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Caoineadh na mairbh: Vocalising Memory and Otherness in the Early Performances of Alanna O'Kelly

Kate Antosik-Parsons

Irish performance art engages with individual and collective memories to critique, challenge and subvert dominant cultural narratives. Performance art is an ephemeral, process-based practice that is concerned with making art in the 'present moment'. Consequently, memory forms an integral part of the engagement with the documentation of these works, particularly as there is a reliance on the processes of remembering to facilitate viewer interaction with the resulting art object. In the construction of cultural memory, remembering and forgetting are mutual processes that attempt to structure memory by providing cohesion to 'experience, thought and imagination in terms of past, present and future'.[1] The emphasis these processes place on structuring memory into narratives is important because they shape and solidify representations of Irish cultural identities. Repressive historical, colonial and nationalist cultural narratives that employ allegorical female figures like Mother Ireland, an icon that symbolised purity and self-sacrifice, often rendered the realities of women's lives invisible.[2]

During the 1980s, Irish women artists adopted performance art as a way to respond to the gendered politics of the conservative political, religious and cultural climate in Ireland. It was a time period characterised by heated debates about women's bodily and sexual autonomy. Birth control was difficult to obtain without a prescription, despite being made legally available by the Health (Family Planning) Act (1979). The pro-life amendment to the Irish Constitution (1983) acknowledged the right to life of the unborn child as being equal to the life of the mother. In addition, Irish voters overwhelmingly defeated a referendum to lift the Constitutional ban on divorce (1986). Furthermore, feminists challenged the perception of women's maternal responsibilities to the Irish nation as enshrined in Article 41.1.2 of the *Irish Constitution* (1937): 'In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved'.[3] For artists like Alanna O'Kelly (b.1955) Pauline Cummins (b.1949), Mary Duffy (b.1961) and Frances Hegarty (b.1946), performance art enabled them to subvert

dominant cultural narratives while addressing contemporary issues of bodily autonomy, and the economic and political status of women in Irish society.

The oeuvre of Alanna O'Kelly is particularly notable for its sustained engagement with the cultural construction of memory in an Irish context. The historical, religious and cultural Othering of women in dominant Irish narratives has deeply influenced her practice. O'Kelly studied at NCAD (1975-1978) and Slade School of Art, University College London (1985-87). She has exhibited in numerous national and international exhibitions including *Documenta 8* (1988) and the *São Paulo Art Biennial* (1996). She was the recipient of the Glen Dimplex award (1994) in conjunction with the Irish Museum of Modern Art. She was elected a member of Aosdána in 1996. O'Kelly is best known for her elegiac time-based works created during the early to mid-1990s that activated the legacy of the Great Famine. However, it was in a series of early performances that O'Kelly first engaged with memory and the act of remembering by adopting vocal performance strategies. The artist recovered the cultural practice of *caoineadh na mairbh*, or keening as a strategy through which she stripped away the layers of colonial and patriarchal oppression that denied the cultural subjectivity of Irish women. O'Kelly's earliest work to use keening, *Chant Down Greenham* (1984-1988) was inspired by her participation in a protest at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp outside the nuclear weapons facility and Royal Air Force base in Berkshire, England.

In an embodied visceral experience, O'Kelly transformed her protest into performances that fused grief and anger to draw power from silenced cultural memories. Between powerfully measured cries and deeply profound silences, O'Kelly's performances positioned female subjectivity on the margins as a site of power. Furthermore, O'Kelly's keening activated the feminist expression 'the personal is the political' as a realm of lived engagement. This article examines O'Kelly's feminist vocal strategies, arguing that by reclaiming a marginalised oral tradition, her performances negotiated repressive historical narratives and remediated suppressed memories of Otherness to critique dominant constructions of Irish identities.

