

Grace Benham - Aine Phillips Interview 28 October 2022
Transcribed by Isabel Githaka

Grace

Do you feel like the performance space is a separate space from the everyday world?

Aine

Yes. I definitely feel that it's a separate space. I feel that it's a framed space in the way a drawing or a painting is framed to set it apart from everyday reality, the everyday world. I try to frame a performance in some way, also in non-conventional art or theatre spaces.

If I make work in the public space or in an everyday location, I always to find some way of framing to set it apart. That could be by locating the performance in a certain architectural context or use of background colour or texture, using visual or structural settings .

The performance is outside of everyday life because I want the viewer to experience something that transcends everyday reality, that offers another type of experience to everyday life. That it offers symbolic or metaphoric, transformed experience of what life is and what the meanings of life can be.

Also, I always think of myself in the performance as being an expanded version of self. Not my every day self, but as an every-woman standing in for everyone. I very much think about my own femaleness as being fundamental in the performance and the fact that I am a female body and biology. I have always worked with my specific identity in a very focused and deliberate way.

Grace

You said that this space is framed, how do you frame the space?

Aine

Well, I am a trained visual artist and a sculptor. I think visually in the performance. So, when I come to an offsite location where I'm going to perform in, I find a context that offers a framing device. It could be architectural, as you say, like the cell in Kilmainham Gaol, that was a perfect mini stage. If I'm performing in a public space, for example, Red Weight, where I pulled a huge quantity of red clothing behind me in the street. I framed the location by choosing the physical route, by choosing how it looked in the context of the backdrop. Ireland, I performed it along the the Salthill Promenade in Galway with the backdrop of the Burren mountains.

So I'm always thinking about the context, how the performance looks visually, how it creates a space that has a powerful effect visually, spatially or experientially, because of course, architecture or the spaces of landscape have an affect upon us. And it can be different if we're in a cave than if we're on top of a mountain or if we have the sea behind us, or if we have grandiose buildings, or if we have the car park. So, context and background creates a certain atmosphere and a certain mood for the performance.

Our bodies experience a space phenomenologically, our bodies experience a space sensually with all of our senses engaged. So smells, sight, physicality, how close our proximity is to objects and to others in the space all makes a difference to how we experience the space and the performance happening in it.

Grace

During your work *Redress* in Kilmainham Gaol you stood on a pink blanket. Was there a reason behind this?

Aine

Yes I choose everything for specific reasons. That pink blanket was from my own childhood home where I grew up.

Grace

Wow. Okay.

Aine

I grew up in Malahide in Dublin, I was born in the mid-60s. So I was a child in the 70s and those pink blankets were everywhere, but they were institutional as well. There are the hospital and institutional blankets of the time, when we were teenagers on religious retreats, they always had those blankets. They were cream wool with blue or pink stripes and they were very comfortable but scratchy.

I've collected them and over the years I've reused them in different performances because they have an emotional resonance for me but they also have a resonance back to an Ireland that was institutional, that was authoritarian.

Well, Ireland was one of the most institutionalised countries in the world during the 19th and 20th centuries. So these institutional objects have a social and political resonance and they're also personal. A blanket is something you put around you to protect and comfort you, it's like a cocoon.

But definitely the blanket has a number of different meanings that are personal and political because as a material object, it speaks of an Ireland of the past. But that was the Ireland I grew up in and it was very evident. I know you could feel it all around you, this institutionalisation of everything and that this authoritarian culture as well that we grew up in those days.

Grace

Yeah. Precisely.

Aine

Yes. In particular women's incarceration within the Magdalene Laundries and the Mother and Baby homes and the redress schemes.

Grace

Yeah. Wow. That's really powerful actually. I didn't really come across people really talking about the pink blanket when they were discussing the work, so that's really interesting to hear your perspective on that. And was there also a reason why you decided to paint yourself white?

Aine

Well, it's ghost-like.

It is ghostly and it transforms the skin as well, it is uncanny and transforms identity which is useful. I wanted to create a body that was something other, transformed, that was just outside of the normal and everyday presentation of self. But white and ghostly, is also shivering, it's cold, it's alienated, all of those meanings were in it.

Grace

Perfect. And then, just moving now to the last runway workshop specifically that one that took place in Kyoto. So, I was just curious about the actual space. Did anybody else, apart from the participants in the runway step onto the red carpet?

Aine

Okay. You're very interested in the materiality.

Grace

Yes.

Aine

It's really interesting to me as well. Actually, no, the red carpet was a really special space. That was the framing device for the last girls and women to perform on. I was the MC, so I gave a running commentary of the summarised stories of each lost or missing individual in a poetic script. I was speaking their story, with a little bit of a distance, giving each story its dignity and space.

I consciously set it up that way. I wanted the performers to be on the red carpet, elegant and distinguished. Especially because the topic is very sad topic and had such resonance from my own personal life as well, and I really felt it very strongly. And also I just wanted to honour and dignify the performers who are standing in for the portrayed lost and missing girls and women. No one else stood on the red carpet only the performers, it was sacrosanct.

It was pristine and it was pure.

