

Figure 1, Amanda Coogan, *Yellow*, 2008, Performance Still. Courtesy: the Artist.

Bodily Remembrances: The Performance of Memory in Recent Works by Amanda Coogan

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A central concern for those involved in Irish Studies is the examination of identity in relation to Irish history and culture. Since the early 1980s, the field of Irish Studies has focused closely on cultural products such as literary texts and films to interrogate Irish identity and the forces that shape its construction and reception. More recently, significant attempts have been made by critics Fintan Cullen, Luke Gibbons, and Lucy Cotter to consider the role of the visual in relation to Irish cultural discourse. Art historians such as Fionna Barber, Katy Deepwell and Hilary Robinson have made critical feminist interventions into this area with regards to contemporary art in Ireland. While the disciplines of art history and Irish Studies overlap in their examinations of the influence that identity has upon Irish visual culture, further investigation needs to emphasise the relationship between memory and identity with regard to contemporary visual art.

Memory works retrospectively in shaping identities. The importance of collective memory lies in its ability to unify a group of people by constructing historical narratives that reinforce perceived identities. Those in power often use these historical narratives to 'buttress and legitimize their own authority'.¹ In an Irish context, memory and the processes of remembering and forgetting have been contested and appropriated by nationalists, unionists, revisionists and others in order to achieve specific political and cultural aims. Memory is not necessarily encapsulated in a single form but appears in texts, ceremonies and rituals as well as visual representations. Feminists have challenged how patriarchal representations of women obscure the lived realities. Ailbhe Smyth argues that Irish women have been doubly colonised: 'Irish women are twice dispossessed. Disremembered. Unremembered. No body, so to speak. No past to speak of. Unremembering our history of absence, sign of our existence.'² Certain artistic practices engage memory to dispute dominant historical narratives in order to weaken their cultural significance and expose underlying gender inequalities. The performance art of Irish artist Amanda Coogan is well positioned to undermine accepted patriarchal representations of the 'Irish woman'.

This paper provides a feminist reading of two recent works by Coogan, *Yellow* (2008) and *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato* (2008) in order to explore how her performances use corporeal strategies to engage with memory. It argues that by articulating memory through the body, Coogan's art reveals suppressed bodily realities that destabilise hegemonic cultural representations of the 'Irish woman'.

Amanda Coogan (Dublin, b. 1971) studied sculpture at the National College of Art and Design before completing an MA in Performance Art at Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig, Germany. Her mentor is Marina Abramović, the Serbian performance artist, noted for her extreme practices that test the physical and psychological limits of the body. In 2004, Coogan was the recipient of the AIB Art Prize and as a result, in 2005, held a major exhibition of her work at the Limerick City Gallery of Art. Her art often draws upon both art historical and specifically Irish references. One such example, *The Fountain* (2001), was a performance that featured Coogan urinating in front of an audience at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The title refers to Duchamp's landmark artwork, a mass-produced urinal. However Coogan has indicated that the work draws upon the shocking story of Ann Lovett, a 15-year-old girl who on 31 January 1984, died while giving birth in a grotto to the Virgin Mary in Granard Co. Westmeath.³ At the time, conservative Ireland was scandalised by the circumstance surrounding Lovett's death, highlighting the stigma attached to female sexuality and more specifically, concealed teenage pregnancy and unmarried motherhood.⁴ The transgressive nature of Coogan's public urination, generally a private bodily function, referenced Lovett by confronting the audience with an act that rendered visible shame and humiliation. Furthermore, it is telling that works such as *Milltown Madonna* (2001) and *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (2006) engage explicitly with female icons that hold particular significance in a predominantly Catholic Ireland. In the work *Medea* (2001), a three hour-long performance, Coogan used Irish Sign Language to tell the stories of the oppression and abuse in the Irish Deaf community.⁵ *The Quiet Man* (2002) is a video diptych that reinacted the famous scene from John Ford's kitsch film while reinterpreting it to expose the underlying subtext of domestic abuse. Despite the serious issues her work deals with Coogan's performances draw upon sharp humour making her work complex. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith remarks,

Much of Coogan's work to date has involved an attempt to reinvest contemporary visual art with the power of physical sensation by bridging the gap between the visual and the visceral, artist and audience, high art and popular culture with an energy and wit that occasionally belies her underlying seriousness of purpose.⁶

Coogan's assertion of self-image and sexuality contribute to performances that are often psychologically unsettling.

