Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprs20

Not Just 'A Life Within the Home'

Maternal labour, art work and performance action in the Irish intimate public sphere

EL Putnam

To cite this article: EL Putnam (2017) Not Just 'A Life Within the Home', Performance Research, 22:4, 61-70, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2017.1374708

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1374708

Not Just 'A Life Within the Home'

Maternal labour, art work and performance action in the Irish intimate public sphere

EL PUTNAM

During the early twentieth century, as the Irish nation-state was coming into being, to raise a family was a woman's patriotic goal. Article 41, Section 2 of the Irish Constitution enshrined this belief:

> The State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

As a result, a woman's political duties are bound to her ability to raise a family, supporting masculine and future citizens. A woman's compulsion to become a mother is further enforced by the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, which bans abortion under all circumstances. Several mother performance artists, including Amanda Coogan, Áine Phillips and me, EL Putnam, challenge this constitutional rhetoric and the historically designated political positionalities of mothers in Ireland by transforming gestures, images and materials affiliated with motherhood into acts of resistance. In this article, I discuss how these performance artists challenge Ireland's relegation of motherhood to the home while redefining the maternal in this national and cultural context using a critical framework drawn from Lauren Berlant's (1997) definition of the intimate public sphere – where sex and citizenship are intertwined. To interpret these performance events, I draw from Hannah Arendt's (1998) distinction between labour, work and action. According to Arendt, while labour consists of the repetitious activity needed to meet daily needs and maintain life, work is an individualizing activity that transcends biological need. She describes how labour and work can be performed by individuals, but action requires plurality as it occurs between human beings and is key for political participation. I argue that Coogan, Phillips and I cultivate live aesthetic encounters that use maternal labour as the impetus for creative practice and art work, providing possibilities for performative politics of the maternal in Ireland.

PERFORMING MOTHERS, MOTHER PERFORMANCES

Amanda Coogan sits wearing an oversized yellow dress, scrubbing the fabric of the garment rigorously as bubbles form in her lap (fig. 1). She dips her hands down into the dress, submerging them in a bucket upon which she rests, exposing her bare legs. She lifts the fabric up and continues to scrub, rubbing away invisible stains with determined gestures. She pulls her hands up on the fabric, collecting the bubbles as they form an ejaculate-like appearance, only to blow them away with a resigned puff. At one point, she holds the

Figure 1. Amanda Coogan, *Yellow*, performed as part of 'I'll Sing You a Song from Around the Town' at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland, 2015. *Image courtesy of the artist*

PERFORMANCE RESEARCH 22·4 : pp.61-70
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1374708
ISSN 1352-8165 print/1469-9990 online

fabric, gripping it with her teeth as she makes eye contact with the audience, shaking her head in an animalistic fashion. At another moment, she whips the skirt's cloth to its fullest length of several metres, only to collect it and begin scrubbing again. In one of the earliest versions of this work, *Yellow* (2008), Coogan performed these gestures for six hours at the Oonagh Young Gallery in Dublin, making the act of washing in this context lose its purpose – it is not about making clean – but it becomes an aesthetic experience.

Coogan describes how *Yellow*, along with several other of her performances including *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato* (2009), emerged from a domestic space when she was at home with her newly born son. Creating new works from what she refers to as 'a small window on the world' (Putnam 2016), Coogan took chores commonly relegated to women, especially mothers, and used them as the impetus for her performances. Such a recontextualization is reminiscent of American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who became known for coining the phrase 'maintenance art' in her *Maintenance Art Manifesto* (1969). In 1973, Ukeles began her *Washing Tracks* series at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, where she performed tasks such as polishing display cases and washing the steps outside the museum. Ukeles' practice transpired from her negotiations of being an artist, wife and a mother. When she was pregnant with her first child, Ukeles was training to be an artist. She recounts:

> I remember when my pregnancy began to show. I came into my sculpture class and the instructor said, 'Well, I guess you can't be an artist now.' And I thought, 'What are you talking about?' I wanted to be a mother … but I was in a panic that it meant I couldn't be an artist. (qtd in Jackson 2011: 85)

