

**The Spaces of Performance Created by
Contemporary Irish Artists**

Em McLoughlin

Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the BA
(Honours) Degree in Design for Stage and Screen, Costume Design, DL829

Submitted on the 15th of February 2024.

Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Stage and Screen, Costume Design. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eimear Mc Loughlin', written over a horizontal line.

Eimear Mc Loughlin

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my coordinator Luke Lamont for his enormous help and continuous effort and support throughout the writing of my dissertation, which could not have been done without his guidance.

I would like to thank Siobhan Gorman, who has taught me so much over my years in the college and has been nothing less than thoughtful and wholly supportive throughout my time here.

I would also like to thank my course mates who were there with me throughout and who encouraged me to produce my very best work.

Finally, I would like to thank Ciaran O’Keeffe, who taught me in my second-year performance art elective, and who introduced me to so much amazing work that would then inspire the writing of this dissertation.

Abstract

This dissertation is interested in the examination of how a variety of contemporary Irish Performance Artists use space in their works and how the space chosen for a performance affects both the audience and the artists' vision of the piece. This was accomplished by attending a variety of performances by several Irish artists, including but not limited to, Aine Phillips, Amanda Coogan and Venus Patel, in order to personally witness the different ways these artists set up their spaces, so that I had a first-hand experience as an audience member. Therefore, much of the work discussed, bar the first chapter, is empirical research gathered from my own experiences, which I then analysed.

My research is split into the categories of performance art in a public space, in an installation space, and through film and other media, as I believe that they best encapsulate the options and design decisions an artist may have when choosing where their piece would be best performed. These spaces can all be used in a variety of ways to enhance the performance, and each draw a different type of audience which changes the perception of the piece.

Through this dissertation I seek to examine how important of a factor the use of space is within the realm of performance art and the many different ways an artist may choose to wield this space to further embody their work and evoke certain reactions from the audience, as well as the different types of audiences that these spaces may attract. It also serves to investigate how performance art has evolved over time and how performance artists have used the expanded opportunity of spaces available to them overtime to their advantage in order to get the most of the space in which they choose to perform.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
1. Performance art in the Public Space	10
The Diceman	
Aine Phillips	
2. Performance Art as Installation	16
Amanda Coogan	
Junk Ensemble	
3. Performance Art on Film	24
Venus Patel	
Conclusion	31
Bibliography	34

Introduction

Performance Art is a relatively new artform in the grand scheme of things, The Tate Modern stating that the term itself only became widely used in the 1970s. (Tate, Performance Art.) It took even longer than that before the sphere of performance art emerged in Ireland in the 1980's. From the point of its inception within the Irish artistic sphere to now, there have been massive changes to the ways in which performance art has evolved as time has gone on, as many more opportunities have opened themselves up for these artists to elevate their work, and technology has become more accessible than ever before for artists to use within these pieces of performance. One of the most appealing parts of performance art for many is the impermanence of the artwork, as compared to more traditional forms of art like painting or sculpture. This is often remarked upon when discussing the movement that the performance artist will conduct during the piece, once the action of the performance is done, the audience may never see the set of movements that they witnessed in the context of the piece ever again, and even if the piece is repeated, the movements will never remain exactly the same, as the artist evolves with the piece the more it is put on. This is all very true, but another important aspect of the experience of witnessing a performance is the space in which the artist creates and draws the audience to while the performance is happening. Performance pieces all transpire within their own worlds and the space in which an artist chooses to do their work is very important in outlining the meaning of the piece, as well as the audience's reaction to the performance. For example, the audience may have a wildly different reaction to a performance piece if it is done while they are not expecting it in a public space, versus if they witness a performance taking place in a modern art gallery. An artist may want one reaction or another from the viewer, so the space in which an artist chooses for their performance is of great importance to the piece.

In my research, I sought to attend and examine the works of various contemporary Irish Performance Artists, primarily based in Dublin, in order to consider how each of these artists create a performance space that draws the audience towards the world in which their piece is set. I separated each of these artists' pieces into three groups, based on the space in which their piece is set. The first chapter involves the discussion of performance art in public spaces, where an artist simply performs on a street or other public setting with unassuming passersby, who then become the piece's audience. Performance art in installation spaces, such as in a gallery, is the next group, and these spaces can be very interesting as the artist has more freedom and time to install effects such as lighting or set pieces, in order to elevate the performance. Audience members may be there specifically to see the performance and if not, they have some sort of interest or preparedness to view a piece of performance art such as this. The final body of work to be discussed revolves around performance art on film, and how this can be used in conjunction with traditional performance pieces in order to add another layer of performance to the live piece, as well as how they can stand as performance art pieces of their own and how, through editing a performance art film, an artist can completely change the narrative and world for the performance to reside in, which may have otherwise been impossible to achieve. The reasoning behind splitting the discussion into these three aspects is to be able to examine how each of these chosen performances were affected by the spaces which the artist used, and how the meaning and the reaction from the audience was affected by the different environmental factors. I also found that writing about these spaces in the order I do, gives the added effect of showing how performance art has developed over time - performance art started as a purely public affair before it began to be taken seriously by the wider artistic community and was finally given the opportunity to create its own slot within more traditional spaces for art, such as galleries, where they were allowed to create their own environments and materialize their own world for their

performance to take place within. Then, as technology developed, artists gained the ability to be able to use film to record their performances and to edit these to add another layer to their work. There are many academic writings that look at performance art, specifically in Ireland, that discuss the evolution and perception of performance art, such as the chapter ‘Temporary Art’ from *The Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume III* by Maire Byrne and Rita Larkin, as well as the book *Performing Body, Performing Art* by Bernadette Sweeney, and the reading of both of these provided a lot of important backing for my own examination of the performances I viewed. The landscape of performance art has changed greatly as time has gone on and it is important to consider how all of these aspects can change how the artform is perceived.

