

Becoming Visible: Transformative Actions and Fearless Speech

Anyone who experienced a 1970s Irish childhood, will know the infinite joys of spontaneous outdoor play. With unfettered access to the world at large, children were free to roam suburban neighbourhoods, the caves and beaches of coastal areas, or the forests and lakes of the countryside. Such untamed spaces provided rich learning environments, enhancing independence and imaginative discovery, beyond the constraints of adult supervision. Vast research among evolutionary psychologists suggests that we are genetically programmed with an affinity for nature. As opportunities diminish for young people to interact in naturalised outdoor spaces – amidst a modern emphasis on structured and supervised play that generates a kind of ‘playground paralysis’ – opportunities for authentic forms of risk-taking and self-directed learning are significantly reduced. In short, as our physical realm shrinks, so do our psychological boundaries.

Mindful of some of these concerns, Yvonne McGuinness’s recent moving image work, *Holding ground where the wood lands* – commissioned by Fingal County Council’s Arts Office in collaboration with Draíocht Arts Centre [and curator Sharon Murphy](#) – was filmed in an open field beside her childhood home in Portmarnock, County Dublin. In situating this work in a setting of such personal significance, McGuinness seems to be pursuing an autobiographical impulse. In the film, seagulls and aeroplanes traverse the sky above the suburban houses, recreating the soundtrack of the artist’s childhood, which played out largely within the expansive realm of the field. This wild and expansive terrain – edged by overgrown woodland and a golf course – was gradually eroded, as it was built on by the council. McGuinness also has lucid memories of sleepwalking in the field as a child. This striking image posits the field as a vivid metaphor for the subconscious – an exterior space reflecting an interior ‘wilderness of thought’, where new pathways can be forged (both physical and intuitive) into unknown territories.

Holding Ground is characterised by an intrinsic duality. The film is both an artwork – to be circulated within the realm of contemporary visual art and encountered by audiences in gallery settings – and a piece of socially-engaged research, given that McGuinness worked with male adolescents from a local Foróige club in Blanchardstown, a large outer suburb of Fingal. The film both documents and engages these teenagers in a process that saw McGuinness, as artist and facilitator, constantly moving between the aesthetic and the social. *Holding Ground* was first screened at Draíocht Arts Centre (22 November 2017 – 3 February 2018) as a two-channel video installation – a presentation format that suitably manifested the film’s binary qualities, through layered and contrasting vantage-points.

Part story-telling, part intervention, the film manages to incorporate multiple discourses, while also suggesting various aesthetic and theoretical influences. A minimalist script – developed and enacted by the young men during workshops – echoes Beckettian nihilist dialogue, while the use of first-person narrative calls to mind the testimonial style of verbatim theatre, a “documentary form of theatre focused on the real”¹. A voiceover by the golf club green-keeper recounts his memories of playing in the grounds of the nearby former Plunkett Estate, where peacocks once roamed. Rooted in history yet distinctly contemporary, the film’s visual character, symbolic sequences and narrative content call to mind the cinematic and literary traditions of speculative and dystopian fiction. As viewers, we are critically aware of the social discourses underpinning the identities and life opportunities of these suburban youths, while also being mindful of performance and its relationship to youth engagement, as a commonly practiced form of social intervention. Above all, the film suggests parallels with Social Realism, evoking the vast contributions of British directors like Clio Barnard and Ken Loach, who work with real people from marginalised communities (rather than actors) to highlight society’s vast inequalities. This in turn, upholds Brechtian values of theatre as catalyst for consciousness-raising and political change.

The film opens with shots of the manicured golf course and neighbouring woodland, against a soundtrack of peacock cries, articulating the idyllic history of the aforementioned Plunkett Estate. In the subsequent scene, a hooded youth startlingly vocalises this birdcall as some kind of primal scream, establishing an uncanny atmosphere. A group of young men are depicted walking through the forest, emitting tribal calls, gathering firewood and carefully digging up a young tree. This sapling seems to hold some sort of ceremonial significance. As if establishing territory within the forest, the teenagers mark lines on the ground with bright blue paint. The particular shade of blue is noteworthy here, calling to mind Yves Klein Blue (YKB), an intrinsically liminal hue, associated with performative actions. Klein famously remarked that: “Blue is the invisible becoming visible. Blue has no dimensions, it is beyond the dimensions of which other colours partake”, suggesting that, for Klein, this colour was a conduit to bridge immaterial terrain.

The teenagers later use the same electric blue paint to overwrite graffiti on a wall with the words: “Begin Again”. Hanging blue and maroon material from the surrounding trees, they fabricate a make-shift campsite, piling tree stumps into low stacks. In the dim dusk light, they start a fire. This provides a crackling focal point, as they read through a scripted conversation. Here, the dystopian-sounding phrase “Begin Again” resurfaces, perceived as vocalising, perhaps, a collective desire for a ‘fresh start’; a chance to rewrite personal stories or other people’s perceptions of their world. The group comprises bright and physically strong young men. A degree of negativity undoubtedly surrounds this age group; acting out their

masculinity can often be misconstrued as antisocial behaviour, while the social outlets for teenagers in urban areas continue to diminish.

The film fluctuates between documentary-style footage and scripted theatrics, developed by the teenagers during a series of workshops. Their conversations, collective thinking and word associations gave form to the overall structure of the final script. The artist collated fragments of sentences to formulate a stilted dialogue, comprising phrases like: “Imagine below us”; “The ground is shifting”; and “Blue, it’s blue, the colour moving around us, can you feel it?” This was not the recreation of a theatrical production; these were not acting classes. Rather, it was an opportunity for the young men to articulate a sense of place, with their personal stories having intrinsic value, something Michel Foucault refers to as ‘fearless speech’, truth-telling or *parrhesia* – a concept from Ancient Greek which Foucault summarises as “the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger.”ⁱⁱⁱ The teenagers put on life jackets and leave the fire. Carrying torches through the forest, they plant the sapling behind the blue line. In the closing scenes, floodlights illuminate a football pitch, as aeroplanes fly overhead.

The metaphors of manhood, identity and place, so powerfully embedded in the choreography of *Holding Ground*, are played out through primal impulses and channelled through performance, as well as the ceremonial gesture of gathering around a fire. In many ways, the young men are shaping the material of their own lives through physical actions – a recurring motif within McGuinness’s wider moving image practice, that frequently sees her protagonists engaged in some sort of transformative or cathartic act, such as building, sweeping, wrapping or digging, often incorporating the classical elements of earth, fire or water. Her films are repeatedly set within immersive natural landscapes, which provide suitably tranquil backdrops, as participants enact embodied connections to place, often with ritualistic or New Age undertones.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer and Features Editor of the *Visual Artist’s News Sheet*.

Notes:

ⁱ Kathleen Gallagher, Anne Wessels and Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou, ‘Verbatim Theatre and Social Research: Turning Towards the Stories of Others’, *Theatre Research in Canada*, 33.1(2012): p 28.

ⁱⁱ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001) p 16.