Shannon Jackson describes how Ukeles' maintainance art, not unlike Coogan's performances, came from her daily household and childcare chores: 'finding herself saddled with the task of housework and childcare while simultaneously trying to maintain her definition as an artist, she decided to use her relative autonomy as an artist to make her own decision about what qualified as art' (2011: 85). Ukeles transformed the immaterial labour of being a parent into material for creative production. Helen Molesworth argues that by defining domestic labour as maintenance Ukeles helped 'to articulate the structural conditions of the relations between the public and private sphere' (2000: 82). A similar assertion can be made concerning Amanda Coogan's *Yellow*, where she frames the act of washing in the public setting of the gallery as art work, allowing domestic labour to take on certain political connotations in the Irish context due to the constitutional rhetoric that designates a woman's place in the home.

'THE STATE RECOGNISES …'

As Ireland crystallized its national and political identity with the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 (the precursor to the modern Irish nation), women were designated to the hearth and home, despite the fact women played significant roles in the 1916 Easter Rebellion and subsequent struggles for Irish independence. Such attitudes were reinforced by legislation and Roman Catholic prohibitions that, according to historian Maryann Valiulis, promoted understandings of female citizenship as 'rooted in their role in the family as wives and mothers' (2009: 102). Catholicism held a strong influence over the ideological formation of the Republic of Ireland, which can be traced to the nation's attempts to distance itself from its former colonizers, Great Britain. The British have occupied Ireland since the fifteenth century, with Ireland officially being part of the United Kingdom from the early nineteenth until the twentieth century. During the seventeenth century, the British imposed strict Penal Laws that limited the civil rights of Roman Catholics, the predominant religious faith of the Irish, which included barring them from holding public office. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Catholic Relief Acts loosened the stringent restrictions imposed

on practitioners of Catholicism, allowing the 'Church', which is how the Roman Catholic institution is commonly referred to Ireland (Bacik 2013), to gain prominent influence in Irish society. At the same time, the island had undergone a process of Anglicanization that attempted to expunge Irishness, including the language, culture and way of life. In turn, Catholicism became a substitute for Irish culture, as it provided practitioners with a way of building identity, creating meaningful community relations and preserving cultural practices (Larkin 1972). As Ireland attempted to liberate itself from its colonizers, Catholicism offered a common ground for Irish nationalism as it became 'the religion of social and political defiance, of nationhood and patriotic identity' (Bacik 2013: 17). Subsequently, it is no surprise that the Church had such strong authority in the formation of modern Ireland. The prominence of the Church in Irish politics reached its climax during the 1930s and 1940s, when Archbishop John Charles McQuaid influenced the drafting of the 1937 Irish Constitution, Bunreacht ma hEirann (Bacik 2013).

Through the specific articulation of a mother's role in the Irish Constitution, the maternal is given a political status. Lynette Hunter suggests that ideology can be considered the ethos of the modern nation-state as it 'stabilises the representation of those holding power in the state as well as the identity of the citizen who becomes subject to that power' (1999: 8). Moreover, as Ireland was developing as a modern nation, Catholic ideology offered a stabilizing force, creating a common ground. It was key to developing an Irish ethos from which the nation-state could emerge, enshrining these beliefs and justifying the political positionalities of the constitution, creating an artificial norm that intentionally forgets that it is artificial (Hunter 1999).

Over time the explicit influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland has diminished in its official capacity, which historically included the provision of social services, especially education, health and welfare – picking up the windfall for a fledgling national government. However, according to Bacik 'the Church continues to exert a strong influence on the everyday lives of all Irish citizens – and on the sexual politics of Irish society' (2013: 19). While the Irish Constitution specifies that a woman provides support through her place in the home, the home is not disconnected from the society within which it exists. Rita Felski points out how the home 'is not a private enclave cut off from the outside world, but is powerfully shaped by broader social currents, attitudes, and desires' (1999: 24). In Ireland, the phrasing of the Constitution makes this interconnected relationship explicit. Lauren Berlant describes this correlation of private acts with public political aspirations as the intimate public sphere, which 'renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere' (1997: 4). Berlant's analysis emerges from the United States during the Reagan years; however, being informed by 'simultaneously lived private worlds', her description of citizens and personhood as no longer limited to public interactions can also be applied to Ireland. With Ireland's obsessive management of female bodies through legislative and religious institutional measures, motherhood came to be valued as a woman's key political and national contribution. Moreover, women have inhabited an intimate public sphere since the advent of the Irish Free State in 1922. Thus, Coogan's transformation of labour into art work in *Yellow* has a political connotation in the Irish context. Hannah Arendt's differentiation between labour, work and action helps illuminate the significance of this transformation and how the art of mother performance artists in Ireland can function as resistance.