The first performance of *Chant Down Greenham* (1984) was at the SFX Theatre, Dublin and featured O'Kelly performing a series of cries separated by silences of various lengths.[4] Art critic Dorothy Walker described the performance as: 'an abstract, structured series of keening calls, serial art transformed into pure expressionist sound'.[5] *Chant Down Greenham* emerged as a response to her experience of the Greenham Common

Women's Peace Camp outside the nuclear weapons facility at the Royal Air Force base in Berkshire, England. In September 1981, the protest camp was established in opposition to the decision to base cruise missiles at the site. The women's camp was the largest of the different encampments protesting against the NATO led militarisation.[6] O'Kelly was present at Greenham Common during 'Sounds Around the Base' (1983), a demonstration attended by 30,000-50,000 women during which they made sounds every hour on the hour.[7] The artist witnessed a group of women making sounds akin to keening and, inspired by the power they drew from one another, experimented with her own voice.

The precursors to *Chant Down Greenham* were two performances, a sound performance in the Douglas Hyde Gallery (1983) and collaborative performance with Mary Duffy in March 1984. O'Kelly's experiments with sound were initially informed by Inuit throat singing, a gendered practice in which two women facing each other make sounds into each other's mouths through inhalations and exhalations. O'Kelly's performance inspired by this oral culture was performed in collaboration with Trish Haugh. A photograph documenting this performance depicted the two women at close range as darkened figures with mouths open (figure 1). Although it is not possible to identify the women, their pose and close cropping of the image suggests the emphasis on bodily experience to communicate collective experiences rather than defining individual identities.

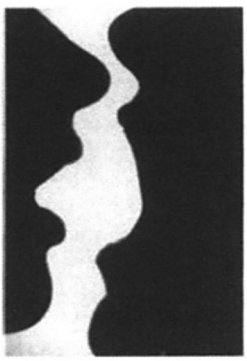

Figure 1. Alanna O'Kelly, *Untitled Performance* (1983), Photograph. Courtesy of Alanna O'Kelly.

In a second performance, O'Kelly and Mary Duffy explored their opposition to nuclear armament in a performance entitled *Realignment*, at the *Make Your Mark* festival held in Belfast.[8] A performance in two parts, O'Kelly and Duffy constructed a spiral out of paraffin soaked rags on the

ground outside the gallery (figure 2). The artists then positioned coloured powder stencils of birds, crescents and circles inside and around the spiral.

Figure 2. Alanna O'Kelly and Mary Duffy, *Realignment* (1983), Performance Still. Courtesy of *Circa Magazine* and Alanna O'Kelly.

The spiral was then set on fire as the artists sang a protest song from Greenham Common, evoking the memory of female solidarity manifested there. Although there is no remaining documentation as to the lyrics of this song, it was most likely one that O'Kelly wrote entitled *Chant Down Greenham*. Reproduced in *Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp Songbook*, O'Kelly is listed as the author and composer of *Chant Down Greenham:*

35 women, campers for peace
Breaking the law
So there'll be no more War.
We won't want your laws
We don't like your cause
We don't fight your wars
Chant down Greenham
We don't want your cruise,
We have life to lose
There's still time to choose,
Chant down Greenham.
So there'll be no more War.
35 thousand Women for peace,
Embracing the base
So there'll be no more War.[9]

After the spiral ceased to burn, the performance continued inside a gallery space. The audience was met with a darkened space that the artists slowly illuminated with candles. O'Kelly then read a written text composed of facts about nuclear armament.[10] Reviewer Anne Carlisle suggested that the tension established in the work was never fully resolved: 'although the intention of the performance was clear – a construction of the "reality" of nuclear war – it became an exercise in the representation of this issue with the consequent loss of emotional content'.[11] The title, *Realignment*, suggested the need to refocus priorities on the politics and dangers of nuclear armament, whilst referencing O'Kelly's earlier performance event *Eve of St. John's Fire* (1983) that was literally and metaphorically about aligning oneself with the earth.

Although *Chant Down Greenham* was initially devised in Dublin, it was in London that it evolved into a lengthy performance of live keening and recorded audio elements. As the work developed for subsequent performances, O'Kelly stood alone in a darkly lit space wordlessly keening against the backdrop of recorded sounds from the peace camp that included women talking and chanting, percussion instruments, silences and in the distant background appeared the sound of military helicopters (figure 3).

Figure 3. Alanna O'Kelly, *Chant Down Greenham* (1985), Performance Still. Courtesy of Circa Magazine and Alanna O'Kelly.

