



APHORISTIC REFLECTIONS

On Sinéad O'Donnell's Performance Work

GILLIAN WYLDE

"The invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck"

Paul Virilio¹

"I fall to pieces"

Patsy Cline²

I. HER SHIP SETS SAIL FROM HERE

Performance Reflection Number One:

Sinéad O'Donnell's performative art practice investigates instances and actuations of causality through singular occurrences and halting actions; cause redirects within the work, and gives rise to action, phenomenon, conditions and effects. Lively things are set off or initiated by her bodily presence or encountered within recorded, or otherwise mediated, frameworks.³ Relationships between cause, action or event produce a certain response, in the form of another event. The repeated event is generally understood as a consequence of the first event. Repetitions of events, of utterances and iterations, of objects, processes, partial variables, and semi-permeable facts, weave through Sinéad's projects, purposefully, persistently and with unyielding attitude and attribute.

¹ Virilio, P (1999) *Politics of the Very Worst*. In conversation with Petit, Philippe New York: Semiotext(e).

² Cline, Patsy (1999) *I Fall To Pieces*. Song written by Hank Cochran and Harlan Howard (1961) From the album *Patsy Cline Showcase* (CD) US Import. Mca Nashville Recordings.

³ This understanding of "lively things" is taken from Ahmed, S (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* Duke University Press.



Sinéad O'Donnell, from the 'Silverhead' series, Japan, 2010

Image Credit: Sinéad O'Donnell

Artist's Comments: *This is from a two-week period spent in a Japanese house in the countryside. During the residency I set myself the task of "re-searching mentality by isolating the head area of the body." I studied the light in the house and when and where it appeared and disappeared. I also watched the domestic actions, daily chores and areas in which they happened. The resulting work was a series of actions to camera.*

II. SHE GAVE WAY TO A BURST OF WEEPING. HE WAS NOT A MAN TO GIVE WAY TO THIS KIND OF PRESSURE

Performance Reflection Number Two:

Repetition fascinates Sinéad. Repetitions and iterations of actions, things, objects, and words, are renewed, questioned, said again, or restated. Repetition lives in the body; it is both known and so very easily forgotten. Through repetition lively things give rise to action and phenomenon, bringing into being affects and percepts, sense datum within space-time contexts.

O'Donnell's work breaks things up; it is about agency and transmission, waiting and giving way. This is purposelessly purposeful work, contradictory, simple, hard. Watching her reminds me that if you do something on purpose, you do it purposely. But if you have a specific purpose in mind, you are acting purposefully. Much in life is done or made with no discernible point or purpose. Much in life is done with great purposefulness, endlessly the same and endlessly different.

III. THE INVENTION OF HER SHIPWRECK BEGAN HERE

Performance Reflection Number Three:

Much contravenes or runs counter to the uncluttered actions and activities encountered within Sinéad's work. The fragile force of things attract the body toward the centre of the earth, or toward any other physical body having mass. These actions of encounter are exchanged within the performative moment by way of words, heat, and other forms of energy. For most purposes the degree of intensity of this is measured by an unhurried increase in acceleration. Sinéad's gravity is seen and heard by others within a series of intra-actions. Gravity gains, effecting change upon this thing or that thing. And things are likely to collapse, take a tumble, cave in, or shatter. It is for this reason that reparation is improbable.

The tender, visceral force of things, the extreme or alarming, takes people by surprise. They are involved because they were there, as audience or bystander, witness, passer-by, spectator or onlooker. They are involved in what is happening, and in what happened. Things take the shape of conditions; these actions become EVENTS, encountered within the context of a gallery space or shop front, wasteland or side street, a market square, disused train station, local Municipal Park, or domestic setting.

IV. FLOORPLANS ARE NOT USEFUL; LET'S USE OUR FEET⁴

Performance Reflection Number Four:

Sinéad makes words with objects. Her objects are talkative, ordinary, everyday, and are often found in multiple within works. Precarious words make precarious objects. Like most artists, Sinéad's fascination with certain objects, words, and materials are made apparent through repetition within various projects. *White china plates; Silver foil head wrap; Paper; Gaffa tape stacked wood; Galvanised bucket; Potato; Tree branch; Vernacular chair or table.* Sinéad brings things and stuff in dialogue with the specificity of a particular context, situation, or set of circumstances and conditions; her works explore the psychological, aesthetic, cultural,

⁴ O'Donnell, Sinéad 2011 CAUTION, an unlimited project by Sinéad O'Donnell (online) Available from: <http://www.sineadodonnell.com/artists/caution/sin%C3%A9ad-o%E2%80%99donnell> (Accessed: 22 July 2011)

ritualistic, and porous boundaries of things and stuff in and *as* the world. The attitude and apprehension of the thing brings about affect and causality – however slight, fleeting, discreet, affecting, grasping, or changeable these encounters and apprehensions might be.