LABOUR, WORK AND ACTION

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes how labour constitutes the repetitious, everyday activity that 'corresponds to the biological process of the human body' (1998: 7). These acts are tied to the life process, and therefore

are ephemeral in nature, which adequately describes the maintenance labour of the domestic sphere, including cooking, cleaning, washing and so on. Usually performed behind closed doors, domestic labour is cyclical and does not leave any lasting monuments. Arendt defines work as 'the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence.... Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings' (7). Work, in contrast to labour, is individualizing and results in long-standing contributions, ranging from the invention of tools to creating masterpieces of literature and art to the building of architectural marvels and cities. Arendt's third fundamental human activity – action – is the only activity that occurs between human beings, as it corresponds to the 'human condition of plurality' (7). Unlike labour and work, which can be performed in isolation from others, action requires a collective presence and depends on the plurality of human existence. As such, it is action that makes political life possible. However, action also carries unpredictability, setting things in motion that can extend beyond the intentions of the instigator. Action does not provide a blueprint for activity, but behaves as a catalyst that can bring potentially haphazard results. There is no guarantee of an outcome with action, but the potentiality for change can thrive. Such is the duality of action that carries both the danger of running amuck and the possibility of new human connections.

Labour, work and action are all present in the performances of certain mother artists in Ireland. In Amanda Coogan's performance *Yellow*, her gestures of washing may appear simple and, on the surface, performed without consideration for others. However, as a live scenario, duration contributes to the transformation that work affords, building the relationship between performer and spectator over time. As Adrian Heathfield notes: 'Denaturalising and de-habitualising perceptions of time, durational aesthetics gave access to other temporalities, excluded or marginalised within culture's increasingly rigorous temporal organisation' (2012: 29). Coogan's gestures are cyclical and repetitive, both her and the spectators experience each sensation differently, as the present carries the past and the subject unceasingly changes with the passing of time (Bergson 2009). The exaggerated conditions of repetition through the temporal parameters of the performance draw attention to domestic labour's ability to entrap the subject through Sisyphean repetition as it is continuously needed to maintain our biological selves. Through *Yellow*, Coogan takes the labour of washing and turns it into art work, an individuating activity in Arendt's terms. Presenting *Yellow* repeatedly in different gallery contexts from 2008 to the present consolidates the position of the performance as a long-standing contribution to Irish contemporary art, and therefore functions as work. At the same, these performance gestures provide a means of connecting to other people, which also makes these gestures actions.

Arendt emphasizes the significance of speech in relation to action, as both are what occur between human beings, occupying the web of relationships that make political life possible: 'speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words' (1998: 178). Speech is designated a privileged role in communication, with Arendt presenting speech and action as constitutive of human beings, 'in acting and speaking, men [sic] show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world' (179).

However, the particularities that Arendt describes as affiliated only with speech, including the ability for a person to identify as an actor and announce what she 'does, has done, and intends to do' (178), can be applied to performance action when taking into account Erika Fischer-Lichte's reconsideration of the semiotics and aesthetics of performance. Responding to J. L. Austin's definition of the performative, which treats certain speech acts as constitutive in that they bring forth the

social reality they refer to, Fischer-Lichte (2008) emphasizes that such transformative power does not need to be restricted to language. Therefore, she modifies the term 'performative' to apply to performance acts, where the gestures of artists are self-referential and constitutive, encapsulating the transformative power that Austin attributes to performative speech-acts. In turn, the significance that Arendt places on speech in relation to action does not need to be restricted to spoken language, but an artist's performance gestures maintain the same potential for transformation through their constitutive ability.