Grace

Well, that's a lovely description. Thank you. Pristine and pure. Amazing. And when the performers were on the carpet, did they all do the same thing? Was there an element of repetitiveness that was seen in each performer's performance?

Aine

Well, it used the format of a fashion runway show. We followed that conventional format and because the use of repetition is very powerful in performance. Repetition is powerful in every art form, actually. It is rhythm. So by repeating something over again it instills something in us as witness or viewers. For

example we all need repetition to learn something. I have realised that as a teacher and I understand as well from being a learner too, I've had to learn things by repetition.

In performance, using repetition is a powerful tool. So there was the repetition of the performers walking the red runway but some performers stumbled down it, some of the performers danced, some of the performers moved really, really slowly given the action they had developed to portray the lost girl that they had chosen.

So each performance was different but followed a similar structural format.

Grace

Perfect. And then I think now is a good note to shift on to maybe looking at the function of performance. Why do you feel the need to express yourself through performance?

Aine

It comes from a personal motivation, in my childhood I was always a little bit of a showy child. I remember my mother saying to me, "Stop making a show of yourself!" And back in those days, people used to say little girls should have been seen and not heard.

I always struggled against that idea. I wanted to express myself, to put myself out there and do or say whatever I wanted to do or say. I think it was just my nature. So, I often think Amanda Coogan is also a good example of this because she grew up in a household where both of her parents are deaf.

Herself and her sister always had to make big actions and physical movements to perform themselves. Imagine a home in which two little girls are growing up full of life and the parents not being able to hear them. They will become very performative. And I can really see that in her.

I think something similar happened in my family growing up. We very severely disabled brother, we were four girls and I was the eldest. I probably was very expressive and just trying to get myself seen and heard within my own family context and my poor mother was struggling with my brother. In the 70s and 80s there was so little support and help for families with severely disabled children. When I went to secondary school I discovered art which I loved and the school theatre productions.

I went to art college and started making performances immediately with my most exhibitionist fellow students, some were punky rockers lads and girls that were really unconventional in their physical appearance as well. And we were also politically active in relation to the social issues of the time, especially feminist and class problems. We did a lot of collective activist political performance on the streets at the time there were cuts to student grants and the fees were going up and we were opposing that. We made performances on the streets with banners and performative objects and props.

Those were the days that the Eighth Amendment had just been put in place. And I was active with the pro-choice campaign at the time as a student. I learnt public speaking as head of the NCAD Students Union. I was into putting my ideas out there and doing things in a performative way as a young artist.

So I think performance came through me very naturally. I couldn't really ever suppress it. In 1989 I went to Galway when I graduated. All my sculpture class immigrated, everybody went to New York or London. But due to the circumstances of my life at the time, I just couldn't face going abroad. I encountered Macnas, a Galway based community theatre company performing on the streets of Dublin. They had created a giant Gulliver floating in the Liffey with street performers alongside engaging with the public. And I just thought this was the most interesting artistic thing I'd ever seen, because I was only ever aware of art in galleries or in museums.

Community art was in its infancy in Ireland, Macnas were one of the first groups to begin making art and performance in public space. In Macnas I learned all about performative techniques and skills. I think of it as my apprenticeship in performance in public space and working collaboratively with communities responding to social and cultural issues.

Then I got my teaching job in the Burren College of Art, I moved to Clare. I had my two daughters. I did a Masters by Research in LSAD in 1999, and I focused on performance art entirely. So then my work really was transformed more into performance art as a form in its own right, and since then I have focused entirely on performance art. My PhD in NCAD in 2006-2009 was a further deep dive into performance, it was a study on autobiography in performance art which helped my own work develop to embrace the feminist adage 'the personal is political' as a modus operandi.

As I get older, performance is a little bit more difficult because I don't have the same physical energy. In other ways it is entirely natural to me and it has become part of my identity and one of my expertises in the field in terms of the practice and the theory.

But of course COVID in the last few years has meant a dearth of performance opportunities in public contexts. I can see myself still carrying on performance as I get older, but probably doing it a bit less. If I have an idea, I will see the idea manifested through performative outcomes. That seems to be how an imaginative idea or an urgent call to action for me is best expressed.

Grace

Why do you use ritual in your performance?

Aine

In my view ritual and catharsis go hand in hand. Throughout history we have always used ceremony and ritual to enact our deepest desires, our fears, our loves, our longings ... to enact spiritual meaning, social meaning. For example the act of a marriage ceremony is an act of social meaning in front of our friends and family. It also enacts spiritual and emotional meaning, and it is political too.

I think performance art is very close to ceremony and ritual because it enacts meaning, it enacts performative meaning in front of others. We do it in such a way as to bring others into the experience even if they're purely spectators, standing outside, only watching, not participating in any way, even by spectating, even by watching, we get involved. We get pulled into the ceremony because somebody else is doing something in our stead. Somebody else is enacting something that we don't have to do ourselves, but is being done for us.

A Catholic priest at mass is performing a metaphor of sacrifice, so that we don't have to, so that we can just observe it and be part of it. In ancient Greek theatre the tragedy was enacted in front of the audience who felt the emotions of a son killing his father, sexually desiring his mother - these deep human desires that can't be expressed in words. However when they're enacted out in front of us, we somehow feel relieved and satisfied that it's okay that they're spoken about and revealed. It is therapeutic.

