

Performance Ecologies was a live art and film event that took place at Interface on the 27th and 28th August 2022. Artists Eileen Hutton, Noel Arrigan, Gustaf Broms, Tadhg Ó Currín and Day Magee made live performances on site over the course of the afternoon of the 27th alongside screenings of two performative films, one by Elizabeth Bleynat and the other a collaborative project by Burren College of Art.

All the works addressed the relationship of humans to the environment in micro and macro ways - our planetary and system-wide relations put in jeopardy by climate change and ecological crisis as well as our life sustaining, intimate and emotional connections with the world around us.

On the following morning, the 28th, an 'artists breakfast' brought together the artists, curators and members of the public to discuss the performances and the experiences of the day from different perspectives. This text is an abridged version of the conversation that took place, sitting outside on the giant water tank overlooking the majestic Inagh Valley. Each artist describes their project and speaks about the subjective experience of making the performance and their relationship with the audience.

The event was curated by Áine Phillips and Alannah Robins and produced by Jill Murray. Áine Phillips mediated this discussion and it was transcribed by Isabel Githaka.

Áine Phillips

Eileen you were the first artist to kick start the programme of events, literally with your fascinating kick sampling workshop, will you tell us about it?

Eileen Hutton

When I was invited to participate my research was centered around a citizen science model called kick sampling. You go into a freshwater ecosystem and disturb the bottom and gather small marine and invertebrate life in a net and do this in a series of physical motions.

Kick sampling is a systematic, 30 seconds of kicking and then you move upstream, and repeat. So, it's quite like an elegant dance. It's a way to determine the health of a freshwater ecosystem, the water flowing through changes quite quickly, you never step into the same river twice.

If there was any runoff or pollution, you could test it one day, potentially and it could be gone by the next. But if there was continual pressure put on an ecosystem, you would be able to determine that by the type of the biodiversity within that marine invertebrate population. So that's what we were looking for.

My project was centered on the idea that I would show people how to perform this dance of kick sampling and we would enter the water doing that together. A collective dance performance, with the idea of looking, thinking, being in harmony with that freshwater ecosystem.

Plans changed slightly and we adapted the project to connect with local community members through Alanna Robins and I worked with local marine ecologist Mary Louise Heffernan and the river behind her house.

I performed the kick sampling there on my own first and again yesterday with participants. We brought the water and marine invertebrate samples back into the lab space at Interface and spent the afternoon talking with the public about the process of kick sampling, how people could get involved in doing it at their own locations.

We looked at the invertebrates underneath a stereo microscope and took pictures, printing the images out on acetate and plastering them onto the windows to create a visual underwater world.

My idea was to de-center the human being, to shift our perspective and make the creatures more than human, almost larger than life. I wanted to think about place and where we are in this ecosystem. A few people came in and asked if I was a scientist, because it was very lab-like and had all the tools and methodologies of science.

As an artist I wanted to appropriate all of that methodology as a way to shift thinking. To perform science in the space did lend a certain air of gravitas that maybe wouldn't have been there if situated in an art centre. There was an industrial feel to it.

Aine Phillips

You were enabling the participants or the observers to do it themselves in their own context too and showing the procedures or the processes by which people can check their own water courses for biodiversity and health.

Eileen

Absolutely. I was definitely trying to softly recruit people into adopting or stewarding a tributary near them and show that it's easy to do. It's a commitment of about an hour a month and you can contact LAWPRO, the Local Authority Waters Programme for more information. It's a way to engage with a fresh water ecosystem locally and to take ownership of those places that get overlooked. The smaller tributaries are important ecosystems for brown trout, for eel and for a lot of native Irish species.

Aine

How did it feel for you doing your workshop performance?

Eileen

I felt I had adopted these marine species for a day. I returned the water to the two different rivers this morning. ~~I think I felt a little bit~~ Ultimately I was conflicted in this process, that I was caring for an ecosystem by kicking up things.

I was disrupting them, scooping them up and taking them away. It did feel odd but then I wondered if could it be justified with the intention of care and monitoring and trying to bring people on board with that.

Audience member

I love the idea of the gravitas of the scientific aspect takes but there is joy in what you've done as well. There's a certain knowledge you can gain from the scientific aspect but your performance just brings it home.