As I wished to have a focus on contemporary artists in Ireland, with some discussion on past influences, I thought it best to be able to witness these performances myself so that I may personally feel the effectiveness of the use of space and other effects such as lighting and sound in the performance and how this influenced my experience of the piece. I found these performances through a variety of means. I was already aware of the works of Amanda Coogan and Venus Patel, and I sought out their performances to view as part of this research. I already knew that these artists had their own very specific styles of performance, through installation and film respectively, which would be useful for me to experience, examine and write about. Other performances I viewed and discuss within this work, such as Junk Ensemble’s piece *Powerful Trouble* (2023), I had been previously unaware of and went in without preconceptions. After witnessing the performance, I decided to include it as part of my research, as it embodied the elements of performance as an installation in a very effective way, and that I would be remiss to not bring it into the discussion. Regardless, I do believe that the ability to expose myself to most of these performances in person allowed me to get

the most well-rounded view of how each of the artists wished for their use of space to come across to the viewer and meant that I could recount these aspects in my writing accurately.

Live Performance Art; Public Facing

In order to effectively discuss public performance, particularly within an Irish context, I have elected to study the work of influential artists that used site-specific spaces and how the particular spaces they chose affected the performance and the audience's perception of it. The artists in question are The Diceman (Thom McGinty) and Áine Phillips. McGinty is one of Ireland's most well-known performance artists, having performed extensively on the streets of Dublin. Phillips' work often revolves around movement through a public space also, and it is this aspect of her repertoire that I focus on, as well as audience reaction and participation.

Performance is in many ways an everyday part of life for people, especially nowadays, with the proclivity of television and social media, the likelihood of seeing performance is higher than ever. Despite this, oftentimes people are shocked when they encounter random performance in person; this is doubled when it happens in a public space. Suddenly, the role of these passersby changes to that of an audience member, and the way that one views and interacts with a performance like that is very different to how one might react when viewing a performance in a theatrical space or a gallery. Outdoor spaces also provide unique challenges to the performer - Bernadette Sweeney pointed out some of these hurdles that the performer must adapt to, such as "outdoor performances become 'site-specific', and the architecture, and often the function of the site in question, becomes part of the creative process. A performance piece can be inspired by the choice of site, its location, plan and/or the potential audience members that use the space as part of their daily routine." (Sweeney, 2002, pg.30). These aspects are not necessarily hindrances to the performance, but rather something that must be considered by the performer when deciding to utilise an outdoor space to the best of their ability. There is also the aspect of familiarity. Those that visit spaces specifically designed for performance are just that: artistically-minded

individuals who go out of their way to view these performances as art pieces. However, when doing performance on the street, one encounters a much larger range of personalities, who may not have any familiarity with performance art, and as such they may view the performance not as art, but as a spectacle that they cannot look away from (not unlike a car crash.)

The Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume III comments on the relationship between performance art and the viewer, “there is no distance between the object, the artist and the viewer, the closeness of the bodies and the objects defining the purpose and the aesthetic of the performance art. The comfortable and safe position of the spectators of within the frame of traditional art is destabilised by the continuous engagement between the spectator, artist, process, and object.” (Byrne, Larkin, 2015, pp.492) Performance art allows the artist to reach out more fully to spectators and connect with them in ways other art forms cannot. It’s for this reason that an artist may decide to do these performances in a space where anyone can witness them, as a way to reach out to these people and not only spread the artform wider, but to see how it may be transformed by their reaction and/or interaction with the piece. It can become an interesting cultural commentary, as different cultural norms form different thoughts, and the examples in this chapter serve as a lens through which one can view Irish culture.

The Diceman, also known as Thom McGinty, was a performance artist who became a prolific figure on the streets of Dublin during the 80s and 90s for his work as a living statue and the elaborate, and sometimes contentious, costumes he would don during these performances. In the magazine *Hot Press*, Dermot Stokes dubbed him "Ireland's most famous street performer and an integral part of Grafton Street life for well over a decade". (Stokes, 2001) Jan Brennan studies the importance of public performance in creating community spaces in the article ‘Public Art and the Art of Public Participation’. He writes, “Public art

plays an invaluable role in the process of community building. Not only does it establish and beautify public spaces, it expresses and supports a sense of neighbourhood history, culture and identity.” (Brennan, 2019, pp.34) The Diceman was just that for the streets of Dublin, becoming a staple figure in the heart of the city and introducing his form of art to the masses. He became so well known within the cultural context of the city of Dublin that he was featured on RTE many times, be it on the news for some of his more controversial acts, or on *The Late Late Show* as an interviewee, so he could discuss his work in front of the masses.

Despite McGinty’s burgeoning fame, not all responses to his work were necessarily positive. As a street performer, he would of course have many interesting interactions with the public of Dublin just trying to do the shop; often people would find amusement or confusion with his work, gathering around to observe his strange looks and behaviours, but there were also many who reacted very poorly to his presence. After being attacked while working, McGinty had to enlist the help of a bodyguard who would stand near him as he did his performances to ensure his safety. He frequently found himself in trouble with the Gardai: at first all of his performances were simply that of a living statue, but after getting in trouble for causing obstruction of the streets with the crowds surrounding him, he developed a style of slowly walking at a measured pace down the streets, as a sort of immobility in motion. On the topic of temporary art, it was written in *Art and Architecture of Ireland* that “many artists were interested in making artwork that was almost indistinguishable from ‘everyday life’.