This structure to the performance allowed for the representation of the issue of nuclear armament to be infused with emotional content. At times her cries resounded in direct opposition to the menacing noise of the helicopters, demonstrating 'how those without conventional political power might yet prevail with recourse to a replication of the instruments of power'.[12] These recorded sounds, primarily controlled through an eight-track sound desk, operated during the performance by sound artist Conor Kelly (b.1960), were varied for each performance allowing for the performances to differ in length.[13] This variable aspect to the performances indicates that although each relied on the same basic elements, the performances were unique in tone and duration, meaning that each was truly ephemeral and could only be experienced once.

The keening in O'Kelly's work was corporeal, formed deep within the body and expelled in a tactile aural quality. Unlike the traditional keening, based on lament poetry with its elaborate verses and refrains, O'Kelly utilised a simple non-lingual sound. Her cries lasted approximately thirty-five to forty-five seconds and were punctuated by silences that served to lead the viewer deeper into the work. As the silences occurred more frequently, the viewer became aware of the timelessness sustained in the silent moments. These performances demanded that viewers accompanied O'Kelly through the silence, allowing one to mourn, protest and celebrate together with the artist. Dipping and diving, rising up in a trill like fashion, one was brought on a journey of highs and lows. Her upper ranges emoted anger and protest, while the lower wails were heavy and deep, conveying a great sorrow. The speed of the cry fluctuated, commencing at a moderate pace and climbing to a pitched frenzy, before dropping to long, drawn out syllables, after which the artist was silent, almost profoundly so. It was this final silence that enabled the performance to exist long after it was finished. O'Kelly reflected on the affective qualities of the performance at *Documenta 8* remarking: 'after I performed, there was a long silence and people were quiet. It's often hard though to interpret how a live event has gone. It might be years afterwards that somebody will say something about it'.[14] The different qualities to the voice and the shifting nature of the tone of the keen permitted these performances to address different aspects of memory and identity.

The use of keening in O'Kelly's practice developed from addressing the political and social issues surrounding nuclear armament to a much deeper rooted culturally specific engagement of the voice that remediated memories of Otherness.[15] The practice of *caoineadh na mairbh*, or keening for the dead, was a public lament, wail or mourning cry performed by women in Ireland as part of funerary rites. Keeners were present at wakes

and graveside burials to mark the passing of a life. First documented in the ninth century, it was an oral tradition that combined mourning, storytelling and individual and collective memory.[16] Considered to be a direct address to the deceased person, the laments were in the Irish language and took the form of elaborate poems along with stylised sobbing.[17] Written accounts from British officials and travellers touring Ireland in the eighteenth century represented keening as a crude primitive practice, particularly as these cultural outsiders were shocked to learn that the women were professional lamenters, at times not even kin of the deceased, as is evident in one account that describes the women as 'poor mercenary howlers'.[18] Furthermore, as these observers were unable to understand the Irish language, the complex laments were rendered unintelligible. The incomprehensibility of keening to this audience highlights the Othering of Irish culture and language under colonisation. Indigenous authorities also frowned upon the continuance of the practice, as it was considered to be a vestige of more primitive times. The Catholic Church opposed keening as unorthodox, due to the emphasis it placed on death instead of the Resurrection or the possibility of a Christian afterlife. The respect given to female keeners for their funerary services undermined the authority of male religious figures.

By the late nineteenth century Church authorities had suppressed the practice, although it occasionally resurfaced in Irish-speaking (*gaeltacht*) areas well into the twentieth century. A sympathetic account, written by the Irish writer John Millington Synge (1871-1909), describes the practice on Inis Mór, the largest of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland:

> While the grave was being opened the women sat among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken and all began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs. All round the graveyard other wrinkled women, looking out from under the deep red petticoats that cloaked them, rocked themselves with the same rhythm, and intoned the inarticulate chant that is sustained by all as an accompaniment [. . .].[19]

Synge's description is significant because it highlights the bodily performance of the ritual, along with its emotive aspects. Two well-known paintings, *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child* (1841, NGI) by Frederic William Burton, RHA (1816-1900) and *The Marriage of Strongbow and*