Audience member

You initially had the idea of having a lot of people making a dance. Do you envision that you will do that somewhere?

Eileen

I do love that idea of collectivity and taking collective action in order to transform things. So coming together to perform that kick sampling action would be quite a beautiful performance to do with a group of people. The smaller tributaries are important, especially now that so many waterways are under pressure from dredging. They are really important habitat to ecosystems for brown trout, for eel and for a lot of native Irish species.

Aine

How did it feel for you doing your workshop performance?

Eileen

I did feel like I had adopted these marine species for a day. I returned the water to the rivers this morning. I think I felt a little bit conflicted in this process of caring for an ecosystem by kicking up things.

It felt like I was disrupting them and scooping them and taking away. I was thinking about colonisation and these imperial legacies. It did feel odd but then could it be justified with the intention of care and monitoring and trying to bring people on board with that.

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Aine

Day Magee performed after Eileen and you performed twice in the afternoon. The first iteration of your performance took place in one of the nearby tanks. Day, will you tell us about your beautiful, poetic work and about your experience?

Day

Yes, I performed it twice over the course of the day and it was called “a fish in the shape of a voice”. My practice has pivoted in the past seven months or so, my work has always been performance centered, but now it's explicitly and specifically addressing queerness, chronic illness and religiosity, which are all sources that relate directly to my body's experience.

Increasingly, I'm interested in the self-mythologizing that our bodies cannot help but accumulate over time and that was a theme in the work. I was positioned in the centre of one of the old salmon tanks, I was naked and reclining. This pose referred to one of my favourite Rene Magritte paintings, from 1934 which depicts a fish lying on a beach and its bottom lower half is a woman's legs.

In my piece I was live reading, not a script that I had rehearsed or memorised, I was actively reading from a series of writings that I'd written over the past few months in relation and in response to this space.

I'm interested in how language exists potentially as a source of distinct entity from humans. I believe language information possibly can encode itself and proliferate itself and diversify itself through subjectivities, through individual human bodies. What survives past us is the stories we tell whether about ourselves or the world and to each other, which are just sounds hopping from human body to human body across time.

In the work I refer to the salmon of knowledge, relating to these ideas as well to the biblical tale of the first humans eating from the tree of knowledge and how that fractured the world. Eternal knowledge with a post enlightenment rational way of pursuing scientific method was the theme. In the performance I was orating my writings making these connections between myths in general and the specific myth of the salmon and its life cycle in the wild but also in the hatchery.

I was reading the writing of the body, live in the moment and reading in the present, what it had written in the past. I was naked, speaking something into existence which relates to Christian theology in terms of God speaking the world into existence. We can't help but also speak things into existence by naming them, which can also deaden them.

I had a speaker that amplified my voice and a background sound scape I had partially made from samples under water here by the lake. The sounds were secondarily amplified by the tank itself. You couldn't hear it as well from the outside but when you stood looking over the tank it created an upward tower of sound.

Aine

Subjectively, what was your experience of doing the performance and you did two versions?

Day

There were different aspects to each iteration of it. I felt quite powerful also that I was performing naked. Originally we thought that the audience would not look into the tank, only hear the voice and sound elements, it was going to be more of a focus on storytelling, and mythologizing. Of course, imagery is inherent in myths anyway, the performer is always

rendering themselves quite vulnerable, even if they're not naked but especially if they're naked. Viewers could ask "why is this human animal doing this? What reason would it have to do this"? And yet drawing a power from that.

I think there's a definite power for the performer but also the audience, the witnesses, and the performer being a witness to themselves as well. There's a collective consolidation of the temporal event that we're all recording with different filters. It's like we're generating this given reality through a certain amount of time.

I draw a lot of strength from that perspective in my own personal life as well, which is interesting in terms of performance potentially being a form of technology, I suppose in and of itself. It can be the source of spells cast for self-empowerment.

Audience member

Nudity always makes us more animal. So you were becoming animal, you were becoming fish. And that really made sense in the particular context. Did you get lots of fish bites?

Day

I didn't actually!

Audience member

I thought you looked like a fish, lying in the tank it was so beautiful and I was so glad we were able to look in, down at you because the visual aspect of it felt so important.