This alliance with the ordinary, the small scale and the non-permanent gave artists a liberty to make work that could be transgressive or surreal and then could disappear.” (Byrne, Larkin, 2015, pp.492) McGinty’s work followed this idea of artists at the time, as while his performances were small in scale, they still managed to be surreal to the viewer and draw in an audience, and through this he managed to essentially make his performances a part of the aforementioned ‘everyday life’ of Grafton street. It is also important to note that McGinty

was a gay man in Ireland during the 80's, and his work often touched upon issues within the country at the time, such as the role of religion and the place of women and gay people within society. At the first gay pride in 1993, which was held to promote the decriminalisation of homosexuality, McGinty appeared as a prisoner breaking free; he also supported many fundraising efforts for AIDs awareness, after he himself got a positive diagnosis in 1990. I mention this to point out that all of these actions and works were responding to the public space that he existed within. The space of his performance is what made it transform into an art piece and what allowed him to reach so many people. While not a practitioner of traditional performing arts, such as dance or theater, his work was the introduction for many people to the artform of performance. His performance pieces were intrinsically tied to the public setting and his confidence in his existence in these public spaces were a commentary in and of itself in such a tumultuous time within the country's history. Clearly, street performers are just as much performance artists as any traditional artist performing in a gallery space, and *The Diceman* is an excellent example of this.

Áine Phillips is a contemporary Irish performance artist and curator, who has been performing and exhibiting since the late 1980s. As a curator, a person with access to gallery spaces, she has of course done many of her performances within an installation space. However, she also has plenty of work that involves being in a public setting as an intrinsic aspect of the piece. Much of her work deals with feminism, and discussing aspects of gender, socialisation, and social change. In the chapter on performance art in *Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume III*, it is stated that “mainly female performance artists have touched upon the relationship between body and identity, challenging the cultural tropes of the mother and/or Madonna. Performance art pieces have accentuated the specifically Irish dilemma about the female body turned into a public display of the feminine object.” (2015, pg.494). Phillips' work is an excellent example of the commentary on the relationship Irish women have

between their country and their gender, and she frequently tackles the topic of personal identity. As a result of the topics she engages with in her art, it makes sense that she presents her work in a public space. Her art offers a commentary on society, and so it is interesting to see how that society engages with her work. Gender inequality is such a wide spread issue in our society that it helps to engage a wide audience, who may be able to see themselves, or the world around them, within the work.

One such work that was influential in this way, was her performance entitled, *Red Weight*. (2013). This was an hour-long performance piece that involved her wearing a dress with a very long train, made from over 600 pieces of used red clothing. Phillips performed the piece publicly, by walking along the Salthill promenade in Galway, and again by walking through the streets of central Krakow, Poland. While walking, she dragged the heavy trail of the dress behind her with dignity, even if it got caught along the way, stopping at times to answer questions from passersby unfamiliar with the performance. Phillips struggled as she walked, but members of the audience began to assist her in pulling the weight, walking forward with her to ease the load, creating a long human chain connected by the red fabric. The performance itself is a metaphor for the burdens of the past that we all carry throughout our lives, our memories and our dreams, and we carry this burden with us as we move forward in life towards our successes, and despite the weight, we do not allow it to hold us back. The interaction and help from the audience members add extra layers of meaning to this piece, it tells us that we do not have to carry the burdens of life alone, that if you require help, people will be willing to assist you towards your goals and lighten the load however much they can. Phillips stopping to speak and explain the meaning of the piece to her audience most likely encouraged passersby's watching her pull this weight to help her. This shows that oftentimes, if we ask for help with the burdens we face, the people in our lives will be more

than willing to provide it. We are all helped by many others in our life and it is important to acknowledge and appreciate them.

The message of this piece is very impactful, but the extra context of doing it in a public space with the help from members of the public, adds so much more to this performance than could have been possible in a staged environment. The real help offered by real people as Phillips walks a real distance, dealing with the elements, is much more powerful of a performance, than if she were just walking around an exhibition space in a gallery, with audience members approaching to watch, but not interact in any meaningful way. Different types of performances require different environmental contexts, and I think the use of public space in this piece is a perfect example of that. The space a performance is done is oftentimes one of the most important foundational layers of the performance, and it must be well considered when deciding the intended message of the piece.

Performance Art as Installation

As noted in the previous chapter, the increased discussion and viewing of performance art in a public setting means that the popularity and desire to view the work of these artists in a more controlled environment also increased. As a result of this demand, galleries began providing opportunities and spaces for performance artists to perform, create installations in which to perform, and curate their own exhibitions. This new and more controlled environment allowed performance artists to create their very own spaces to interact with and bring the viewer into the world of the performance. These spaces can be created in many forms, through physical sets, lighting, props, etc. These are spaces that would often only ever be feasible through the use of an installation which serves to elevate the performance and fully immerse the audience. Instead of the familiar world that a public performance resides in, the use of an installation takes the audience away from the world that they know into this space specifically crafted by the artist. Because it resides within a purpose made artistic space the audience that gathers for these performances also differs greatly to the audience that may gather when performing in a public space. Instead of this audience being unfamiliar and reacting organically to the work presented to them unexpectedly, the audience for a performance in a gallery space consists of people who are familiar with performance art and enter with a certain amount of knowledge of what sort of space this is for. As such, they may view the performance with a more aware and critical eye.