Aoife (1854, NGI) by Daniel Maclise (1806-1870), further suggest the crucial performative embodiment of keening by depicting women with their arms outstretched. In Burton's depiction, the pose of the keener, highlighted by the light from the circular opening in the cottage roof, accentuates the importance of her role in conveying the grief of the distraught family. The Irish Folklore Commission, a body established in 1935 to record and preserve the extensive oral culture throughout Ireland, holds important sound archives that contain several recorded examples of keening from 1941 through 1952, by individuals who were keeners or witnessed keening. However, there was reluctance on the part of the women keeners to perform a lament out of context. One keener went so far as to insist that her identity was withheld from the archives records as it would be deemed inappropriate for her to be identified as a keener given the suppression of the practice.[20] At a later stage of her development of keening, O'Kelly became aware of these recordings and used them to inform her understanding of the origins of the practice.[21]

Alanna O'Kelly's vocalisations did not merely recover the practice of keening but reinvested it as a culturally specific discourse that employed strategic remembering, fusing the contemporary with the past.[22] In doing so O'Kelly highlighted the potential of performance art to remediate dominant cultural narratives by subverting iconography appropriated by traditional media in Irish visual art. In the early 1980s, Neo-Expressionist paintings in Ireland were commanding critical attention, offering uninterrogated male perspectives on the psychological condition of the individual. Furthermore, many of these works solidified certain representations of Irish women as passive, sexual objects. An example of this is Patrick Graham's (b.1943) *My Darkish Rosaleen, Ireland as a Young Whore* (1982), an oil painting that depicts the allegorical Róisín Dubh, from the sixteenth-century political song by the same name, as a prostitute. Surrounded by shamrocks and various political symbols, Rosaleen is dressed in stockings and suspenders with her pubis exposed to the viewer. Performance art offered alternatives to artists by destabilising hegemonies that inscribed gendered historical narratives onto the bodies of Irish women. Through her vocalisations O'Kelly engaged with the seemingly contradictory elements of her own personal and collective Irish identity. The emphasis of performance art as a process-based medium rather than producing a material art object meant that O'Kelly's practice engendered a dialogue about identity, place and memory, traversing complex issues of individual and collective memory and her own gendered experiences as an Irish woman emigrant.

During the 1980s, as Ireland found itself in crisis due to economic recession, high rates of unemployment forced many to emigrate abroad with a significant percentage of the population moving to Britain. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Irish women have remained one of the largest immigrant populations in Britain; a source of cheap labour, they were often employed as domestic workers. *Chant Down Greenham* acknowledged the silencing and cultural invisibility of this important migrant labour population. Like many Irish artists who emigrated for better educational and career opportunities, O'Kelly moved to London in 1985 to attend the Slade School of Art. While in London, she became increasingly attuned to the hesitancy of British people to discuss what she termed as the 'Irish Question' or the complex nature of the political and cultural relations between England and Ireland. These implied tensions were further magnified by several terrorist campaigns carried out in Britain as a result of the continuing sectarian violence of the Troubles (1969-1994), a period of ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland. In the 1980s, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a paramilitary organisation seeking the reunification of the island of Ireland, perpetuated high profile bombings, including the Hyde Park bombing (1983), the Regent's Park bombing (1983) and the notorious Brighton Hotel bombing (1984), the latter a failed attempt to assassinate British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.[23] Although nothing suggests that O'Kelly supported Republicanism, assumptions about the political leanings of the Irish led to the misconception that most individuals were sympathetic to Republican violence.

The negotiation between O'Kelly's understanding of her Irish identity and subsequent experiences of Otherness as an Irish woman artist abroad resulted in a dislocation that was the catalyst for her interrogation of Irish identities. Performance art provided a framework to confront the ambivalent feelings that emerged as a result of this dislodgement, and the temporality inherent in the medium allowed O'Kelly to simultaneously acknowledge, mourn and protest the marginalisation of Irish women. The complexities of these nuanced identity relations were further compounded as a consequence of colonialism. As art critic Lucy Cotter argues, the lack of Irish cultural authority regarding the perceived identities of many emigrant artists has allowed them to be subsumed into British art, adding another layer to the Othering of Irish identity.[24] The significance of this was not lost on O'Kelly, who along with fellow artist Anne Tallentire (b.1949) sought to counter this cultural erasure of identity by establishing Irish Women Artists Link (IWAL), a networking organisation for Irish artists working in England.

