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Interview with Helena Walsh

Helena Walsh is a live artist from County Kilkenny Ireland. She has been based in London since 2003. Helena works with time, liveness and the materiality of the body; both within constructed installation environments and site-specific spaces. Drawing on her lived and embodied experience through her work Helena seeks to positively violate the systems, borders and rules that construct gender. Her practice explores the relations between gender, national identity and cultural histories.

She graduated from Limerick School of Art and Design with a BA in Fine Art in 2001 and completed her Master of Fine Arts at Chelsea College of Art and Design in 2004. She undertook a practice-based PhD in the Department of Drama, Queen Mary University of London, which she completed in 2013. Over the course of her doctoral research, which examined live art and femininity in an Irish context, Helena made a number of durational live art performances that explored Irish cultural histories. For example, in 2010 she performed Invisible Stains based on the labours, losses and political whitewashing experienced by the women detained in Ireland's Magdalen Laundries. She devised a site-responsive durational performance entitled Containing Crisis, at Strokestown Park House: The National Famine Museum of Ireland in 2011, which interrogated the continual haunting power of the Famine in relation to the Republic of Ireland's recent economic collapse. In 2012, Helena co-curated and participated in LABOUR, a touring group durational exhibition that brought together eleven female live artists native to or resident within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Exploring issues of gender and labour in the Irish region, taking into account the relevance of Ireland's geographic proximity to the United Kingdom, LABOUR toured London, Derry/Londonderry and Dublin.

Helena has performed widely in galleries, museums, theatres and non-traditional art spaces, including public sites. In 2016, Helena performed in Future Histories at Kilmainham Gaol as part of the Arts Council of Ireland's 1916 centenary programme. Helena is a founder member of the direct-action feminist performance group Speaking of IMELDA. Between 2013 and the successful referendum to repeal the 8th amendment in the Republic of Ireland on 25th May 2018 that enabled the government to legislate access to abortion, she contributed to the development of the group's public performances, publications and media campaigns. Alongside her creative and activist work, Helena writes on contemporary performance practice.

Artist's website: <http://www.helenawalsh.com>

Valérie Morisson: *Helena, who have been practising performance since 2001-2002, you have co-curated a collective exhibition, LABOUR, in 2012 devoted to performance, you have also contributed a chapter to Áine Phillips' book, Performance Art*

in Ireland, A History, 2015, the first volume dedicated to this art form. Together with Amanda Coogan, you are among the main practitioners and supporters of performance art in Ireland and abroad, a form that was almost nonexistent back in the 1990s. When did this form emerge as a major practice in Ireland and which factors allowed it to impose itself?

Helena Walsh: Performance art emerged on the island of Ireland in the early 1970s and has developed steadily and significantly as a practice since then. Performance art offered a means for artists to respond to socio-political realities in a particular cultural context and explore the everyday embodied effects of oppression, violence and gender inequality. For instance, early practitioners such as Brian O'Doherty and Alastair MacLennan responded to the political violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Women artists north and south of the border also began to deploy the body in performance as a means of countering gendered norms in a particularly patriarchal, conservative cultural context, in which women's bodily autonomy was severely restricted. The discontent voiced by the second-wave feminist movement is, of course, relevant here. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s female artists were engaged in experimental performance practices and often worked collaboratively to challenge the limited opportunities for women artists. Indeed, as Kate Antosik-Parsons details in Áine Phillips' book, artists such as Pauline Cummins, Mary Duffy and Alanna O'Kelly were active at this time and the establishment of groups such as the Women Artists Action Group (WAAG) and the Northern Irish Women Artists Group (NIWAG) in 1987 sought to heighten the visibility of women artists.

VM: Would you say that performance art is particularly suited to address political issues from an embodied perspective, that is to say an alternative, more feminist, perspective?

HW: I was drawn to this form as it allowed me a way of expressing my lived and embodied experience. In using my body within my work, I attempt to make connections between my embodied experience and how it relates to the broader socio-political context, in particular, gendered social norms and cultural constructs of femininity. The embodied effects of the ways in which patriarchal norms contain female sexuality and limit political agency is often hidden or difficult to articulate. Performance as an embodied medium provided ways of making such visible and, importantly, challenging such. It enabled me to explore the everyday realities of the specific cultural context I was living in and subvert patriarchal norms. Equally, performance art as a medium is also not weighed down by a lineage of male dominance in the way that other art media are. It has been persistently deployed to voice alternative feminist perspectives and reclaim the female body. So yes, performance art is particularly suited to addressing political issues from an embodied and feminist perspective.

VM: Many contemporary Irish performance artists are women. Performance art has indeed enabled women to voice complaints through their bodies and re-present a painful history in a way that foregrounds a shared vulnerability facilitating empathy.

Is performance art now deeply tied to feminism and gender in Ireland? Would that be a problem for young art students who might feel the weight of such a “tradition” in Ireland?