Amanda Coogan is a contemporary Irish performance artist and is a great example of an artist that performs within a gallery setting, as much of her art focuses on long durational pieces that require a very specific setting and prop pieces. For example, in her piece *Yellow* (2008), Coogan sat in a yellow dress amongst mannequins also in the same yellow dresses, endlessly washing clothes, which served as a commentary on the Magdalene Laundries. This piece was most impactful as an installation as it allowed her as a performer to truly settle into

the space and complete her performance. Coogan was trained in the artform under the proverbial Mother of Performance Art, Marina Abramovic. Through studying under Abramovic, Coogan developed a style of durational performance art, she describes this aspect of her work on her website stating that “The long durational aspect of her presentations invites elements of chaos with the unknown and unpredicted erupting dynamically through her live artworks, she is first and foremost an embodied practitioner.” Coogan is one of the most prolific performance artists in Ireland at this time having exhibited her work in some of the most well-known art institutions across the world, such as The National Gallery of Ireland, the Liverpool Biennial, the Venice Biennale, and MoMA PS1 in New York City, to name a few. Her work makes practical use of a multitude of media, such as objects, text, moving and still image, all of which circulate around her live performances. When discussing Amanda Coogan in *Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume III* her work is said to “reveal the body as a semiotic field, creating meaning from the relationships she establishes between traditional Irish perspectives and the reality of the flesh.” (Byrne, Larkin, 2015, pg. 494) Coogan has a very specific relationship to the use of the body as a tool for communication without words, having been brought up by deaf parents, and she has stated that her background is what caused her to be drawn towards the artform as an alternative form of expression more akin to the way she would have been raised.

It is for this reason that she was joined by Dublin Theatre of The Deaf, Cork Deaf Community Choir, and students from the Centre for Deaf Studies when conducting her series of performances entitled *Freude! Freude!*, which was a live exhibition, performance and installation that translated Ludwig Van Beethoven’s Ode To Joy chorus into Irish Sign Language, and reinterprets his entire Symphony no.9 in D minor through the lens of the Deaf Experience. The piece is a site-specific installation within the Douglas Hyde gallery that uses elaborate sets and sculpture to create a space that can be interacted with to showcase the

musicality of the piece. The central stage piece of the installation is a patchwork tapestry of old shirts and fabrics sewn together, which acts as a canopy over the entire performance space. The use of shirts and other types of clothing from generations of people represents the intricacies of human existence and experience. The light filtering through this canopy creates a dream like atmosphere and the breaks in the coverage create spotlights that highlights the actions performed in them. Beneath the canopy there were also many abstract floor-based sculptures, and in the leaflet provided for the performance it is said that these sculptures are reminiscent of early hearing aids, which for generations have been used by deaf people in order to connect with the world around them. These sculptures, which Coogan goes on to use as props in her performance, may have been inspired from the work of Marina Abramovic, specifically her works which she has called “transitional sculptures”. These works are discussed in the article *Performance Art; Spectacle of the Body*, where these works of Abramovics are described “These superficially minimal sculptural works are vessels of potential; ripe with latent possibility, not in terms of what they as objects will do, but what the participant will experience or become, as a result of their interaction.” (Dawes, 1995, pg.28). The way in which Coogan chooses to display and then interact with the sculptures she creates operates under the same philosophy. All of these aspects that create the energy for the installation are all very key components within the actual performance itself as the performers use all of them to represent the orchestral score that they perform to.

The performance itself is made up of three acts, each taking place one after another with no breaks between, each using the space to conceptualise the music in a new way. The first involves three performers interacting with the sculptures that lay across the floor of the space. These interactions seem random at first but each one represents the swell or valleys of the orchestral piece. The larger, hollow sculptures, which were the ones made to represent older styles of hearing aids, were dragged through the space, and then a performer would put

their head into the opening and balance the piece on their head as the performance continued. The smaller sculptures were attached to a series of pulleys, and they were then lifted into the air. The movement of these sculptures hitting the canopy above the space matched the rising of the music and created a vibration throughout the fabric overhead, a visual representation of how a deaf person may experience the music.

The second act was performed by Coogan herself, and started with her simply standing in the room by herself, in one of the slivers of light that the canopy allowed through. As she stands there she slowly begins to react to the music in slow jerking movements, that become fast and more frenzied as the music begins to swell. She simply allows the music to control her actions without choreography, just letting her own body be representative for how the music flows. As the music slows she makes her way onto the floor, still within the shaft of light, and breathes in tandem to the melody of the music. She then gets up and makes her way to the far corner of the space, where a large pile of yellow fabric lays. She picks it up and starts to slowly walk across the space, allowing the fabric, which turns out to be a sort of rope made from many more sewn together pieces of garments, one end of which is attached to the wall, to fall behind her. As she reaches the other side the rope is pulled tight above the ground, and she pulls in time with the surge of the music, her struggles match the speed of the music and once again the shake of the fabric matches the beat of the piece, vibrating with the heaving pressure of it all. The music slowly begins to calm and so does Coogan's effort, she resumes her slow stride back to the beginning. She gathers the fabric into her arms as she goes, the more fabric she gathers the more she starts to struggle under its weight, but in the end, she manages to return it to its resting place.