As a performance strategy, keening established a discursive space where memory, mourning and protest were inextricably located. Firstly, the performance mourned the loss of a fixed identity for the artist and the historical absence of subjectivity for women in Irish culture. As a funerary act, keening served to focus the uncontrolled grief of the gathered mourners. In *Chant Down Greenham,* O'Kelly channelled this anguish, imbuing her performances with a cry that was both powerful and vulnerable. Of this she stated: 'when you cry you are letting go. If you really let go and you're in a supported situation, your inner culture can handle that [. . .] and you can let go and reach another level'.[25] In performance, both artist and audience can be rendered vulnerable in moments where emotions are unrestrained. Keening in *Chant Down Greenham* manifested this vulnerability to focus the audience on the power of grief and to establish resistance. The protest in the performance, though inspired by her opposition to nuclear armament, started as anger towards the unacknowledged legacies of colonialism and nationalism. However, it crescendoed to something much larger, building upon both historical and contemporary memories, as O'Kelly's vocalisations articulated a resistance to the historical and cultural erasure of women. Finally, remembering in this work emphasised the complexity of nuanced and staged identities. The artist privileged her experiences of ambivalence to undercut the perception of fixed identities.

The performance and subsequent re-performance of *Chant Down Greenham* numerous times between 1985-1988 within the context of different exhibitions demonstrates the possibility of this work to address the multiplicity of memory.[26] It also existed as a recorded performance for *Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of the Mind – some new Irish art* (1985), an exhibition curated by feminist critic Lucy Lippard that toured various locations in the United States. A later version of the recorded performance appeared in tape-recorded format for *Sound Moves* (1988), an anthology of works broadcast on British Telecom.[27] The fact that these performances existed at different times in different formats suggests that memory in O'Kelly's work is fluid and mutable. On the importance of performance art in a specific location, O'Kelly remarked: 'It's often got to do with a sense of place, as opposed to a sense of space, and place always brings with it a history and a context and a lot of different histories perhaps'.[28] Performed in Dublin at the *Guinness Peat Aviation Exhibition* (1986), *Chant Down Greenham* directly addressed the weight of history, mourning the suppression of traditional Irish culture and emphasising women's contemporary struggles for bodily and sexual autonomy. In the presence of a largely international audience in Kassel at *Documenta 8*, it affirmed the

potential of performance to undercut modernist narratives by empowering marginalised subjectivities on the periphery with a refusal to be silenced. At the Pentonville Gallery in London, *Chant Down Greenham* asserted the refusal to assimilate into the dominant culture and celebrated the power of staged identities as an Irish artist and an Irish woman. Through these vocalisations, *Chant Down Greenham* recognised the contradictory and unstable nature of these identities in different locations. This was most evident in the context of the London performances. Art historian Fionna Barber noted: 'for many Irish people emigration to England also involves a conscious eradication of their original accent as a means of survival'.[29] In this context, O'Kelly's use of the keen was a direct refusal to be culturally silenced as an Irish migrant. Jean Fisher argues that: 'O'Kelly's keening liberates the voice from the specularised body and reinvents it as political agency, alluding, among other things, to a refusal of the pacification of Irish identities effected through English colonialism'.[30] By staging identities within specific contexts, these performances drew strength from the collective experiences of loss and cultural erasure.