This slippage from speech to performance gesture becomes further plausible when considering the unknown character of the live encounter in performance art. Fischer-Lichte emphasizes how through performance, art is not an object, but an event that 'opens up the possibility for all participants to experience a metamorphosis' (2008: 22). She points to the co-presence of subjects as a key factor of the transformative power of performance, where the division between subject and object is no longer dichotomous, but oscillatory as actions trigger further actions. Drawing from Max Hermann, Fischer-Lichte notes that it is the 'bodily co-presence of actors and spectators [that] enables and constitutes performance' (33). As such, the performance occurs between actors and spectators, and possibly between spectators themselves, resulting in a 'dynamic and ultimately wholly unpredictable process [that] precludes the expression and transmission of predetermined meanings; the performance itself generates its meanings' (35). Here a correlation can be drawn with Arendt's definition of action that emphasizes plurality. Through action comes the potential for difference; the uncharted volatility that carries both reward and risk as a space of negotiation and experience.

As noted previously, the repetition of Coogan's actions draws attention to domestic habits that become imperceptible over time. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir treats the endless nature of housework as oppressive:

> Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition. The clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. (1989: 451)

Trapped by repetition, for de Beauvoir women are associated with immanence, as opposed to men, who can achieve transcendence. She describes how men are productive workers who can move beyond the limits of the family, making contributions to society. Women, however, 'are doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home – that is to say, to immanence' (429). The repetition of housework is a means of creating continuity, opening up a state of an everlasting present through the mundane cycles of maintenance.

The rhythm of domestic labour forms the basis of Coogan's actions, though her distillation of these gestures with repetition functions as a form of amplification, allowing her to surpass immanence. In contrast to de Beauvoir, Rita Felski (1999) connects repetition, home and habit – which adequately describe domestic labour – as characteristics of the everyday that cannot be undervalued. While repetition tends to be considered in negative terms due to its potential for stagnation, Felski argues:

> We become who we are through acts of repetition.... Repetition is not simply a sign of human subordination to external forces but also one of the ways in which individuals engage with and respond to their environment. Repetition can signal resistance as well as enslavement.... Acts of innovation are not opposed to, but rather made possible by, the mundane cycles of the quotidian. (1999: 21)

Coogan's exaggeration of futility through her acts of washing challenges de Beauvoir's claim that repetition is enslaving. Coogan transforms them by erasing their purpose of making clean and presenting them in the collective context of the performance scenario, taking the immanence of labour and producing the transcendence of work with the shared potential of action. While de Beauvoir (1989)

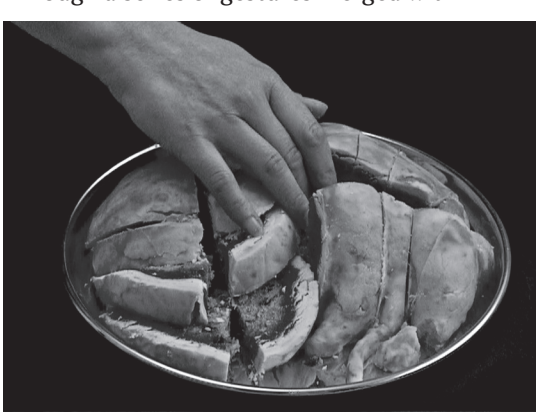
Figure 2 *(left)*, Figure 3 *(below)* and Figure 4 *(opposite)* Áine Phillips, *sex birth & death*, 2003. *Photos Nigel Rolfe. Images courtesy of the artist*

argues that women's labour produces nothing, Coogan draws from women's labour to produce performance art – an aesthetic encounter that constitutes *something*. This reframing is significant in the Irish context, since the constitution delegates a woman's political role as providing labour to support the family, which are her 'duties in the home'. Using domestic labour as the impetus of art work in the collective context of action extends the political support of mothers from beyond the original constitutional prescription while referencing these origins. As such, Coogan's gestures of washing become a form of political resistance that challenges the framing of mothers' roles in the Irish Constitution.