For the Third and final act of the piece, the many deaf communities that Coogan contacted to be a part of this performance get their time to shine as this act consists of a deaf choir performing the Ode to Joy chorus. The two performers that joined Coogan's

performance in the first act slowly escort a band of choir members down the stairs, and each takes their place, once again standing in the shafts of light created by the canopy. With Coogan as the conductor, the choir begins to perform the chorus through ISL (Irish Sign Language). Although more refined and choreographed, this performance in many ways mirrors that of the second act performance, in which Coogan allows the music to simply move through her body. Even though they are signing, the music still controls their body and deciphers the melody of what they are signing. The choir being placed within the shafts of light gives focus to them and captures them in an almost heavenly aura that matches the tone of Ode to Joy beautifully.

This collection of performances speaks to Coogan's knowledge of the deaf experience. It interprets this experience in different ways through the variety of performances present in the show, displaying how music is experienced both literally, through ISL, and conceptually, through the use of movement and vibration. It was also very enlightening to be part of an audience of both deaf and hearing experiences. I myself am not deaf and do not know ISL, so I imagine my experience of the performance differed greatly from that of the deaf audience present, but despite that we were both simply experiencing the music in our own ways and interacting with the art together, and to witness that was very impactful.

Another piece that I believe is important to talk about when talking about performance installation is *Powerful Trouble* by Junk Ensemble. Junk Ensemble is a Dublin-based dance-theatre group and school that strives to create imaginative performances that strive to shed light on social issues in the world today. They aim to challenge the typical audience/performer relationship and in this effort, they often find themselves establishing more non-traditional or found performance spaces. These goals for their work are what pushes them towards the title of performance art when viewing their pieces, as they tend to steer away from traditional ideas of theatre and dance and more towards more complex

communication about wider issues through these issues, and attempt to immerse the audience in this experience.

As part of the 2023 Dublin Theatre Festival, Junk Ensemble presented a performance in The Royal Hibernian Theatre, entitled *Powerful Trouble*. It was a ground-breaking live performance that celebrates the witch as a symbol of dissonance. It features dancers and a live percussionist, and the entirety of the upstairs portion of the gallery was taken up in order for the vast scale of this installation to be achieved. The set pieces used throughout the piece were few as much as the space is shrouded in darkness, so instead of through the use of physical objects a performance space is created through the use of light and shadow, and how the performers bodies shape them in order to conjure the feeling of dissonance and disturbance that this show aims to capture.

At the beginning of the piece the audience enter a completely dark room, before a performer strikes a match and the show begins. In order to witness this piece, the audience is required to move with the performers through this very large space, following the light they carry with them. There are many simplistic settings throughout the space, but the lighting is what truly creates the scene. There is a large-scale series of instruments in the center of the room that performs the music that plays throughout, every aspect is done live. A performer dances upon a reflective flooring that morphs her body, and looking up at the ceiling shows that the reflection looks to be fire. This dancer is a witch, and she begins to battle with her own magical abilities and the flames. As the light disappears in one area, it reappears in another, and the audience follows. We see these witches performing crafts such as weaving, and drawing runes onto the walls that continually reappear throughout the performances. Another witch sits at a table and combs her hair, and the sound reverberates through the room as there is a microphone attached to the comb, creating a harsh and eerie sound as she goes. There are many more designated floor spaces that these witch characters move between,

performing rituals and fighting against themselves, such as sand pits, projections of living trees, or simple red scares. In each of these spaces the performers dance and interact in a new way, kicking the sand, reaching through and fighting the projections, and we must follow them through these settings. In the final dance of the show, the witches create a large salt circle that they start to dance around, while a giant thurible with incense burning in it begins to swing above them, becoming faster and more intense as the performance goes on. Eventually, this slows to a stop, and the audience are led through to another room, within which is a band dressed as ghost on a raised stage in the center surrounded by chairs. Each audience member is offered a drink as they enter, and on these drinks is the rune that kept reappearing throughout the performance. Once everyone is seated the band begin to play a series of haunting ballads about the witches and the trials they faced.

Enveloping the audience into this world was one of the most important aspects of this performance. By plunging the audience into darkness take them away for reality and reintroduce them to the new world they've created for performance with their own light, which they must follow throughout. This alone means that they are invested in it: where it goes and what it does from the jump. The performance also uses sense memories that the audience are familiar with to evoke certain emotions. Such as the sound of hair being combed that is projected throughout the room, or violent dances in sand and other 'natural' environments. Altering these familiar sensations creates a sense of unease. The smell of incense burning in a giant thurible that swings over the audience connects with the idea of religion as an oppressive force, something that is prevalent in Irish culture, and this paired with the context that this is a performance of witchcraft creates a sense of dissonance. The use of senses to create these sensations elevated the performance in ways I had not before experienced. Bernadette Sweeney remarks on this phenomenon of the audience experiencing these sensations in her book *Performing Body Performing Space*, saying that "The audience

is implicated here in that the physical experience of the actor is not that of each audience member; by evoking physical senses (and emotional states) the experience of performance can be recognised as other and yet evince visceral responses in the onlookers.” (Sweeney, 2002, pg. 34)

Both of these performances showcase in different ways how an artist can create a performance space within an installation. In *Freude! Freude!* the space created in very physical it consists of sculptures and set dressings and props that the performer can then interact with and can use to create the scene, such as Coogan using the canopy to create the vibrations of the music. Whereas in *Powerful Trouble* the use of physical objects to create space, especially considering the scale, is very limited, however they instead choose to invite the audience into their world, using light and sound to guide them. How an artist creates their space is very important to consider and using one or all of these ideas effectively can elevate a performance piece to the next level.