Yellow

The six hour durational performance, *Yellow* (2008) [Fig. 1], has been described as a 'tableau vivant'. It was first performed in the Oonagh Young Gallery, Dublin in July 2008. The performance involved the artist barefoot and clothed in a long exaggerated yellow polo neck dress seated over a large bucket of soapy water concealed underneath her skirt. Her legs spread, she rhythmically scrubs imaginary stains from her skirt, first immersing it into the water and then working up lather with the material between her hands. The classical piano music of Schubert's *Impromptu* plays intermittently throughout the performance. This work references numerous paintings of women engaged in domestic chores and specifically that of the laundress or washerwoman. However, this work also references the women incarcerated in the Magdalene Laundries, also known as Magdalene Asylums, the Irish institutions where so called 'fallen women' were required to do penance by way of 'hard labour' in exchange for room and board. Operated by different orders of the Catholic Church, these institutions took their name from Mary Magdalene, reformed prostitute and devoted follower of Christ. Many of the incarcerated women were considered sexually promiscuous or had committed the mortal sin of becoming pregnant out of wedlock, while others were committed because they were too difficult for their families to control. Forced to live in harsh conditions, all freedoms were taken from them. Silence was often enforced and the women were made to pray continually.⁷ These institutions concealed women whose actions were deemed shameful from public view and in turn 'perpetuated the fiction of Irish cultural purity'.⁸ It is estimated that 30,000 women were committed to these institutions in their 150-year history.⁹ Until as recently as 1990s, the atrocities committed against these women remained an invisible scar on the collective Irish memory.

This performance consists of four main actions; the artist scrubs her skirt, displays the skirt to the audience, clenches the skirt in her teeth and wrings the material between her hands. These actions are then repeated with slight variations over a six-hour period. The continual scrubbing of her skirt recalls the repetitive hand washing motions of someone who suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder and exhibits the desire to cleanse oneself but is thwarted by an inability to complete the task satisfactorily. In her second action, Coogan stretches her skirt taut between her hands, holding it up to show the viewers the imaginary stain. By interrupting her scrubbing, Coogan's arrested stillness references the act of 'witnessing'.¹⁰ The performance becomes more intricate, subtly drawing in the audience and making the

viewers complicit in her 'shame'. This action complicates the viewer's relationship to the performance; the viewer bears witness to the suffering and humiliation of the incarcerated but the viewer also oversees her punishment, as such the viewer oscillates between witness and warden. In the third action Coogan raises the skirt up to her face clenching the wet material in her teeth. She stares confrontationally at various audience members. Aislinn White describes this action noting, 'Many viewers shift discreetly as they watch her tug the unmitigated yellow dress with her teeth, groaning.'¹¹ Foam and water trickle from Coogan's mouth, running down her chin. In her fourth action she grasps the skirt, twisting and squeezing it between her hands until a frothy lather emerges. These last two actions can be read as sexual and reference how the Catholic Church and Irish State historically have conspired to control women's sexuality. These actions provoke uncertainty in the spectator, compelling one to interrogate one's own relationship to the issues raised. Likewise, the duration is significant because as the performance progresses each action builds upon the last, escalating and intensifying the spectator's anxiety. Equally important is the penitential element of the duration, as the viewer continues to watch one might question whether the penance belongs to the artist or the audience. The title, *Yellow*, is a double entendre, suggesting a tainted quality, or a loss of innocence in addition to referencing the cowardice of those who conspired to incarcerate and 'rehabilitate' these women, fearful of their seemingly transgressive female sexuality. In this powerful, physically demanding performance, Coogan literally transforms the memories of oppression, humiliation and shame into actions that are projected through the body.