REDEFINING IRISH MATERNAL SEXUALITY

In the Irish context, the maternal is not just related to the acts being performed, but it also concerns the cultural expectations of mothers, which, like the constitutional delegation of women to the home, can be traced to the nation's attempts to distance itself from its former colonizers. Sara Gerend emphasizes how Patrick Pearse, the nationalist writer, felt that Ireland needed to be reimagined as a sexually pure gendered space in order to 'counter the view that Ireland has been disgracefully raped and feminized by English imperialism' (2005: 36). Moreover, according to Gerend, Pearse presented Ireland as a chaste maternal figure, drawing from the female archetypes of Kathleen ni Houlihan, a recognized symbol of Irish nationalism, and the Virgin Mary. Kathleen ni Houlihan is commonly depicted as an old woman, representing an embodied personification of 'mother' Ireland that requires the help of young Irish men to fight and die for her to be liberated from British colonial influence. As such, the ideal for the maternal posited in Ireland was not only impossible to achieve (a passive, virgin mother), but also was disconnected from the daily existence of Irish women (Gerend 2005). Such prescribed ambitions for Irish women became further codified over time, as cultural aspirations became cemented through constitutional rhetoric.

Therefore, the challenge for mother performance artists in Ireland is not just to break from domestic expectations, but also to challenge the limitations that such understandings of the maternal place on Irish female sexuality. In her diverse oeuvre, Áine Phillips meets many of these presumptions head on, critically embodying elements of the Irish cultural mystique that embraces various taboos, including overt expressions of female sexuality, abortion and extramarital affairs, while drawing from her own experiences as a woman and mother. For example, in *sex birth & death* (2003), which Phillips first performed at the National Review of Live Art in the United Kingdom, she not only challenges the de-eroticization of the maternal, but explicitly references abortion, which she links to motherhood as 'two sides of one coin' (2016: 8). Through a series of gestures merged with



spoken word and video projections, Phillips blends pleasure with disturbance as she pushes the limits of imagining the maternal body. In the first part of the performance, Phillips presents the making, sharing and consumption of a foetus cake (fig. 2 and 3), referencing the Catholic ritual of Communion:

> Take this baby and eat it
> It is my duplicate self that I offer up to you,
> It is my erotic frustrations that can never be consummated … It is my embarrassment and my baggage
> Take this in memory of me and eat it,
> It is the epiphany of pro-lifers
> It is the logic of Catholics
> It is the cannibalism of mothers. (Phillips 2003)

Emphasis is placed on plurality in consumption through this collective act, like the ritual of the Eucharist. In the context of Phillips's performance, collective consumption highlights how an abortion is not an isolated act. In addition to being tied to women's reproductive health in general, the procedure is connected to various political, social and ideological influences and beliefs, making it a volatile issue that affects more than women's bodies. In Ireland, strict legislative restrictions do not eradicate abortion, but force women seeking abortions to go to great lengths to receive the procedure in a safe context. Generally, women are required to travel abroad to the United Kingdom or continental Europe, taking advantage of informal networks of support that function as a 'safety valve', which allow women access to abortion services while leaving stringent anti-choice legislation of the Eighth Constitutional Amendment in place (Muldowney 2015). Recent shifts in Irish attitudes pertaining to abortion through increasingly visible pro-choice movements (including various campaigns to repeal the Eighth Amendment and the annual pro-choice rally and march that have been taking place in Dublin since 2012) underscore the significance of collective action as being necessary to overcome these restrictions while countering the isolating shame that many Irish women are forced to endure as they acquire abortions

through clandestine channels.

For the second part of *sex birth & death*, Phillips celebrates the leaking, abject female body through explicit presentations of lactation (fig. 4). She squeezes bottles of milk to appear as pouring from her nipples, with the milk taking on a seminal quality as it seeps down her body, intentionally blending this act of nourishment with sexual pleasure. In her description of the work, Phillips states: 'In my personal experience giving birth was like an enormous orgasm and breastfeeding aroused sexual feelings in my whole body … In *sex, birth & death* I consider the image of lactation to be a metaphor for female eroticism' (2016:8). As such, she embraces the erotic nature of motherhood, where the norms of corporeal coexistence are blurred through the sharing of bodies and life. At the same time, she counters expectations of chastity in motherhood and expresses pleasure in the mothering body (Phillips 2016). As with Coogan's gestures of washing in *Yellow*, maternal labour (the act of nursing) becomes art work and shared performance actions, turning the mother's body into a site of active resistance that counters the expectations of a passive 'mother' Ireland.

