘raise questions relating to the profile of, and possible function for contemporary art beyond the gallery space, and ultimately to the role of the artist in the city’. The brief for artists was simply to choose a functioning environment within the city and to make a piece of work in that context.

In a discussion of several public art projects, including ‘Resonate’, Circa reviewer Aidan Dunne emphasised the usual problems associated with site-specificity, ‘weaving arts into the fabric of day-to-day life is a process fraught with problems... When you go into a gallery you know if it’s in there it must be art but out in the wild, who knows?’ Projects such as ‘Resonate’ often succeed in placing the issues of context and audience on the critical agenda for reviewers, simply through problematising access, despite the fact that these issues are sometimes side-stepped by the work. Although the ‘Resonate’ organisers/participants are mostly Belfast-based, there was an international dimension to the project. French curator Guy Tortosa, who has widely espoused this type of public art practice, was invited by the organisers to give a public talk during the Belfast Festival. Tortosa’s speech, which centred on his own experience of curating ‘Événements’ in Limerick in 1996, explicitly promoted the regional or mainstream as a process of ‘exchange’, thus categorising the relationship between the ‘provinces’ and the mainstream as a process of ‘exchange’, thus problematising the construction of the peripheral as a ‘pure’ or ‘alternative’ space.

Careful choice of environment was arguably the key factor in the success of the project as many of the interventions were decidedly modest in scale. Graham Fagan’s drawing of ‘Belfast as World Garden’, a rather child-like map of the city could easily have been mistaken for a school project. However its placement in the Victorian palmhouse at the Botanic Gardens linked the process of mapping with both imperialism and contemporary tourism. Susan Philipsz’s ‘Filter’, accapella versions of pop songs played over the sound system at Laganside Buscentre, was both evocative and eerie. Philipsz succeeded in creating a tension between those positioned as the audience for the piece as many of those listening to the ‘Filter’ were unable to determine its source. Mary McIntyre’s mobile billboard piece ‘Home’, which toured the city, featured ambiguous domestic images. This work played with conventional definitions of private and public arena, and functioned as an antidote to the slick billboard images of Yoko Ono and David Byrne (displayed in Belfast during the Festival).

Karen Vaughn’s ‘Un Kapoor’ was a barely noticeable intervention, consisting of a grey painted band, painted at waist height on the facade of a building on Castle Street. The work (which drew attention to the subsidence of the building) hinted at the complex relationship between the artist and the city. The notion that cycles of decay, redevelopment and renewal are somehow ‘natural’ has been criticised by several urban theorists, including Deutsche and Zukin. No one could mistake the destruction of sections of Belfast city centre, occurring at various points during the last thirty years, as a ‘natural process’ of urban decay. However the role that artists and artists’ initiatives, even those which appear to function outside the ‘mainstream’, play in the re-imagining and re-presentation of the city, still requires critical interrogation.

The ‘Resonate’ project, incorporated into the Belfast Festival, formed part of a series of high-profile events designed to promote the city as a world-class cultural capital and several of the ‘Resonate’ sites were well-known tourist landmarks (such as the Botanic Gardens, Queens University and the Linen Hall Library). ‘Resonate’ was thus ideally positioned to explore the re-construction of the city as tourist destination but, although the project placed the role of the artist in the city on the critical agenda, many of the works stopped short of addressing problematic issues, such as urban regeneration.

Cultural practices such as ‘Perspective ’98’ and ‘Resonate’, although they appear to function as opposing paradigms, play a significant part in the re-presentation of the city. Several of the artists participating in both projects did attempt to investigate the workings of, and their place within, this process. It is apparent that both the site-specific project and the survey show provide opportunities for contextual art practices. Work which actively engages with the production of meaning, whether inside or outside the gallery, can contribute to a much-needed critical interrogation of the artist’s role in the symbolic economy.

notes
1 ‘Belfast Festival at Queen’s’ Programme introduction, p. 1.
3 Fitzgerald, Derval, Circa 86, p. 19. Fitzgerald notes the fact that many of the selected artists have participated in the activities of ‘Catalyst Arts, Orchid Studios et al.’. Three Belfast-based artists (Theo Sims, Mary McIntyre and Susan Philipsz) have contributed to both ‘Perspective’ and ‘Resonate’.
5 Ibid, p. 7.
6 Laganside website.
7 ‘Grasshopper Festival’ (November 10-28) Programme Foreword, p. 5.
11 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Interview with Susan Philipsz and Eoghan McTigue, SSI Newsletter, January/February 1999, p.11.
16 Dunne, Aidan, Circa 86, p. 5.