HW: Since its emergence performance art has been continually deployed by women artists in Ireland to interrogate the systematic oppression of women by the Catholic Church and Irish state following independence. Women artists have challenged the legislative attempts to relegate women to the duties of procreation and domesticity, alongside the incarceration of women in Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries. The last of these state-sanctioned institutions run by Catholic orders, where women were forced to labour in for-profit industrial laundries, closed in 1996. Indeed, the touring group durational exhibition, *LABOUR* (2012) that I co-curated with Amanda Coogan and Chrissie Cadman, which featured eleven female artists, sought to explore issues of gender and labour related to an Irish context – more widely in the wake of the revelations concerning the Magdalen Laundries. Performance artists also contributed to the successful campaigns to enable access to abortion services on the island of Ireland. Access to abortion was enabled in the Republic following the successful campaign to repeal the 8th amendment in 2018 and abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland in October 2019. In 2013, I co-founded a direct-action feminist performance group called Speaking of IMELDA¹ that challenged the restrictions on abortion on the island of Ireland. This London-based group staged numerous performance interventions, inserting the voices of the intergenerational London-Irish feminist diaspora into the debate and expressing cross-border solidarity. Áine Phillips was involved in the Artists’ Campaign to Repeal the 8th and has bravely advocated for reproductive rights within her practice. So certainly, performance is linked to issues of feminism and gender in Ireland. Yet, performance artists have equally responded to broader political issues, for example, as aforementioned, the turbulence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Over the last two decades, many artists have also deployed performance to interrogate the silences related to the widespread clerical abuse in Ireland’s Industrial and Reformatory Schools, which emerged into public discourse in the 1990s. In particular, artists challenged the attempts to silence those subjected to institutional abuse within the Irish state’s redress system and the downplaying of the abusive nature of the Magdalen Laundries within the McAleese Report (2013)². These issues are addressed in the work of Áine Phillips, Amanda Coogan, Chrissie Cadman, Dominic Thorpe, Ann Maria Healy and myself, amongst others. In the use of durational formats and the live body, performance artists have approached histories of oppression with empathy, while resisting the attempts to whitewash or bury these histories in the past. Rather, they open up a space where the unresolved injustices related to state-sanctioned incarceration remain present. Hence, while performance art responds to issues

1. <https://www.speakingofimelda.org/why-imelda>

2. Senator Martin McAleese, “Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries”, 2013, on line: <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013>.

of feminism and gender, it has also responded to broader socio-political issues, attempting to give body to the impact of political turmoil, cultural silences and histories of oppression. It offers, perhaps, an alternative space where embodied experiences that are often difficult to articulate can be considered. In exploring histories of oppression through the body performance allows us to consider how the past continually touches the present. Importantly, performance art is a practice that resists concrete definition and is openly experimental in the format and processes it deploys. I see it as a practice that is always open to the development of new possibilities and strategies. I am sure the next generation of performance artists will continue to experiment with innovative ways of responding to shifts and issues in an Irish cultural context and farther afield, alongside interrogating issues related to their subjective lived and embodied experiences. Rather than being weighed down by a particular tradition, performance can be embraced as a medium open to experimentation, open to being pushed and developed in exciting directions. So, for younger art students, performance always holds the potential of new possibilities in terms of subject matter, form and processes.

VM: Though many performance artists have addressed specifically Irish themes in their performances, the form itself has heavily been influenced by international artists. Are performance artists in Ireland today part of international networks or are they more committed to Irish collaborations and projects?

HW: I would suggest both. Performance artists working in an Irish context often present abroad and international artists have frequently performed in Ireland. As recorded in Phillips' book, Joseph Beuys visited Ireland in 1974. Amanda Coogan was a student of Marina Abramović and Alastair MacLennan performs with Black Market International, a collective of international artists. So there have been long-standing exchanges between artists on the island of Ireland and international artists. Within an Irish context, artists are also committed to developing collaborations with each other, presenting work in collective formats and organising artist-led performance platforms, including within public space. For instance, in their performance monthly meetings in public spaces, the Northern Irish collective BBeyond³ established a regular collective performance network. The recent exhibition by Array Studios from Northern Ireland at Jerwood Space, London in 2019, also demonstrated the collective use of performance to broaden discourse around socio-political issues and everyday realities in Northern Ireland. Equally, there have been many collective durational exhibitions where performance artists from north and south of the border perform in a collective environment, which often allows the development of exchanges between artists. Examples of such collective live art exhibitions include *Right Here, Right Now* (2010) (fig. 1), *LABOUR* (2012) and *Future Histories* (2016) (fig. 2). *Infusion / Fix 2000 – Millennium National Review of Live Art* organised by Catalyst Arts, Belfast⁴ and the Real Art Project (RAP), Limerick is

3. <http://bbeyond.live>

4. <https://www.catalystarts.org.uk>

Fig. 1 – Helena Walsh, *Invisible Stains at Right Here, Right Now*, Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, 2010, curated by Amanda Coogan, Dominic Thorpe and Niamh Murphy.

Photo credit: Joseph Carr.

Fig. 2 – Helena Walsh, *Autonomy* at *Future Histories*, Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, 2016, curated by Áine Phillips and Niamh Murphy.