Day

We normally see performers on a stage but if the audience are above you it changes the hierarchy that is produced. I was interested in how I almost could draw upon my own sense of power from being below.

Aine

Gustaf, when Day's work finished, you started performing around that time.

Gustaf Broms

I started over here behind the header tank. I think almost no one saw me to begin with. There is a place where a tree has almost fallen over and there is a perfect little slot to hang underneath. So, I inserted myself there, below its roots. It was a still image. And it was a good way to put me in contact with the idea of roots because I turned into roots at the end.

Then I moved to the front of this wall or stone cliff to perform. When I arrived here first and was developing my ideas for performance I hung out in front of that wall of stone, I just loved the idea of being in communication with it and being squeezed between the rock and the mountain.

I was at a festival this winter and there was another artist and the right away, she said, "Are you a story teller?" And I never thought of myself in that way because I tend to not use words, but there's definitely elements in my performance that build some story.

Then I performed a section that was more active starting with making the yellow hand print that is still on the wall there. I've lately been thinking a lot about those early traces of human actions, rituals or language on cave walls. How people expressed a sense of wholeness with no big separation between the environment and their sense of self.

I was trying to understand how did we put ourselves in this environmental mess and how did our arrogance in relation come about? So I was thinking about the journey we have made from the caves to now, in such a short time relatively. I called my performance "There is no there", it is about trying to understand this sense of self, the borders between self and environment being very fluid, constantly dissolving and coming back together again.

Aine

Can you describe some of the powerful images that you created for those who didn't see you.

Gustaf

Very simple images - there was a beautiful goat skull. So I took this goat skull onto my head, pulled the jacket up and tried to get rid of my hands. I also had an animal bone with a dolls dress on it and I put a wig on the skull, hung them both up and left there on the cliff face. I made the hand print by blowing the turmeric through my mouth onto the rock. This is how they made the ancient cave prints supposedly, but with okra of course. I was not thinking of it as imagery but as traces of the body like early performative actions.

Then I tied the roots to my head and feet and slowly walked indoors and lay down in the space and finished the performance like that.

Aine

You left a trace of your own body then in the gallery space. That was an extraordinary image at the very end.

Audience member

When I saw you first, I thought you were a roadkill. It looked like somebody had hit your head with a rock and you were yellow. I thought you had dug a hole out in the ground and you put the rock on top of your head, the yellowing on your hands looked like decomposition. Jaundice or liver failure.

Gustaf Broms

The image of the stone as my head was a reminder that we are nature, we are trees and fungi, or that we can start to relate to these other kind of beings.

I wanted to speak of self as a rock, but of course there is some consciousness holding the modern cues together, there's an awareness of being a rock or it could just be expressing an idea of falling apart.

Audience member

I think awareness is a good word because what I really enjoyed about your performance with the goat's head were the three additional participants in the guise of two little girls and an older brother. They gave a running commentary and it was fabulous because you talk about story telling, but from their perspective, everything you did was a story.

There was a point where you were going to stick a leaf on your face and one of them said something like, "Is that allowed?" Because the performance was drawn out and because it was nonverbal, their level of presence and engagement with it was fascinating to watch. They were verbalising all your transitions when you were playing with fire, they were like, "Oh, that's how's that going to end? How's that going to work out?"

Aine

Gustaf, what was your own subjective experience of doing the performance like? Will you tell us a little bit about that?

Gustaf

I think it was almost three hours wasn't it? So of course you go through many different stages of doubt and enjoyment and bliss to get to the end. But the memory that will stay with me of a fantastic day with a fantastic audience. There was a collective concentration in the whole space here. Once there are people in the space, you eat that energy and that fuels you.

Aine

Thank you, your work had incredible focus. Noel your work started at the same time as Gustaf and ran concurrently. Will you want to tell us about your piece?

Noel Arrigan

My background is sculpture and performance, I try to create a work that is both sculpture and performance together. I honestly have to be very sincere with myself to achieve the right focus and then ideas start coming.

I had an idea to make a bed of nails as a healing process, which I found was 3000 years old from ancient India and was used as a path to enlightenment and a way of focus.