How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato

The performance, *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato* (2008) [Fig. 2] was organised for the *Out of Site* 2008 performance day at Clontarf, a seaside suburb on the north side of Dublin. Coogan's performance marks an intervention into a public space and provokes responses from those who are not familiar with performance art. Shelters dot the Clontarf promenade and during the summertime, they provide a welcome respite for those who walk to the nearby beach at Bull Island. Given the shape and size of the structure, the shelter in this performance functions as a stage. Donning a suit constructed of sixty-two kilograms of red rooster potatoes with gold leaf covering her face, the artist sits motionless in a concrete shelter along the promenade. The weight of the potato suit and the burden placed on Coogan's body becomes physically manifested throughout her performance. Her body is still as she remains seated in the shelter. The stillness Coogan engages with during this performance is a meditative state, one that can be associated with Zen qualities and it infers a contemplative nature that is entered into by the artist.¹² According

Figure 2, Amanda Coogan, *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato*, 2008. Performance still. Photo: the Author.

to Anthony Howell, this type of stillness allows the performance to be read like a tableaux or painting instead of a theatrical piece where actions demand the viewer's attention.¹³ Furthermore, the silence maintained by the artist during her two-hour performance effectively engages viewers in an active mode of observation, one that requires the audience to meditate closely on the meaning of the work. *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato* has various references. Most notably, this performance is a homage to Joseph Beuys' 1965 *How to explain pictures to a dead hare* and Marina Abramović's 1995 re-enactment of the same. In Beuys' performance, he covered his face in honey and gold leaf while cradling a dead hare in his arms, silently explaining pictures to it.¹⁴ Beuys indicated that the use of honey and gold leaf referenced a transformation of the head and were symbolic of understanding and consciousness.¹⁵ This performance also suggests the role of ritual in contemporary society. However, it may be argued that Coogan's performance focuses closely on the idea of provoking bodily consciousness.

In this work the body becomes the agent through which memory speaks and the act of wearing potatoes transforms Coogan's body into a physical site of memory, one that is open to multiple meanings [Fig. 3]. The potato is highly emblematic in an Irish context, specifically as a crop closely related with the Great Famine (1845-1849). In 1845 and 1846 blight destroyed the majority of potato crops, a staple crop that the Irish relied on for subsistence. Meanwhile they were required under British colonial rule to export other staple crops such as grain and corn abroad. The inability to pay landlords led to many tenant evictions with thousands ending up in workhouses where terrible living conditions, coupled with widespread starvation and disease led to many deaths.¹⁶ As a cultural symbol, the image of the potato represents a memory of this significant loss. Paradoxically, the potato can be seen to represent fertility as every uneaten potato has the potential to propagate a new plant. However the potato may be considered asexual, as it does not need to be fertilised in order to reproduce. This asexual quality implies a connection to the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception. The imagery of the Virgin Mary, a revered symbol that holds particular significance for Catholic Ireland, represents a non-threatening femininity, one that is both pious and asexual. Moreover, the placement of the potatoes covers the artist's body acting as a cloak or a shroud, obscuring her sexuality and femininity from the spectator's gaze. The gold leaf on Coogan's face emphasises the connection to religious imagery through referencing gold leaf used in icon paintings. Furthermore, the gold leaf serves as a mask, concealing her identity although the suggestion of her blonde hair alludes to her sex.

This performance challenges the traditionally dominant representations of women in Irish culture. In particular, this work alludes to the imagery of Mother Ireland; a self-sacrificing maternal figure associated with the Virgin Mary. Female figures such as Mother Ireland, Cathleen ní Houlihan, and Dark Rosaleen have been

adopted in literature and visual art to represent the feminine ideal as the bearer of the national race.¹⁷ These allegorical images serve to reinforce gender stereotypes and become physically and psychologically projected onto women's bodies, veiling the tangible body. As Paula Murphy noted in 1998:

An examination of the position of woman in society – independent woman and woman within her different roles – is the concern of many contemporary female artists. The need to replace woman as a patronized, powerless and propagandist symbol with an exploration of woman as an emotional, living being is evident in much recent work.¹⁸

These concerns are still relevant as women continue to struggle for gender equality and to empowerment as bodily subjects rather than cultural objects. Apinan Poshyananda interprets the representations of female icons in Coogan's art as evocative of liberation, penance and female force.¹⁹ However, it is arguable that Coogan does not simply seek to reinvest or liberate these icons from misappropriation. On the contrary, it is through the emphasis Coogan places on corporeality that serves to fragment these allegorical representations.