Performance Art in Film

As has been outlined previously, performance art is an ever-evolving artform that artists have adapted over time to create the ideal space for their performances to immerse the audience, whether they do this through venturing out into a specific site in the world, or by creating their own within through installation. But many of the performances that I have previously discussed were performed live by the artists, and while this is of course an importance aspect of performance, many contemporary artists have begun to imagine how the recording of a performance can be adapted to elevate it to a new level, through editing and lighting. One such artist that has been exploring this medium of performance as well as many others is Venus Patel, who artfully captures her performances in order to create a new dimension and experience for the viewer.

When thinking about the work of performance artists in modern day Ireland, one must examine the works of Venus Patel, a rising figure in this field. On her website Patel describes the inspiration behind her work, and how it concerns her experience as trans femme of colour trying to navigate society, as well as questioning heteronormativity; why the need to conform is so heavily enforced, and how that affects the perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world around us. She states that, “Although her work deals with serious subject matter, she utilises a unique mix of humour, absurdity, and abjection to create multi-faceted performances and experiences.”



Venus Patel in her performance piece *Monsters of the Apocalypse*, Pallas Projects/Studios.

Patel recently ran a performance piece/exhibition in the Pallas Projects/Studios, entitled *Monsters of the Apocalypse*. This exhibition was one of the most riveting experiences of performance art that I had ever seen, both in terms of how well developed and immersive the performance itself was, but also in how well the exhibition space was used to envelope the audience into the world of the performance. Through sound design and set dressing they managed to transform the space into the world of Patel's monster. In doing my research I took the opportunity to examine her work in person and get a better idea of how her style of performance fit in regard to others that I had researched and seen. It was very interesting to see a space designed and curated by an artist specifically for the purpose of one performance,

using all the many different aspects of spatial designs that were mentioned in previous chapters for both the live and filmed performances.

The space consisted of two rooms, you entered a room surrounded by stills from a series of films made by Venus in connection to the performance piece, as well as a stain glass piece depicting some sort of creature. In the centre of the room lies some sort of costume made from a random assortment of cardboard boxes and fabric.

The piece itself consists of Venus, dressed in a straw hat, a white dress, and cowboy boots, storming into the room and standing on a soap box in the corner. Speaking through a megaphone, she weaves a story of a pilgrimage she took to the hellfire club, where a monstrous creature appeared from the sky before her and gave her a set of commandments for her to spread to humanity so they may all reach their true monstrous selves. She then unravels a scroll and begins to read the commandments, which contained lines such as “Men must be Women, Women must be Men”, and, “Only Transgender People of colour can hold societal power.” Upon finishing the reading of the commandments, she nails the commandments to the wall. A moment’s silence takes over the room, before music begins to play, and Venus begins to dance in a circle around the room, moving erratically, and as she does she begins to slowly move towards the centre of the room where the box lays. She begins to dance with the fabric of the box, getting closer and allowing it to cover her before she enters. The box begins to writhe around on the floor, and the voice of the mother monster is heard, declaring that her transformation into her true monster self is completed.

That concludes the live performance aspect of the exhibition, but afterwards the audience is encouraged to explore the space, and in the next room over they show the series of films that the stills in the previous room were from. There are four films, each featuring Venus transforming into a new monster, and interacting with the world as such. The films act

as separate performance pieces themselves, as Venus would get into the elaborate costumes of these different monsters on the Luas, in Tesco, etc. Parts of these costumes are also present throughout the exhibition and in some cases would have to be interacted with, as one could only enter into the viewing room through a curtain made from one of these costumes. The chapter Performance Art in *Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume III: Sculpture* states the idea “that artistic objects should be activated, rather than remain static artefacts that belong, as far as performance artists are concerned, to past artistic traditions.” (Byrne, Larkin, 2015, pg.494) The concept of the activation of an artistic object is reminiscent of the use of Patel’s costumes. In many cases these are presented as merely abstract sculptures, unmoving in the space with an invisible line separating itself from the reach of the viewer, but by making it into a feature that the audience must interact with when moving through the space. That action in and of itself becomes a performance, and therefore the objects become activated.

Patel showcased a series of performative videos following the theme of the exhibition, and I found these to be a very interesting addition to the show. One often thinks of performance art as something that is meant to be seen live, but more and more often contemporary performance artists are using video technology to elevate their performances. In the article ‘*Video Spaces*’, Barbara London remarks upon the practice of using artists using video within an installation space, “By releasing the image from a single screen and embedding it in an environment, artists have extended their installations in time and space.” (London, 1996, pg.14) The inclusion of video pieces within Patel’s installation allows her to showcase performances in ways that would otherwise be impossible. Through editing the audience can witness the transformation and Patel can transport us to different arenas where these monsters live their lives, on the Luas, in Tesco, sunbathing. All these spaces are familiar to us but by recording them there we see these monsters as part of everyday life, which would otherwise be a very difficult idea to convey within a gallery space.