Allusions to Catholic ideology and its infiltration of Irish society can be found throughout Phillips's work. In 2000, she created *BVM (Blessed Virgin Mary)* for the Alternative Miss Ireland contest, where she personified the iconic mother that has earned a special place in the Irish Catholic imagination. Her 2005 performance *Red Wedding*, which is based

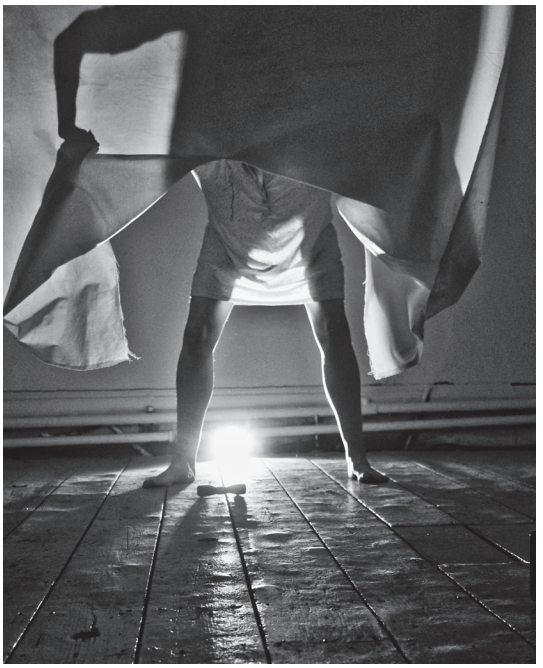


Figure 5 *(left)* and Figure 6 *(opposite)* EL Putnam, *Parting*, performed as part of 'Feminism and the Body in Performance' at the Mart Gallery, Dublin, Ireland, 2015. *Photos Leah Robinson. Images courtesy of the artist*

on the Catholic mass and wedding ceremony, challenged the preordained destiny of Irish women as only being complete through matrimony to a man by marrying herself. Phillips confronts the presumed moral sanctity of Catholic institutions, which over time have been revealed as anything but infallibly righteous. In recent years, distrust in the Church has increased through the exposure of paedophile scandals in Ireland and abroad, in addition to revelations that the Irish episcopate actively covered up reports of abuse, as made evident by recent investigations, including media documentaries such as *Suing the Pope* (2002), and government responses such as the 2005 *Ferns Report* and the 2009 *Report of Commission Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin*, also known as the *Murphy Report*. Phillips's grotesque subversion of Catholic rituals make apparent the hidden reality that many Irish women and mothers experience through the institutional regulation of their bodies.

AN AMERICAN IN IRELAND

On the 6 August 2014, a Caesarean section was performed on Ms. Y, a refugee woman who found out she was pregnant shortly after coming to Ireland seeking asylum earlier that year. Ms. Y had been raped in her country, and increasingly became suicidal after learning of her pregnancy. According to Kitty Holland's (2014) timeline of the case in the *Irish Times*, as a newly arrived refugee, Ms. Y could not acquire the appropriate documentation to travel abroad to receive an abortion, which, as noted above, is the common practice of Irish women seeking to terminate pregnancies. Ms. Y began to refuse food and fluid, claiming she would rather die than give birth. As her case worsened and an abortion was not possible, health and legal officials decided on performing early delivery by Caesarean section (Holland 2014).

I was six months pregnant when this story hit the Irish media. Unlike Ms. Y, I made the choice to become pregnant and I entered the country voluntarily, remaining on an EU family visa. This case highlights the complex implications of Irish Catholic ideology and anti-abortion legislation on obstetric care. When the rights of the unborn are considered equal to those of the mother in legislation, in practice, the rights of the mother can be undermined. Such was the case with Savita Halappanavar, who in 2012 went to the National University Hospital in Galway as she was miscarrying. She was denied a termination and died of septicaemia a week later (Holland 2012). Ronit Lentin emphasizes how Halappanavar's case connects to a longer history of Irish '(bio)politics of birth' and the nation's lengthy history of the 'maltreatment of labouring women', perpetuating a link between birth and nation that extends back to the writing of the Irish Constitution (2013: 130 and 134).