How to explain the sea to a potato deals with issues of corporeality and female sexuality, and as such it is relevant to mention that large numbers, up to 6,000 women, travel annually from the Republic to England to terminate pregnancies, as abortion is not currently legal in Ireland.²⁰ Seated staring out at the Irish Sea, Coogan's performance references the difficult journeys that women have made across the watery divide. The State holds that the rights of the unborn child are equal to those of the mother.²¹ It is significant that the weight of the potatoes that Coogan bears upon her body is equal to her body weight. Therefore the significance of the potatoes is equal to what Coogan's body represents. The artist's body becomes more than just a screen on which meaning is projected; it literally transforms into a physical site of memory through which representation and identity is interrogated. In order to comprehend how women's bodily experiences have been rendered invisible, it is necessary to unpack perceived cultural expectations that serve to continually reinforce hegemonic representations.

Memory and Performance Art

In Coogan's performance works, memory becomes powerfully manifested through her silence. An important aspect of her performances, silence has further implications when one considers that she was born a hearing child to deaf parents. As Irish Sign Language is the artist's first language, the body as a means

of communication and expression is an integral part of her practice.²² Coogan stresses this connection between Irish Sign Language and her performance work saying, ‘...storytelling in sign language is always full of huge highs and lows and I think that has probably has affected my practice. You are using your body so you can inflect the language with different expressions.’²³ From an Irish Studies perspective, the use of silence makes a profound statement about women, language and cultural memory. Irish Sign Language is an indigenous yet marginalised language fighting for official recognition in the Republic. Developed by Catholic religious orders in the mid-nineteenth century, pupils throughout the country were educated at two gender-segregated residential schools in Dublin, St. Mary’s School for Girls (established 1846) and St. Joseph’s School for Boys (established 1855).²⁴ The gender segregation resulted in the development of two distinctly gendered dialects, rendering young men and women nearly unintelligible to the opposite sex.²⁵ In 1946 new educational policies replaced the gendered sign curriculum with oralism.²⁶ Despite this, members of the deaf community continued to use Irish Sign Language, subsequently adopting masculine lexicons for general use. Now primarily used only in conversation between women of the older generation, the feminine form of the language has suffered from erasure and more precisely, a silencing. Activists within the deaf community seek to counter this silencing by reclaiming and preserving the feminine form as well as by recording Irish deaf women’s history.²⁷ Given the role of language as a means to articulate the past, it is vital to acknowledge that disenfranchised people continue to contest its usage in an effort to re-frame experiences of oppression. Coogan’s use of silence critiques the hegemonic memories that dictate who may speak and who may be heard. As a result, her performances highlight the fallibility of language, emphasising the misappropriation of women in the dominant memories that create historical narratives.

It is a crucial point that Coogan’s performances are temporary and often not well documented, leaving only traces of what has taken place. *Yellow* and *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato* do not seek to construct a historical narrative; rather they serve to temporarily allow memory to resurface in alternative forms. Her performances draw upon Pierre Nora’s notion of memory in constant evolution. Nora argues that memory is ‘open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting...vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation.’²⁸ It is evident these performances that both the artist and the audience are required to actively engage in the process of remembering. The viewer may enter the work through different aspects such as movement and stillness but crucially, it is the dynamic exchange or transference of energy that fuses the artist and audience.²⁹ The structure of the performance is vital to the process of remembering. Frances Ruane argues that Coogan’s work structures itself upon the tension of opposites: ‘sound and vision;

serenity and horror; religion and sexuality; past and present; romanticism and harsh reality.³⁰ While tension gives the performances a dynamic element, it is perhaps most compelling that Coogan's performances serve to disrupt the interplay of these binaries, subsequently leading to a collapse of hegemonic representations. In Coogan's performances she fluctuates between two opposites; she is not entirely victim or offender, virgin or whore, object or subject. The breakdown of these binaries allows for suppressed memories to emerge, complicating historical narratives.

In her study of memory and legacy in Irish theatre, Emilie Pine has argued all countries, including Ireland, suffer 'intentional amnesia' or the ability to resist political and personal moments that cause irreconcilable tension.³¹ The resistance against representing these moments in historical narratives leads to a silencing or a purging of these memories.³² Coogan's practice negotiates the tensions between representation and memory and has the capacity to challenge the audience to acknowledge the silent voices of the past.³³ Collective memory is not necessarily distributed equally amongst members of a group, but it can be triggered through rituals and performances. Art that references collective memories has the capability to uncover alternative interpretations on personal, cultural and political levels.³⁴ Both *Yellow* and *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato* dispute the construction of the past by engaging with suppressed memories offered in a non-linear and non-narrative approach. These in turn fragment monolithic constructions of gendered representation, emphasising the incompleteness of historical and cultural narratives by pointing to what is both included and excluded.