It's clear that the main theme of the exhibition was the idea of transformation, and that theme is displayed in many different forms. Most obviously there is the physical transformation that Patel goes through in both the performance and the films into her monstrous self, but there is also an element of ideological transformation, as Patel sees the mother monster and attempts to spread her wisdom to the audience. While the commandments are purposefully written to be outlandish, they are all real calls for social change through the veneer of becoming a prophet. Considering the influential power of religion on Irish culture, the satirical nature of the performance showcases the idiosyncrasies of the society we live in. Bernadette Sweeney comments on the conservative nature of Irish society on its people, stating that "This was reflected in the legislation of the new Irish Free State, which embraced a restrictive catholic ethos as an agent of enshrining tradition. The civilizing of the body was undertaken by the newly postcolonial, as the young nation worked to create itself in the same image and likeness of the colonizer – in the image of its maker." (Sweeney, 2002, pg.31) Patel, as both a trans woman and an immigrant, does not fit into the image created by the Christian coloniser ideals that still dominate much of Irish culture. Her work is a call to free oneself from these boxes that have been placed upon the country via politics and religion, and as religion begets religion, attempts to use that as a means of showing the power of what could be. The use of becoming a monster as the transformative result, as the prime state of being, is also very important. Many of the commandments listed are specifically about breaking the gender binary, and as a trans person it's an excellent analogy. When one transitions to another gender, they are often seen as weird and looked down upon, and the trans body starts to become viewed as broken and wrong, monstrous. But it is transitioning that allows the trans person to be the most themselves, to become who they were always meant to be. Patel celebrates the monstrous view of the trans body and revels in transitioning to this body as something to be strived for, as the truest and most happy self.

Patel's use of performance, film and space were masterful, and she takes advantage of the many tools she has at her disposal to create the best quality art that she can. Not only that, but as Ireland has evolved, so have the people living here. Looking at her work as a trans immigrant of colour was very important in highlighting how the culture within Ireland has changed overtime, and how she experiences Irish society through her work. All of these reasons were very important to me when deciding to focus on her piece when having the discussion on performance art in modern day. Given the nuanced viewpoint that Patel occupies, her work offers a key example of contemporary Irish performance art - a form that is particularly suited to presenting themes in a nuanced way

I personally found out about the work of Patel online, through her TikTok and Instagram accounts, and I find that intriguing in the sense that it's a new way to engage an unfamiliar audience with performance art in the digital age. A striking aspect of contemporary performance art is the way in which it is disseminated through social media. It allows a new audience to become acquainted with her character and her work, and had they not come across it they may never have known about her at all. As previously stated, performance art is an ever expanding ever changing artform that moves with the whims of the artist and the ways they can use the new technologies at their disposal to develop their art, and there's no any way you can avoid the topic of social media as it has become such a launch pad for so many artists to display their work, due to both the number of eyes you can get on your work instantaneously, as well as the reactionary culture of the internet. With Patel being both an artist and social media personality, you can get the greatest view of how these two cultures combine within her work.

Patel's piece is a powerhouse of performance, and even to just look at this performance alone you can see the inspiration from the styles of performance art outlined in previous chapters, such as the props and interactivity of the set and the live elements of her

films, which are reminiscent of the works discussed by Amanda Coogan and Aine Phillips respectively. She takes these aspects of performance and puts her own distinct spin on it as she makes them her own. Therefore, attending and examining this piece acts as an examination of its own on how performance art has transformed over time and how contemporary artists are using the traits of pieces by artists gone by to showcase their own work, and Patel is an artist that clearly puts great thought into how the medium of her performances affect the artform, and has clearly as thought about the spaces in which her pieces will be shown thoroughly. The piece as a whole is an installation, with a specific focus on props and costuming that Patel and the audience can interact with. Then of course there is the filmed aspect of the piece, which consisted of public performances, that were very site-specific, that were filmed and edited to act as a collection of narratives. Of course, this chapter has focused on Patel as a performance artist, but the fact that she is also a film director is clearly seen as well in how she goes about creating and editing these performances to suit her vision. All of these pieces are very effective in creating narrative even without the use of words, and the use of editing in the videos accomplishes this without taking away from the starkness that she is doing this in public. While the piece is filmed, it never feels as though you are watching a film, you are still very aware of the performative nature, and with a narrative piece that balance can be difficult to find, but she achieves it beautifully.

Conclusion

Performance art has been a mainstay in the wider artistic community in Ireland for over 40 years at this point, and as time has gone on the way in which these conceptual artists are able to express the meaning within their performances has expanded greatly. What once was only able to be done by oneself on a street corner for baffled passers-by to witness now has the opportunity to be performed in a space specifically tailored to the needs of the performance, to an audience that does not merely caught off guard and watch on in confusion, but to an audience that has come to the space they have created specifically to witness the performance as the piece of art that it is. That is not to say that either is better than the other, for many artists the basis of a performance in the open world is to achieve that reaction from the wider public and see how they process what they are seeing, however the ability now for an artist to choose and manufacture the space in which they perform has allowed the artform to be elevated in a space specifically designed to be performed in and to get their meaning across in a way that may have been impossible otherwise. Space has the ability to completely change the meaning of a piece of performance art and how an audience reacts and is drawn into the action, and it is of the utmost importance that an artist considers the way in which they use their space to evoke the meaning of their performance. This was the reasoning for my research as I wished to further examine how different performers use space in their performances and how their choices elicit different responses from the audience.

By examining the works on various Irish performance artists who used different spaces in their unique ways, I was able to get a better picture of the reasoning of the artist to perform where they did and how that choice elevated the work to another level, and changed the reaction an audience member will have to each piece. Separating the artists into three

sections, performance in Public, as an installation, and on film, made examining the ways these different spaces effected the performance in closer detail clearer.

