

## Who will refuse me the right to listen.

Few institutions seek to suspend the world as a matter of principle. The gallery is one, the educational institution sometimes one, and the prison takes as its most urgent mission the bracketing of the world. Unlike the prison, galleries and educational institutions suspend the time of the world or tear objects and events from the natural attitude of life to liberate us. The cares of everyday existence can be put aside for a time when we are asked to do two things: 1. Pay attention and 2. Let something be and appear through multiple adumbrations. In the *Genealogy of Morality* (§3.12), Nietzsche argues that “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’ be”. The more ways that I can experience something, the better I will understand it; experience is always relational. There is no ‘is’ other than in relation. This is a demanding process as we humans have an all-too-human tendency to see narrowly and fix on those meanings and responses that confirm our prejudices. This tells us about our visceral histories, those dimensions of ourselves of which we may not be aware. To come to look at something through different eyes can therefore be a painful and uncomfortable process, but it is a necessary one if we desire to understand in a more expansive, and arguably, realistic way. This would be easy were this simply toying with ideas. It is more difficult because we are asked to interrogate our affective responses, those regions of ourselves that seem most intimate to who we think we are. We are invited to expose ourselves to different ways of seeing the world and being in the world. Museums, galleries and educational institutions ask us to think, to investigate, to experience, to co-enquire and to move through multiple perspectives and in doing so together we form quasi-publics, often imaginary, that can come to modulate the tenor and fabric of public and political life.

The prison tries to annihilate the world. And the world only gets to see the prison and in its inhabitants in a brutalised and caricatured form. A governor once remarked that if the moon were seen as a security risk, ‘they’, those charged with security, would try to get rid of the moon. Forms of exchange that cultivate either conviviality or disagreement are forbidden by this most contemporary form of exile. What is it to exist within the prison? What might the prison say to the world? Hannah Arendt locates three features of the human condition that are also the conditions for humanity: natality, publicity, and plurality. Each of us is a singular beginning and our stories are unique to us; being is appearing and our sense of being demands that we be seen, be heard and be touched; the plurality of our condition means there must be multiple perspectives to weave the fragile relationships that constitute our common world. The walls of the prison preclude the conditions for humanity.

The first showing of *When I Leave These Landings (2004-2009)* took place in a cloister, behind the walls of another preserved space, the gallery of the Irish College nested at the foot of rue des Irlandais in Paris. There the viewer was met with four small screens and a large screen. Now in Dublin, we move from the south to the north of the city to see an exhibition, four years on. The men in these films now live in our shared world and this time other voices ask to be listened to – the women who love them and whom they love. Entering these spaces, presuppositions and prejudices are not immediately suspended. A civilisation of clichés asserts itself and before even listening or looking we may experience the visceral rejection or approval that belies the natural history of our affects: our feelings are not a private affair. The camera rests on the faces of the men and women for long enough for the body to give itself away and in the intimacy of the relation to the camera as a mediating object lies the power of the work. Through this little machine trust takes palpable form as the men and women look through it to Cummins. This technical object mediates these relationships, allowing for intimate distances that a face-to-face relationship might well foreclose. At certain moments Cummins seems closer to a filmmaker like Philibert than Wiseman, but the persistent lens of Wiseman is evident in these films. They show rather than tell. In a place that takes time, the camera gives time, preserving it as Krapp stored his spools. Film seems the most appropriate form of portraiture in the space of the prison where life can seem frozen. The camera does not circulate to impress a point or an agenda. No historical context is given. The man, the woman, sits without adornment, speaking.

Memory and perception seep into one another and clichés cloud our ability to experience so a straightforward response does not lie ready to hand. It is a work of portraiture that exposes the singular being that is its subject, the uniqueness of being that is the human beyond tabloid newspapers, military collectives or bureaucratic unaccountability, the *who* that each one of us is. These men and women have proper names. This is their work of storytelling. The documents begin as love letters to family and evolve into love letters, in some sense, from family. They archive selves fearful of forgetting themselves in fantasy. They document part of a long story of institutions in Ireland and of political struggles. They speak of utopia, justice, tragedy, love, horror, and betrayal. They speak of the underside of modernity. And they speak of men in prison constituting a sense of individuality in the remains of the world. They exist. They speak.

We are more comfortable with encountering such stories in dusty historical archives, years after the deaths of the storytellers. Then we feel safe and we can get on with the task of monumentalising our history. These documents are familiar, non-monumental, ordinary, flawed, even banal, caught up not in grand narratives, but living through those tragic and beautiful dimensions of human existence that we all live through in different ways: love, death, violence, betrayal, fear, tragedy, disappointment, laughter, conviction, poverty, responsibility, grief, sexuality.

Two women speak. The stories of love. A contemporary tragedy. Echoes of the Greeks.

ANTIGONE: "There is nothing, no pain – our lives are pain – no private shame, no public disgrace, nothing I haven't seen in your griefs and mine."

