

# The Visual Artists' News Sheet



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## SEMINAR REPORT

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Anne Maree Barry, Kitty D., HD still from 'Otium cum Dignitate- Leisure with Dignity' at the LAB, Dublin, June 2017; photograph by Ros Kavanagh



'Arts & Trauma' seminar, 16 June, The LAB, Dublin. Speakers L-R: Niamh McCann, Dr Catherine Conlon, Patricia Cronin, Anne Maree Barry.

## Speaking the Unspoken

SUE RAINSFORD REPORTS ON THE 'ARTS & TRAUMA' SEMINAR, WHICH TOOK PLACE ON 16 JUNE AT THE LAB, DUBLIN.

**HELD** in the context of two concurrent exhibitions at the LAB — Anne Maree Barry's 'Otium cum Dignitate - Leisure with Dignity' and Patricia Cronin's 'Shrine for Girls' — the Arts & Trauma' seminar sought to reconsider the role of art in relation to trauma, as well as the issue of handling trauma that is 'live'. Barry and Cronin joined Vaari Claffey, Dr Tina Kinsella, Dr Catherine Conlon, Michelle Browne and Niamh McCann in tackling questions of responsibility and 'implicatedness' within this charged subject matter. Among other issues, the discussion focused on what contemporary art practice — as opposed to other modes of intervention — can contribute to the conversation.

The two exhibitions on display dealt with female bodies and experience, as well as the trauma and invisibility that women can fall prey to. Cronin's three shrines to victims of gendered violence countered this invisibility by forging sites of remembrance. Meanwhile, Barry's central video work saw

four characters — Madam May Oblong, Kitty D., Countess Aldborough and The Custom House — establish a dialogue between locality, history, architecture and the independence of women in a specific time". With these artworks nearby, restoring dignity and giving voices to female bodies became a central theme of the panel discussion.

Catherine Conlon spoke about her work in social policy and her belief that women's sexual and fertile bodies continually prove to be one of the most destabilising issues for the state. Referencing the 1992 'X Case' and the applied policy research that uses the general term 'crisis pregnancy' as a euphemism for abortion, Conlon spoke about the traumatising effect of policy on women's lives. She also highlighted the problem of presenting individual women's testimonies in a limiting two-dimensional written form: "no matter how often I tried to talk about 'pathologising' as the outcome of regulation of women's fertile bodies ... the tendency was to re-pathologise

the women”. Her move into art practice was motivated by this recurring issue in her social research, as well as her desire to “work with stories in some kind of format that would shift the gaze away from individual words and patterns of words”. Selecting text from her interviews with women, she collaborated with musician Dr Evangelia Rigaki to produce an installation-based performance. This piece aimed to “[shift] the gaze from the individual women onto the entanglement of culture, community and state” in which their stories occurred. For Conlon, the “powerful potential” of arts practice was unleashed in this piece, successfully shifting the implication from individual women to a whole culture of Catholic Ireland, characterised by patriarchal oppression.

The role of art practice in relation to trauma and traumatised subjects, as well as its ability to challenge the dominant discourse, was another recurring theme. Cronin described her exhibition as attempting to “incite a shift in context that might provoke a shift in thinking”. She stated that the artist’s role is one of keen observation, reflection and response — a position that should resist “any kind of editorial impulse”. Niamh McCann also discussed the role of performance work in these destabilising terms. Referencing Anu Productions’ site-specific performance *Laundry* (2011), which took place in the Magdalene Laundry, on Sean MacDermott Street (just a few minutes’ walk from the LAB), McCann described the process of interrogating the “hidden histories of buildings, of the female and of the state”. The Magdalene Laundry buildings are still intact, meaning we are still obliged to physically confront these sites where atrocities against women took place.

Vaari Claffey reiterated how trauma remains active, not only on a physical level within the built environment, but in the sense of inherited trauma that “we as a society still hold”, which manifests “in us and how we live our lives”. The genetic transmission of trauma through the mother’s line means that the traumas of women are “not only in our daughters but in young men now”. This bodily dissemination of trauma over time underscores our inability to eradicate suffering. Its recurrence and active status within contemporary bodies is inevitable, and so modes of articulation are vital if representation and eventually catharsis are to be achieved.

The artist’s role in forging such modes was discussed through the term ‘responseability’ which considered: how much of a response an individual is capable of; what an artist takes on and where she puts it afterwards; and the ethically complex relationships between artists and audiences. Michelle Browne discussed a performance she developed for *labour* — a multi-venue, live exhibition of performances by Irish female artists, which was presented in London, Derry and Dublin. Browne’s *The Grace of God* (2012) was a highly demanding piece, both for the artist and the audience, which hinged on the vast, repetitive and boring labour performed by women in the laundries. Indeed, by the 1970s, the laundries had taken on so much manual work that local women had to be employed to complete it. By partaking in the “labour of the loom” and magnifying these women’s everyday toil, Browne aimed to create some sort of dialogue that people can access.

The issue of handling trauma in the present moment is complicated by its tiered nature: after trauma’s initial occurrence, it is relived over and over in memory and sensation. Its willful

reactivation is therefore ethically fraught and runs the risk of re-traumatisation. Expanding on this with regard to her own practice, Cronin stated: “In the history of western art, there are so many brutalised women’s bodies ... I want to address these topics, but I don’t want to gratuitously repeat them in a way that feeds into a patriarchal commodity — it’s such a delicate balance. If you make a mistake, you’re just re-traumatising”. Moving into conversation with the audience, re-traumatisation was discussed in terms of a perceived insufficiency of language. It was suggested that overuse of the term trauma runs the risk of it becoming an ultimately disabling ‘trend word’. McCann spoke of a “blanket language” and an “ovetsatui Awn” that can only serve to further silence those who can’t have their voices heard. For her, these stories must be represented without neutralising their charged centre. The necessity of maintaining a visceral charge was aligned with the “affective productive potential of art”, which renders it distinct from other disciplines. Art has the capacity to prompt audiences to actively consider how they might be complicit in a scenario and how they might effect change.

The final question of the afternoon focused on how we might reach beyond the dominant discourse and “speak the unspoken”. Proposed avenues of inquiry included live performance work, based on its potential to “play the action that moves us toward activation”. The activity of “queering of the form”, was also suggested as a process that can destabilise existing narratives and provoke new dialogues. Doing so, as McCann phrased it, would “activate something that is not about blame but release”. By considering what kind of activation they have as a maker, the artist allows an audience to consider what we can do with trauma moving forward. This would enable us to take steps towards a future that moves us past blame and repression. In her closing comments, Tina Kinsella articulated a need for “new forms of symbolisation for trauma” that counteract its “unsymbolisable” nature. In other words, there is a need for new methods of speaking that don’t pathologise women, traumatise them or re-enact appropriations of their bodies. In moving away from our immersion in the state and what that has meant historically for female bodies, we need new kinds of approaches that we can partake in without the risk of perpetuating existing harmful models. Such approaches will allow us to get closer to experiences and events that have no symbolisation within a state narrative. As Kinsella notes, “it’s too easy to say that healing comes next” — we must shift the context, shift the gaze and finally shift the thinking.

**Sue Rainsford is a writer and researcher based in Dublin. She was recently announced as recipient of the VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2017.**

#### Note

1. In this context, the term ‘implicatedness’ denotes a shift away from thinking about individuals as isolated units, towards viewing them as interconnected elements within a larger network.

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