I enjoy the process of making, the sculpture starts from the minute I pick up a tool or pick up a material. Then the idea formulates in my mind and I nearly see it before it's finished. I might do a couple of sketches, and I work out mechanical solutions. Everything has to be folded down and put in a car, so I have to be practical as well.

Never having laid down on a bed of nails, it was pure speculation to begin with. That's what I like about performance art, for me it's not scripted, it's the unknown, you're aiming towards a goal just for this particular moment.

So, it all started coming together. I was panicking there last week. "Oh my God, there's so many nails to do. There's so many holes to drill. How am I going to do this, it's going to fall apart? Will the thing collapse?"

It was last Tuesday when I actually laid on it for the first time to see did it work. And that was the test. I said to Eileen, "Jesus, it's a bit uncomfortable." And she says, "what did you expect?"

Performing yesterday I was able to fully focus and get near the meditative state. I winched myself down onto the bed, lay on it, got myself in the correct position as best as I could. Then I worked out the rhythm. I used to do one, two, three, four to slowly winch myself down and up again for the second half, coming out of the performance

So the winch itself is very slow. So if you pull three feet, it might move maybe an inch, maybe less. So it took a long time. I remember thinking to myself "I'm just so grateful to the audience who are here committing themselves to watch me for this time.

But people got with it. I have found with other performances as well, that when you commit yourself to doing something durational, people stay with you. Gustaf spoke about the energy that comes to you from the audience which feeds you.

For me it was just the slow movement and the sound, I found it very therapeutic and the whole experience was nearly like a mantra. It took me half an hour to go down and another to come back up and half an hour in it. But I had no idea of time. Absolutely, that could have been three hours, it could have been one hour. I didn't know.

Day

I almost experienced your performance as as a timepiece. A metronome that you had designed around you, that became an extension of your body. You were you were like a clock hand or a sun dial. Fantastically slow as well.

Aine

How are you feeling today? How's the body, was it hurt, is it healing?

Noel

Yeah. There was definitely parts when I was doing it that felt like there was a healing. I wouldn't say it was a revelation. I wouldn't recommend it for everyone, I am not opening a healing clinic!

Yeah, there was certain stages that I felt it was enjoyable. Then other times then I found the worst part was my head because there were two nails that were noodling into my head. I

had a headband on to try and protect it a bit but I've got a sore neck today because of this pressure on my head. But apart from that I'm all right.

Aine

There was an incredible image at the very end when Noel came up fully and then just pulled off his shirt and his entire back was just studded in couple of centimeter deep indentations.

Noel

A nice little pattern. That was to show that I hadn't got a plate of metal at my back and I was cheating.

Audience member

We felt connected with you while watching you. I'm sure you were nervous. Watching you was a way to draw close to you.

Noel

Thanks. Another aspect of the performance is that one nail on its own will penetrate the body but so many nails will support it. So it was that idea of wholeness. When there were so many people around yesterday, that feeling of wholeness was reflected in the community that Alana is building up here and so many people coming together to enjoy the day.

Aine

Thank you Noel.

So while that was all happening, two performative films were being screened. Coming Full Circle was made by a group of students and staff at the Burren College of Art during the COVID lockdown in 2020. It was in collaboration with Richard Long, the eminent walking artist from the UK, to repair a stone circle he had made in 1975 in Doolin, County Clare. The students performed a restorative action that equated a healing relationship with the environment and a healing of ourselves during the pandemic.

The second film, by BCA student who has now graduated Elizabeth Bleynat is titled Polypropylene II

Will you tell us a little bit about that performative film and what it was like for you? What you were trying to get across the film and how it felt for you to perform it?

Elizabeth Bleynat

My film could not have been shown in a better context because my primary material is discarded fishing plastics. It was appropriate to show this work in a hatchery where fish were flown up to sea in nets and the materials involved in the rest of their life cycle are the ones I work with.

I would describe myself as ecofeminist sculptor but I've become very concerned with the number of micro plastics that we ingest. The best way I've found to demonstrate those concerns is through wearable sculpture. My short film involves a costume that I had constructed over a course of months from found plastics on the shore in Clare.