Photo credit: Joseph Carr.

another example of a project that fostered exchanges between performance artists from across the island of Ireland and farther afield. It was inspiring to work as a volunteer on this event as a young art student in Limerick. More recently, festivals dedicated to this medium, such as the Dublin Live Art Festival and Live Collision⁵, have furthered the development of connections between performance practitioners both in Ireland and abroad.

VM: Would you say that the perception and reception of performance art have changed over the last two decades? Performance art was thought to be radical and dependent on shock-tactics. Is it still the case or are people growing less reticent to this art form?

HW: In breaking free of the confines of the gallery, merging art with everyday life and using experimental processes, early performance art is often associated with existing on the periphery of mainstream arts practice. Given the various ways artists have deployed their bodies within their work, including in explicit or subversive ways, performance art has often been associated with shock-tactics and, perhaps, sometimes unfairly so. Within an Irish context, due to the long-standing conservative moral policing of bodies, alongside the silencing of discourses concerning the body and sexuality due to the influence of the Catholic Church on state education and healthcare, it is not surprising that the use of the body in performance art could be deemed as shocking or radical. Of course, there have been many progressive shifts in an Irish context as demonstrated by the success of recent campaigns north and south to enable equal marriage and access to abortion. Performance artists, as aforementioned, have developed spaces where the impact of restrictive legislation, patriarchal constructs and histories of oppression can be considered. Certainly, I sense that audiences in an Irish context are appreciative of these spaces. *Future Histories*, a group durational exhibition that I participated in, offers an example of how performance art is more accepted in an Irish context⁶. This exhibition was curated by Áine Phillips and Niamh Murphy as part of the Arts Council of Ireland's programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Rising in the historic Kilmainham Gaol, notably the site where leaders of the 1916 Rising were executed. The inclusion of such a substantial exhibition on performance art in the centenary programme and within such an iconic site highlights the embracing of performance art as a medium appropriate to responding to heavy histories.

VM: One of the issues related to performance as an ephemeral practice is exhibition and conservation. What has been the attitude of museums and art institutions in Ireland as regards these questions?

HW: Of course, as an ephemeral practice performance presents challenges for exhibition in museums and gallery spaces. The use of durational formats offers

5. <http://www.livecollision.com>

6. <http://www.artscouncil.ie/Art-2016/Future-Histories>

audiences a more extended time to engage with performance art. For example, in *LABOUR*, all the artists performed together for a period of eight consecutive hours in each exhibition space⁷. In *Future Histories* artists performed for twelve hours. Some audience members may stay for the full-time to experience the process-based evolution of a performance over-time, others visit at a specific time throughout the durational timeframe and others might choose to return at multiple intervals. Galleries and museums are increasingly accommodating to staging durational performance and supportive of artists' processes in responding to a particular space in different ways. Amanda Coogan's wonderful exhibition, *I'll Sing You a Song from Around the Town*, which took place at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin in 2015⁸ offers an example of the staging of a durational exhibition on an ambitious scale. The exhibition ran for six weeks. Each week Coogan initiated a different durational performance which was subsequently taken on by another performer until eventually there were six durational performances occurring at once. The exhibition also included documentation of Coogan's past work. Of course, much has been written on the relationship between the performance document and the live event and watching a performance on film is not the same as experiencing it in the live moment. However, in the case of performances that one could not attend and performances that occurred historically, it is largely through photographic, film, witness accounts or statements from the practitioners that one can access details of these works. The power and immediacy of performance in the present moment, alongside the ephemeral nature of performance is of political importance to my use of this medium. While I prioritise the live moment within my practice, finding out about the work of past feminist artists and having the opportunity to view records or fragments of their work has been important to my development as an artist. In this sense, it is important to document and conserve records so as to inform future generations. Certainly artists, curators, museums and gallery spaces staging performance now are undertaking greater effort to ensure that live work is documented.

VM: What kind of future do you see for performance art in Ireland? Are there shifts in terms of subject matters, forms and practices?

HW: As I've outlined performance art has been responsive to shifts within an Irish cultural context. I expect artists will no doubt continue to respond to subject matter relevant to their own subjective experiences, alongside current socio-political issues. Artists are also responding to contemporary subject matter by experimenting with different forms, processes, and practices. For instance, in 2015 I co-curated a performance event with Livestock called *Performing Pleasure*, as part of the Dublin Live Art Festival. In this exhibition Laura O'Connor responded to contemporary constructs of femininity by painting her long false nails with the blonde wig she

7. <http://www.dublincityartsoffice.ie/the-lab/exhibitions/labour>

8. <http://www.rhagallery.ie/exhibitions/ill-sing-you-a-song-from-around-the-town>

was wearing⁹. Parodying the personas of social media influencers that trial beauty products, the performance was simultaneously streamed on line. As Áine Phillips' book demonstrates, many performance artists that have shaped this field of practice are also equally dedicated to conserving it. It is wonderful to see the twin efforts of documenting past work and the development of sustained platforms and networks for sharing contemporary work. Given the continuing advancement of discourse around this area of practice and establishment of networks and platforms supportive of the work, I sense performance art in Ireland has a bright future.

Interview carried out in January 2020.

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9. See the YouTube video of the performance at: <http://www.lauraconnorart.com/livestock.html#>.