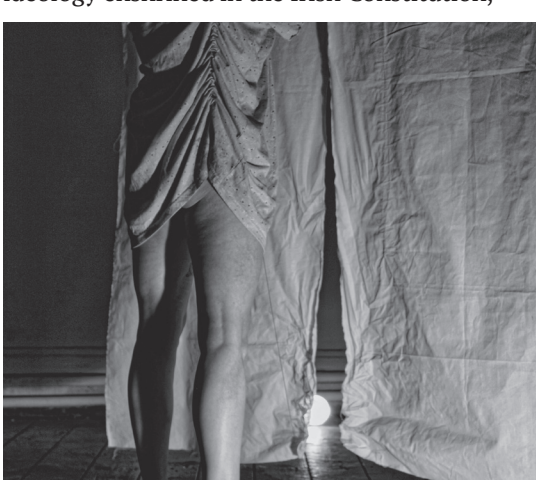
As a stranger to the Irish medical system I was already in a position of unfamiliarity, though learning of these instances of pregnant women being mistreated and having their rights overshadowed by others speaking for the unborn, I was uncertain as to how much my own treatment was influenced by Irish Catholic ideology. I carried this distrust throughout my pregnancy and postpartum, leaving me to wonder if the medical actions taken when

I gave birth were appropriate. When developing the performance *Parting* (2015), which was presented at the Mart Gallery in Dublin, I found myself needing to revisit the changes of my body that accompanied giving birth while contextualizing these experiences in the ideological framework of Irish medicine and biopolitics. I began the performance behind a backlit cloth, so the audience saw my shadow projected onto this makeshift screen. I wore only the nightgown I gave birth in, with faint stains of blood decorating the hem. After a few moments of stillness, I slowly began to tear the backlit cloth up the middle with my body in the squat position (fig. 5). When the rip reached just above my head in standing position, I stopped and stared at the audience. I passed through the cloth and turned away from the audience, grabbing a needle I have attached to the nightgown. At this point, it became apparent that I have sewn a piece of thick red thread into the back of the nightgown. I tugged the thread, lifting the back of the gown and giving the audience a peek at my nude body (fig. 6). I used this thread to haggardly sew up the rip I created. When I reached the bottom of the cloth, I turned and walked through the audience as I pulled the excess thread through the gown. It broke and left a trail of my actions on the floor.

In her survey of sexual difference in Ireland, Bacik (2013) emphasizes the overt influence that the Catholic Church has on the health system, which in turn influences how reproductive and sexual matters are medically treated. Initially, various religious orders controlled health services through individual hospitals and nursing homes, which only recently have become nationally unified and administered through the formation of the Health Service Executive in 2004. As Bacik notes, 'what each [facility] had in common was the Catholic ethical code, and this in turn influenced, and limited, the types of services made available to patients' (22). One of the most infamous examples of procedures performed on pregnant women, supposedly driven by the Catholic ethos, is the symphysiotomy, or the sawing of the pelvis during childbirth so it opens on a hinge. Performed in maternity hospitals regularly until the 1980s, with almost none of the women consulted prior to the operation taking place, Bacik describes how symphysiotomies were carried out as opposed to Caesarean sections since they 'facilitated future vaginal births, avoiding repeat caesareans', which limit the number of children a woman can have. In contrast, the procedure allowed a woman 'to give birth an unlimited number of times' (23). I learned of this chapter of Irish obstetric history when I was eight months pregnant. In *Parting*, I take the act of labour, which in this instance relates to giving birth, and use it as my means of creating art work in the shared context of performance action. I draw attention to the medical aspects of giving birth while also alluding to the potential for violence that accompanies this process (even in instances of desired pregnancies) in the Irish context where women's bodies have historically been mutilated through adherence to Catholic values.