There's a relief in that and that relief is catharsis. I consciously used this approach in *sex, birth and death* (2001).

Yeah, for me that piece was a ritual ceremony and a catharsis. I deliberately used the format of a religious ceremony, co-opting it and some of the language of Catholic mass, religious ceremonies and confession. The performance also used ritualistic actions, like the expression of milk from the body, the cutting of a cake that was in the shape of a fetus and eating it in front of the audience. I then offered the slices of this beautiful cake made with organic ingredients, to the audience.

I believe it was a cathartic moment - to consume the object of our love, of our pain, of our tragedy, of our loss, of our desire, of all the conflicting emotions within us when it comes to having an abortion. I had an abortion when I was younger and I was working with that experience in a cathartic personally political way.

I believe it was a socially therapeutic action, the purpose was to perform a therapy for our society. In the same way the Greek tragedy would enact the catastrophe of a son killing his father and sexually desiring his mother in Oedipus Rex (Sophocles, 429 BC). but I was also performing the catastrophe of our society, not protecting our women's health, reproductive autonomy and choice. The performance also enacted the tragedy the loss of a child because we are compelled or have no other choice in that situation but to choose an abortion.

So how do we express that? How do we speak about all those contradictory emotions that are all part of the human experience? It isn't black or white. Performance art offers a platform for these contradictions to be expressed.

Grace

I think the sentence that you described, performing a therapy for society, I think that really just encapsulates what the works are about.

Aine

Yeah but it is performing that therapy for others. It is not only a personal therapeutic enactment , for example in privacy of your own bedroom, for example we might enact our own private rituals of catharsis ourselves in our own personal lives. But to do that in front of other people, you implicate everybody in that, and we all become part of it.

Grace

Really, really fantastic and interesting to hear. So probably my sum up question for this part will be, what and who are your main inspirations?

Aine

Marina Abramović's work was influential for me. When I was 17, I saw Rosc in Dublin, a big international exhibition and I saw the photograph of Marina Abramović and Ulay performing Breathing In/ Breathing Out (1977) and I immediately understood its meaning and affect, even though I'd never seen performance art, I had no idea that you could make art that was performance. I'd only ever learned about painting and sculpture in secondary school.

I knew I was going to go to art college and I got it immediately. I was like, "Yes, that is it." You can make an action or a performance, a gesture with the same intention as you would create a painting or a drawing. It can be full of emotional, spiritual, political meaning and also it can have affect, and it has its own language. I understood the language of performance in that moment. So that was very influential.

Jumping forward years later, when I was doing my Master's and I was focusing only on performance. I really looked at the work of Karen Finley, an American feminist performance artist, and she made a lot of work during the 80s and 90s. She was one of those artists who got into trouble with the National Endowment of the Arts in America, where the funding was rescinded from her projects because it was judged pornographic. A very interesting artist, she performed with her voice, spoken word and visual presentations with her body as well, using props and setting as sceneography. I incorporated a lot of her methodology into my performances.

I was also very interested in Carolee Schneemann as well and I met both of them. Well, I wrote Carolee Schneemann and we had to back and forth correspondence and she included an image of a work that I had made in a book that's been produced by her NYC gallery since. And Karen Finley, I met her in New York, and she came to see my performance sex, birth and death. That was an amazing moment actually. I couldn't believe it. I was actually completely overwhelmed. I could barely even speak to her.

Grace

Star struck.

Aine

Yes completely!

I also absolutely love the performance work of Amanda Coogan.

Grace

she's amazing, yes.

Aine

I really admire Pauline Cummins and Alanna O'Kelly, who were my teachers when I was an undergrad in the late 80s. And then they were both my supervisors on my PhD in NCAD. And there's many younger Irish and international artists I love, I wouldn't know how to begin.

Grace

But yeah, for the moment, that's my questions anyways but I would love to ask if we could make this a two parter. I feel like your input is really valuable for this whole process.

Aine

It is interesting to respond to new questions on my work because it helps me to see the work in a new way. Over the years I forget about some of the things I've done and now you are asking me I am reminded of occurrences. For example when I performed sex, birth and death. in Germany in 2003,

when I offered the cake slices a woman shouted back from the audience, "I will not eat a baby." People laughed and in America people laughed at the dark humour of that performance. I do like using humour to express difficult topics, I think humour opens the mind of the audience to complex ideas.

Grace

Dark humour, perhaps?

Aine

Yes, and my more recent work *Buttered Up* is full of dark humour, but it's about domestic violence, which I have witnessed in my own life. I believe that performance is powerful because it's also satirical and absurd.

Humour can be used in potent ways. American people laughed in the audience for sex, birth and death but in Ireland when I performed it in Cork in 2005 there was just absolute silence. It was a dark and conflicted time in Ireland for feminism and reproductive rights. In Germany, people liked it, but that woman did shout, "I will not eat a baby." She took the enactment very seriously. So that's the power of art. People can strongly identify with the image.