Performance art in a public is one of oldest spaces where the artform took place, before it was even seen as a conceptual artform in its own right and began to be allowed to coexist alongside more traditional artistic practices. When performing a public an artist will usually have a lot less ability to control their space and therefore the space they're using will more than likely be quite simply and naturalistic, the artist may dress up or use props to aid in the performance but generally they do not have full control over the space they are using. However, a key factor of performing in public is that generally the audience who witnesses the work will be much more random, just miscellaneous members of the public walking around who come across the work unknowingly. Many artists appreciate this aspect of the space as it allows for a much more natural and authentic response to the work, that an audience who are in a space specifically to see art may not give, these people may have no relationship with the wider art world and therefore the pool of audience members viewing the work is much greater meaning the artist gets a variety of responses. This is the reason why many artists may choose to limit themselves in terms of what they can do with the space in exchange for a more natural environment and audience.

As time went on and performance art became more respected within the artistic world, opportunities for these artists to take up spaces in places such as galleries became more common, thus allowing these artists to create installations in which they could make their own environment specifically for their performance. There are many ways in which different artists create these spaces for their performance to exist within, such as creating larger scale set pieces and props to interact with, or through the use of lighting and sound effects to highlight the actions taking place. In order to witness the performance, the audience has to enter this third space and that can create a separation from the outside world where only the

performance exists. Generally, an audience member entering an installation are aware that they are doing so and may be more broadly aware of the artistic background, thus this creates a different reaction to that of a public audience but it is no less genuine as entering another safe requires a certain level of suspension of disbelief. In this safe and artist has full control and can make their safe as naturalistic or otherworldly as they see fit, and is used to elevate the performance.

Performance art is generally known for its “live-ness” and impermanence, however there are also many artists that instead of performing live, choose instead to record themselves doing their performances. The recording of these performances opens up the artist to use tools such as video editing or sound design to create a new world or a narrative that might be otherwise impossible to show the way the artist wants the work to be perceived in person. An artist can showcase this in many ways, through projecting or showing the video on screen as part of a installation piece, or simply through having it be online for anyone to see. Performances done on film are therefore are much more accessible to the widest audience possible online, and even as an installation many more people may be able to see the performance as it can be put on a constant loop, the video can be shown as big or as small as possible, there’s much more range of motion that would be otherwise impossible to achieve in the physical world. That is why I would consider performance art of film to be a space of its own because it has its own capacity to make and exist within it’s own world that greatly effects the overall outcome of the performance.

Performance art can be limited or expanded significantly by the space it exists within, and it is the artists imperative that the way the use the space elevates it to it’s full potential so that the meaning of the piece can be encapsulated. Having seen all of these types of performance in person, I can attest that they are all captivating if used to their full potential, and each need to have their own space within the world of Performance Art.

Bibliography

Brennan, Jan. "Public Art and the Art of Public Participation." *National Civic Review*, vol. 108, no. 3, 2019, pp. 34–44. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.32543/naticivirevi.108.3.0034>.

Byrne, Máire, and Rita Larkin. "PERFORMANCE ART." *Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume III: Sculpture 1600-2000*, edited by Andrew Carpenter and Paula Murphy, 1st ed., vol. III, Royal Irish Academy, 2015, pp. 492–95. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14jxtx2.68>.

Coogan, Amanda (2023). "About", Amanda Coogan Website.
<http://www.amandacoogan.com/about.html>

Coogan, Amanda (2023a). Freude! Freude! At the Douglas Hyde Gallery. Attended on 21st of October 2023.

Coogan, Amanda (2023b). Freude! Freude! At the Douglas Hyde Gallery. Programme. Attended on 21st of October 2023.

Dawes, Mark. "Performance Art: Spectacle of the Body." *Circa*, no. 74, 1995, pp. 26–29. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25562887>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.

Junk Ensemble (2023a). Powerful Trouble at The Royal Hibernian Academy. Attended on 14th of October 2023.

Junk Ensemble (2023b). Powerful Trouble at The Royal Hibernian Academy. Programme. Attended on 14th of October 2023.

London, Barbara. "Video Spaces." *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1996, pp. 14–19. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3245667>.

Patel Venus. (2023). Monsters of the Apocalypse at The Pallas/Projects Art Studio. Attended on the 28th of April 2023.

Patel, Venus. (2023) "About", Venus Patel website

<https://www.venuspatel.com/>

Phillips, Aine. (2013) "Red Weight." Aine Phillips website,

https://ainephillips.com/artwork/3306810_Red_Weight.html

Stokes, Dermot (16 April 2001). "What, Another Year?". Hot Press. Retrieved 19 February 2021.

Sweeney, Bernadette. "Performing Body, Performing Space." *Building Material*, no. 8, 2002, pp. 30–

35. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29791451>.

Tate. "Performance Art | Tate." Tate, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performance-art.

White, Lawrence William. "The Diceman." *History Ireland. 20th-century / Contemporary History*,

Issue 6 (Nov/Dec 2010), Reviews, Volume 18, 2013, [https://www.historyireland.com/the-](https://www.historyireland.com/the-diceman-by-lawrence-william-white/)

[diceman-by-lawrence-william-white/](https://www.historyireland.com/the-diceman-by-lawrence-william-white/)

@pallas.projects.studios. "Venus Patel—Monsters of the Apocalypse. A few images from the exhibition..." *Instagram*. April 15th, 2023.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CrDKNoWqiqZ/?img_index=1