CONCLUSION: MATERNAL LABOUR, ART WORK AND PERFORMANCE ACTION

For Coogan, Phillips and myself, our performances of the maternal emerge from our experiences as mothers, putting on display the intimacy of motherhood. The culturally and sociologically complex portrayals of the maternal we present challenge the Catholic ideology enshrined in the Irish Constitution,



not just in the content of our art, but through our transformation of maternal labour into individuating art work and collective action. Thus, we confront the phrasing of the Constitution that women should not seek work outside the domestic sphere to the 'neglect of their duties in the home'. Instead of restricting our maternal performances to the prescribed ideology of Irish Catholicism and the constitution, our practice recognizes the diversity and plurality of motherhood. Through the transformation of maternal labour into art work and performance action, our gestures function as political acts that undermine constitutional rhetoric. At the same time, our gestures are constitutive. While Amanda Coogan uses duration as a means of emphasizing the cyclical nature of labour through the creation of an aesthetic event, Áine Phillips challenges the rigid prescriptions of chaste maternal sexuality through alternative portrayals of love and the erotic in relation to the mothering body. In my own practice, I disrupt the illusions of privacy in motherhood, emphasizing the impact that Irish legislation and constitutional rhetoric has on women's bodies – including potential violent consequences – from the perspective of a foreigner raising an Irish citizen. Just as Arendt emphasizes how speech and action are how human beings define themselves in relation to others, our performances expose the intimate public sphere of motherhood in Ireland while using it as a site to cultivate acts of resistance to these ideological frameworks.

REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah (1998) *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bacik, Ivana (2013) 'The politics of sexual difference: The enduring influence of the Catholic Church', in Noreen Giffney and Margrit Shildrick (eds.) *Theory on the Edge: Irish Studies and the Politics of Sexual Differences*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17–28.

Beauvoir, Simone de (1989) *The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage Books.

Bergson, Henri (2009) *Creative Evolution*, Waiheke Island: The Floating Press.

Berlant, Lauren (1997) *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.

Felski, Rita (1999) 'The invention of everyday life', *New Formations* 39: 13–31.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika (2008) *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, New York and London: Routledge.

Gerend, Sara (2005) '"Magdalene versus the nation": Ireland as a space of compulsory motherhood in Edna O'Brien's Down by the River', in Sarah Hardy and Caroline Wiedmer (eds.) *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35–53.

Heathfield, Adrian (2012) 'Then again', in Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (eds.) *Perform Repeat Record: Live Art in History*, Bristol, UK, and Chicago: Intellect, pp. 27–35.

Holland, Kitty (2012) 'Woman "denied a termination" dies in hospital', *The Irish Times*, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/woman-denied-a-termination-dies-in-hospital-1.551412, accessed 8 November 2016.

Holland, Kitty (2014) 'Timeline of Ms Y case' *The Irish Times*, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/timeline-of-ms-y-case-1.1951699, accessed 8 November 2016.

Hunter, Lynette (1999) *Critiques of Knowing: Situated Textualities in science, computing and the arts*, New York and London: Routledge.

Jackson, Shannon (2011) *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, New York and London: Routledge.

Larkin, Emmet (1972) 'The devotional revolution in Ireland', *The American Historical Review* 77: 625–52.

Lentin, Ronit (2013) 'A Woman Died: Abortion and the Politics of Birth in Ireland', *Feminist Review* 105: 130–36.

Muldowney, Mary (2015) 'Breaking the Silence: Pro-Choice Activism in Ireland since 1983', in Jennifer Redmond, Sonja Tiernan, Sandra McAvoy, and Mary McAuliffe (eds.) *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland*, Sallins, Ireland: Irish Academic Press, pp. 127–53.

Molesworth, Helen (2000) 'House work and art work', *October* 92: 71–97.

Phillips, Áine (2003) *sex, birth & death*.

Phillips, Áine (2016) 'Eroticism', in Lena Šimič and Emily Underwood-Lee (eds.) *Live Art and Motherhood: A Study Room Guide on Live Art and the Maternal*, London: Live Art Development Agency, pp. 7–8.

Putnam, EL (2016) '"Dynamic Instability:" An interview with Amanda Coogan', *ARTPULSE* 7(26).

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman (2003 [1969]) 'Maintenance Art Manifesto', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.) *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 917–19.

Valiulis, Maryann Gialanella (2009) 'Virtuous mothers and dutiful wives: The politics of sexuality in the Irish Free State', in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (ed.) *Gender and Power in Irish History*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, pp. 100–14.