Sinéad O'Donnell, *From the Violent Series*.
'Chaos' event, Open Space, Victoria, BC, September 2010.
Image Credit: c/o Sinéad O'Donnell

Artist's Comments: *This was a 30-minute performance from my Violent performance series, begun in 2010, in which I explored the sound of the word violent and the imminent threat of violence rather than its actual physical force. The Violent series expresses feelings of isolation and dislocation and draws upon past experiences of domestic violence and of living in a society surrounded by violence. In this action I meticulously stacks dinner plates so high that they tower above my head and then collapse. The debris creates a fragmented sculpture that slowly covers the floor.*

V.

TIME ONLY ADDS TO THE FLAME⁵

Performance Reflection Number Five:

In her recent 'Violent' series, a multitude of white china plates are 'stacked well'. She adds more plates to an already high stack of large white china plates. As she stacks, a voice, just audible from underneath the

⁵ Cline, Patsy (1999) I Fall To Pieces. Song written by Hank Cochran and Harlan Howard (1961) From the album Patsy Cline Showcase (CD) US Import. Mca Nashville Recordings

floorboards of a gallery space or from the pocket of an overcoat, steadily and insistently repeats the word 'violent' over and over. She adds even more plates to the already heightened stack of large white china plates. The likelihood of gravity portends, and takes a nosedive. This was both expected and surprising; reparation is improbable.



Sinéad O'Donnell, *From the Violent Series*.
Elmwood Hall, Blackmarket International & Bbeyond event, Belfast, 2012;
Image Credit: Jordan Hutchings

Artist's Comments: *Another performance that was part of the Violent series (2012). This time the sound was replaced by my voice shushing the plates as if they were human.*

VI.

IF I WAS A GOODY, IF I WAS A GOODY, IF I WAS A GOODY, IF I WAS A GOODY⁶

Performance Reflection Number Six:

We are turned towards things, objects and stuff in the world. Within these encounters there is intent and there is collapse, breakdown or misunderstanding, glorious moments of apprehension or speechlessness. Similarly language, like consciousness or gravity, has intent and agency; it is directed toward something

⁶ O'Donnell, Sinéad 2011 CAUTION, an unlimited project by Sinéad O'Donnell (online); available from: <http://www.sineadodonnell.com/artists/caution/sin%C3%A9ad-o%E2%80%99donnell> (Accessed: 22 July 2011).

and moves out from somewhere, something. Words have inclination, hesitation, latency, and orientation. In the words of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, “consciousness is thus embodied, sensitive, situated.”⁷

Within Sinéad’s work, objects and things communicate neatly and in the most direct of ways. This is talkative work, likely to answer back. Response has agency. “Objects function in our lives as forms of communication. An object is a story in itself and at the same time it is a vessel ready to receive any projection brought upon it by the subject/viewer.”⁸ Words touch other words. Things rub up against other things. Like stroking a cat against the lie of its fur, this is not always the easiest of encounters. The bodiless voice repeats again the word ‘violent’. Spoken or uttered sounds seem to come from somewhere else. Here there is a breakdown. Can there be a going back? We hear the word ‘violent’ said over and over. Should we be afraid? Words are panic exciters, after all; they don't always mean what they say. They are tongue stoppers; they don’t always say what they mean.



Sinéad O'Donnell, *From the Violent Series*, 2010

Plymouth Arts Centre, 'Pigs of today are the hams of Tomorrow'

Image Credit: Paul White

Artist's Comments: *This was the very first performance of the Violent series in 2010. No plates were used. I played the sound of a man and a woman saying the word 'violent' repetitively. I painted my nose back. I gaffa taped the audience to their positions in the room. Then I left the room.*

⁷ Ahmed, S (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* Duke University Press.

⁸ Steinbach, Haim (2001) *North East South West* Hatje Cantz publishers.

TINY REVOLTS ARE STILL NECESSARY⁹

Performance Reflection Number Seven:

In ‘Violent Series’ Sinéad paints her nose with black felt pen. Her black felt nose is both a cancellation and an affront. In other works we encounter knives punched into tree branches or loaves of bread. Or we watch as she wraps tin foil around her head and walks backwards into the woods. In ‘Exposition Silence’ a plastic decoy bird rests on Sinéad’s head; a passer by pats the bird on her head and laughs. In every case, events are actuated by Sinéad with great ardour, and with unfaltering attitude and attribute. She meets us somewhere off kilter and we are reminded that to not act is also an action.

The text above was originally commissioned as part of O’Donnell’s 2010 “ArtsAdmin Bursary” – a national bursary scheme that allows artists to chose a writer to represent their work.

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<http://www.15minuteswithyou.org.uk>

⁹ Wertheim, C Ed. (2010) *Feminaissance* Les Figues Press. Quote taken from Dodie Bellamy essay - “The Feminist Writers Guild”