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BELLTABLE ARTS CENTRE

The process of “demilitarization” has been a protracted one in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Army bases have been demolished, observation towers have been disassembled; but, here and there, the architecture of security and surveillance is still awkwardly visible. At the margins of the changing landscape, certain obscure military structures remain, retaining their aura of secretive authority.

Such an outpost forms the subject of the six photographs, *The Listening Station (post-production)*, 2009, and video installation, *The Listening Station I*, 2008, that comprise “The Listening Station,” 2008–2009, by the Belfast-based artist Allan Hughes. These works offer fragmentary views of a British Army communications complex at the moment of its imminent obsolescence. Rather than collating images that suggest a steady wind-down, Hughes establishes a fretfully wound-up perspective on these controlled zones.

In the small documentary shots, taken while the dismantling of the base was under way, the last few of the fenced-in buildings and transmitters are visible in degrees of frustrated close-up, stressing the resilient security around the almost-redundant site. Each composition presents a constrained space of impassable mesh barriers and curling razor wire. In their insistent foregrounding of high fencing within an otherwise open landscape, there is an undoubted *edge* to these muted images, but they are, nonetheless, models of deadpan detachment when compared to the paranoiac frenzy of the video piece. Though picturing a place that was (covertly) important in the past, but that has no (official) future, the video footage speaks urgently of ongoing business. These moving images have an alarming, agitated vitality: The camera



manically chases along cables and darts up transmission towers, as if a desperate, panicked surveillance exercise were somehow still in progress. All the while, as we watch from this discomfiting stakeout position, a voice-over lists inexplicable number sequences above jarring bursts of electronic crackle and hiss. This center of secret communications is on the brink of finally fading into history, but for those on the outside, its codes remain forever uncracked. Even as it physically disappears, it persists spectrally in the landscape as an unsettling enigma.

Questions of what is legible—and legitimate—in a landscape are also critical to “Neutral States,” 2011–, the second project in this exhibition (titled “Regressions,” and part of a new program curated by Michele Horrigan). Concerned in this case with military histories in the Irish Republic, “Neutral States” is a contemplative yet cryptic audiovisual tour of locations linked with defense operations during World War II. As the title recalls, of course, Ireland claimed neutrality during this conflict, and Hughes focuses on sites and stories relating to military actions of this period that have become hidden over time. Again, however, Hughes’s canny combinations of images and audio tracks conceal more than they reveal: Interviews with veterans, for instance, are edited to form a multivocal account of the era that should be richly informative, but the meandering, merging narratives seem as historically elusive as they are allusive. Equally, Hughes’s variously still or slow-moving views of overgrown concrete ruins are efficiently “straight” documents of these neglected settings. But in their clashing nature/culture palette, and with their strange, patient gaze, these shots also potentially call to mind the gray-green vistas of Tarkovsky’s “zone”—a correspondence that hints, perhaps, at deepening mystery, rather than revealed truth, in the engagement with such resonant historical spaces.

—Declan Long