The Body as a Physical Site of Memory

Performance art has long engaged with the body as a site of meaning. During the late 1960s artists pursued the dematerialisation of the art object with an emphasis on the body as a primary material. Artists such as VALIE EXPORT, Gina Pane and Marina Abramović used the body to develop intense physical and psychological performances that engaged audiences on new levels. Coogan aligns herself with this older generation of performance artists, specifically as she uses her body to traverse the boundaries between representation and reality. In an Irish context, the use of the gendered body in performance art as a means for articulating memory holds a powerful significance. Historically, the Catholic Church and the Irish State enforced conservative legislation that seeks to control women's bodies. The *Irish Constitution* (1937) was heavily influenced by the views of President Eamon de Valera and the Archbishop of Dublin, John McQuaid. Articles 41.2 and 41.3 of the Constitution inscribed the familial unit as privileged over the rights of the individual. It states:

Figure 3, Amanda Coogan, *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato*, 2008. Performance Still.

Photo: the author.

In particular, 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.³⁵

Implicit in the common good was the service of women in upholding the conservative morals and values of the predominately Catholic Irish Free State. Furthermore, the intense debates about body politics in the 1980s galvanised by the failed abortion and divorce referenda and the struggle to legalise contraception, highlight that women's bodies remained a site of struggle. It comes as no surprise then that the manifestation of memory in Coogan's work is rooted in feminist body politics historically informed by these issues. These performances are often reliant on a physical element and frequently test her endurance and bodily control. Regarding the physicality present in her work Coogan explains: 'the question of pain and endurance is a pertinent one here. The performer goes through the experience demanded by the performance not in a masochistic but hopefully in a shamanistic way.'³⁶ This reference to the role of the shaman in Coogan's work evokes images of healing. The physical performance of memory opens up a space where the past can be reconsidered.

Drawing upon performance art as an intervention into the traditional disciplines of visual art, Coogan positions herself alongside other Irish women artists such as Pauline Cummins, Frances Hegarty, Alanna O'Kelly and Anne Tallentire, whose practices disrupt traditional gendered representations. Coogan's performances also establish solidarity with those whose memories remain peripheral to dominant historical narratives that render women invisible. Psychologist Geraldine Moane argues, 'Solidarity can be an outcome of a shared history of oppression and resistance, a sense of identity with other oppressed groups and the development of common goals and shared ideals.'³⁷ The acts of remembering and forgetting are considered social activities and therefore depend upon shared vocabularies, ideas and representations in order to reconstruct and transmit memory.³⁸ Coogan's practice establishes solidarity between women by specifically locating memory through the bodily experiences of women in *Yellow* and *How to explain the sea to an uneaten potato*. It is within these performances that Coogan demonstrates the potential to shatter enduring hegemonic representations that continue to have a lasting cultural influence.

Coogan's performances trace connections between visual art, feminism and Irish Studies by using memory to evaluate the cultural construction of women in Ireland. Coogan's practice provides interventions into the dominant modes of artistic

production and the representations of women in both Irish art and Irish history. In 'Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference', Molly Mullin highlights the importance of exploring the ways in which knowledge of the past helps to construct gender in the present. Mullin notes that it is crucial to draw connections between non-academic modes of feminist practice such as art. Mullin argues:

It is ... not sufficient to produce only linear, textual narratives of alternative histories...Strategies for developing feminist historical consciousness must also include feminist representational practices, which will vary depending on the specific conditions under which feminist struggles must operate. Although it is not possible or desirable to attain permanent and universally shared meanings, values, or final representations of history, representation, definition, and meaning are still important sites of contest and struggle.³⁹

In this context, the subversive strategies and alternative spaces of the visual arts can provide an area where these ideas manifest themselves. Coogan's interrogation of memory focuses on the bodies of women as the bearers of meanings. Memories performed leave a physical trace on Coogan's body and demonstrates the transformative and possibly emancipatory potential of visual art. Using her own body as a primary site of investigation she explores sexuality, identity and oppression in order to complicate and destabilise historical narratives that exclude or marginalise Irish women. Drawing upon the lived body, Coogan's performances open up a space where memories collapse hegemonic representations reliant on the allegorical use of women's bodies.

About the Author

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