Two brothers. One fights for the State. The other against. They both die, but the body of the one who fought against the State is to be dumped, consumed by carrion, the ultimate humiliation for the Greeks. Their sister Antigone cannot bear the thought of Polyneices' body to be "left unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure for birds that scan the field and feast to the heart's content [...] an obscenity for all citizens to behold". She says, "no one has the right to keep me from my own". The Law of Nature, of love, of blood, of family bonds, comes into conflict with the Law of the State. "Our country is our safety", states Creon, "These are my principles. Never at my hands will the traitor be honoured above the patriot. But whoever proves his loyalty to the state – I'll prize that man in death as well as life." Antigone refuses Creon's dictates and obeys the Law of Nature. Though a story of civil war, Sophocles dwells only on the way in which lives and relationships unravel as different commitments and allegiances are made. He does not describe the greater historical context or attempt to justify that these stories be told. We must make up our own minds. Antigone buries her brother. Her uncle Creon, the King, punishes her. Everything falls apart. She says, "I was born to join in love, not hate – that is my nature." What happens when the Law of Nature and the Law of the State are irreconcilable? Should a mother stop loving her son? A wife, her husband?

Adriana Cavarero writing of Arendt says that others tell our stories. There is an aspect of our lives that is obscured to us so when our story is told by someone else, its significance becomes clear. She writes, "In hearing his story, then, Ulysses is moved to tears. Not only because the narrated events are painful, but because when he had lived them he had not understood their meaning." (*Relating Narratives*, p18). The films are not simply the vocative and embodied expression of these men and women, but we too tell their stories and in the relating of them as we speak of them after watching the films, we give them new meanings. They tell us about our present, our institutions, our world. They are our stories.

Nothing is demanded of us, nothing is stated, much remains in silence, but as we listen we may find ourselves reflecting upon how institutional practices are embodied in our own lives, a matter of urgency within the Irish context today. We might come to ask why prisons share so many features of the 'camp', extending far beyond the precept that the deprivation of liberty is the punishment. We may wonder whether we know who others are, if we can still identify the strangers at the gates of humanity or whether we welcome the exercise of exile, no longer bodies dumped on the outskirts of the city but men and women locked in stone chambers. We may think about how it would be to be a man, woman or child who is forced carry the stigma

that someone they love is in prison. We may ask, "What are my rights as a citizen to understand and to sense beyond the crude depictions that manipulate the affects?" This becomes ever more difficult when my only encounter with those inside or those who are members of proscribed organisations is as 'mere representations of a species': scumbag, monster, vermin, animal, inhuman. What would it mean to have a society that could listen to the voices of those with whom many may disagree, acknowledging each human being for what they are, like it or not – a human being? I make no grander claim that this simple statement. *This* is a human being. Perhaps, then we can begin to really disagree with one another. What are the implications of not doing so for our claims to pluralism and democracy? Do I as a human being and as a citizen not have the right to be perplexed, disturbed or to try to understand?

The work is a work of collaboration with those who speak but it does not communicate the 'identity' of a community. It has resonances of Santiago Sierra in its lack of adornment and sparseness but the pieces are not conceptual or staged after the fashion of Sierra. In other respects, it is closer to the work of Jeremy Deller or Phil Collins in the ability to handle ambivalence, through their ethical sensibility, and in the capacity to confront the complex complicity of the artist and participant. One man bites his lip as he talks of his mother. The camera tends to be unrelenting when it fixes on its subject. In recent work Deller creates the conditions for conversations in America about the current conflict in Iraq. Cummins asks us to tell the story of our present before nostalgia morphs into fantasy and before the safety of the monumental past takes hold. In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Grant Kester draws on Jean Luc Nancy's concept of community saying "our identities are always in negotiation, always in the process of being formed and re-formed through our encounters with others" (154). We "think, act and speak beyond our *a priori* roles and identities" (155). Through these films all parties are brought outside themselves. Rather than over-coding the stories of the men and women, in the bare exposure of voice and body we find revealed the knotted vectors of the natural history of humankind as we listen: love, family, grief, loss, commitment, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, family, camaraderie, humour, institutions, collective life, liberation, joy, expression, political life, citizenship, unemployment, representation (political and artistic), mediators, technical objects, violence, Republicanism, betrayal, infidelity, fidelity, disagreement, persistence, dissent, the State, military life, bureaucracy, again, love.. Our ready-to-hand responses are not available. We do not know what to do, what to say, what to think. At such moments, the world opens.

### **Dr Aislinn O'Donnell**

Text by Dr Aislinn O'Donnell (Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick) on the exhibitions by Jonathan Cummins *When I Leave These Landings (2004 – 2009)* Centre Culturel Irlandais, 2009, and *When I Leave These Landings*, NCAD Gallery and Hugh Lane Gallery, April-May 2013.