The process of making the film was very much about trying to get into the mindset of a part human/ part plastic creature coming in and then receding with the tide, reflecting the cycle of micro plastics in the ocean. There's a lot of plastics discarded in the ocean, they break down over a long period of time and they go from these massive nets and ropes that we've all seen - they break down and break down and break down to something that is less than five millimetres.

This material is too tiny to extract from the ecosystem. So, I was exploring that linear direction from the macro to the micro.

Aine

Maybe we are all half plastic, half animal and the creatures of the ocean are ingesting all this plastic and becoming half plastic. So your monster is a strange metaphor as well for maybe what we're all becoming?

Elizabeth

Yes I recently read an article on an Italian Rome based medical organisation that found micro-plastics were passing through the placenta barrier, in normal and healthy pregnancies. The current generation of human beings are born with plastics already in their systems. We are no longer extricable from this thing that we've created.

Day

But even ideologically as well, because you have phrases such as neuroplasticity in terms of our capacity for behaviours, et cetera. The word plastic, the ideology of plastic as it was introduced over the 20th century, is something that can be changed. To be able to change is a great power that carries its own responsibility.

Aine

Thanks Elizabeth, your film is visually haunting with a strong environmental statement.

The final performance of the day took place at 6 o'clock after we all had a glass of wine to lubricate our performativity and voices. Tadhg, do you want to describe what your piece entailed?

Tadhg Ó Currín

Yes, I created a space for an audience to sing karaoke in one of the large tanks down the back. I invited people in and gave them the floor, gave them a space within which to perform. I created little booklets with lists of songs in keeping with the themes of the exhibition: songs about mountains, song about labels, songs about the environment.

I was trying to get at a lot of different things with the work, but at its simplest level it was about creating a space where one could use their voice and enjoy using their voice and enjoy listening to other people enjoying using their voices too.

There's a great anxiety around karaoke because essentially you are singing in public and exposing yourself. I wanted to create a circumstance where people could be a little brave and could step up. I was a little anxious about who would sing first, whether there would be a big awkward silence where no one comes forward to sing but as it happened, someone stepped up right away.

Aine

Many people performed over the course of the hour, as we were eaten by midges. Some people were rock stars. What amazed me was how people transformed, but you've seen it before, because you've done this project a few times.

Tadhg

There's often anxiety around performing, but I've never met someone who sang a song for the first time and hated it as an experience. I try to coax people into doing it because they'll have some fun.

I thought it was a nice way to round out the day because alongside the more serious themes that the performances engaged with, it was good to lean into the fact that performing is a fun and enjoyable thing to do.

Audience member

The midges added a something, an edge to the whole experience. Everyone was waving and shooing them away. The sticks of incense burning were helping to deter them but also added a nice smell and ambience.

Audience member

You spoke at the beginning of the performance about Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth's idea of infatuation with art and music, can you explain?

Tadhg

Kim Gordon said you could never have a crush on art with the same intensity as the infatuation you have for a pop song. I read that in an interview with Mike Kelly but I don't know how true that is for everyone here. Maybe I'm more speaking for myself that maybe I've never had the same infatuation with art that I would with the pop song, and so I've always tried to piggyback on the places that popular music can get to, places that it's more difficult for art to get to.

Audience member

Music, particularly popular music is so transient and represents a timeline of our lives. Sometimes we will listen to something nonstop 24/7 and then we will park it and not come back to it for years. It could be for a decade. Whereas with art, when you choose to part with your money and you put something on your wall it's permanent. So every day you see it and there's a permanence to your relationship with that piece. But I think music resides in our soul, it's transient or cyclical. With art it is something more than infatuation. You have to commit to it if you collect it.

Aine

What I thought was lovely was the celebratory aspect of the performance. We all cheered when someone went up to do the song. And another big cheer when each person finished their song - it didn't matter whether they were good or bad, everyone was unique.

Audience member

Tadhg your work resonated with me as it reminded me of an Australian artist and curator called Daniel Mudie Cunningham who works with popular music. He made a collaborative participatory work where he asks participants to provide the song that they would like to have played at their funeral. The audience goes to the space he created to listen to other people's desires of how they would like to be remembered through a song.

Aine

Thank you to all the artists who made such great works yesterday and the audience who came to share, witness and encounter the experiences they created. Thank you Alannah, Jill and all at Interface.