The power rooted in the performance of *Chant Down Greenham* hinged upon the unifying nature of collectivity. It is important to distinguish between the collective located in traditional keening performances and the solidarity evoked from collective actions at Greenham Common to pinpoint how collectivity was evoked in O'Kelly's performances. Traditional keening centred on a formulaic structuring and participation of numerous individuals within the ritual. One woman occupied the role of chief mourner and established the rhythm and tone of the lament, while secondary women joined the lament at various times offering either an exchange or a chorus of sobs and wails.[31] Although these women occupied the primary roles during the lament, the general mourners were equally important as they functioned as witnesses. These performances served to activate collective memory and unify grief. At Greenham Common, women united in a show of solidarity with one another to activate their political agency. The notion of collectivity in *Chant Down Greenham* situates itself between these two activities. Lyell Davies commented: 'It is a wholly emotional response to Greenham, rejoicing in the collectivity felt by those participating and not a work concerned with the military and political occurrences which catalysed the protest'.[32] In Davies's observations, collectivity is aligned with a participatory solidarity; it is something active, a type of power that is a result of staged, collaborative actions. Alex Mason alluded to this collectivity in his experience of the performance at the Pentonville Gallery (1987):

> Sitting on the floor in near darkness (as out at the camp) one experiences the struggle. It is a powerful, chilling performance where use of lighting at times suggests menacing headlights and where the sound of motor vehicles surrounds one only momentarily and is lost to the haunting cry. During this performance mounting tension releases an energy full of hope and expectation and above all of celebration.[33]

The collective for Mason is a resolution of tension that results in a celebratory energy; in a sense this collectivity is a triumph of sorts. In *Chant Down Greenham* while the artist solely performed the keening, the audience performed the function of witness and participant. Although O'Kelly positioned herself as the primary mourner when she initiated the cries, the silences were shared. The connection established with the audience emphasised mutuality in the performance. It is the acknowledgment of this shared encounter between the artist and audience that creates a celebratory space where commonality is located while different memories and identities activate and assert themselves temporarily.

The silences in *Chant Down Greenham* recall *4'33* (1952), the controversial avant-garde work of experimental composer John Cage (1912-1992). The work consisted of three moments, the duration of each indicated by the opening and lowering of the piano lid. Pianist David Tudor first performed *4'33* in Woodstock, New York on August 29, 1952. During the performance Tudor sat virtually motionless at the piano, performing only the actions noted in the score. For Cage silence and sound were equally important in composition: 'Of the four characteristics of the material of music, duration, that is time length, is the most fundamental. Silence cannot be heard in terms of pitch or harmony: it is heard in terms of time length'.[34] Many present thought the performance was a hoax. The idea of a pure silence is extremely powerful, because it is unobtainable, but the absence of sound was clearly problematic to those who attended the performance expecting to hear composed music. When sound is anticipated and silence continues in duration, it creates a desire to fill the absent space: 'It can remind us that it is up to us to turn our minds towards the silence, to recognize it as we encounter it, even if only for a moment. The silence that Cage spoke of is something that is accessible to each and every person at any time'.[35] The shared silences of *Chant Down Greenham* were made more powerful by the haunting sound of the keening. The moments after the cries heightened viewers' expectations of sound, making them more aware of the moments it was absent. The audience also perceived the

presence and absence of sound in a corporeal way as the keening resonated throughout the ears and chest. The absence of sound is akin to the gaps and silences of memory. Long durations of silence appear to evade measurement rendering them timeless. As the performances of *Chant Down Greenham* oscillated between sound and silence, or in effect, presence and absence, these shared experiences of timelessness articulated an elusive quality to memory. It is here where the temporality of performance as a medium is at its most profound.

Temporality in performance refers not only to a specific action at a specific time, but addresses important moments of interconnections with the audience. There are instances in live performances that nearly defy description when the established distance between artist and audience recedes resulting in a slippage. O'Kelly alludes to this encounter in performance saying: 'It is different when you do something live, [. . .] you are on the edge of something, and a lot of the time it is very uncomfortable [. . .] but when it does work, something that is live and on the edge is very powerful'.[36] This slippage is an exquisite shared moment between artist and audience, and is deeply profound because it establishes intimacy. In *Chant Down Greenham,* the intimacy of these encounters, manifested in the penetrating silences, reflect both timelessness and vulnerability. Commenting on *Chant Down Greenham*, O'Kelly has said: 'These live performances were about searching for truth, hope and empowerment'.[37] In performance, it is the experience of vulnerability that highlights the fragility of identity and memory. Empowerment in these performances was a result of acknowledging vulnerability and remaining open to the fragility of identity and memory. Yet, as this instance recedes, it becomes clear that implicit in the nature of performance are also the processes of erosion and decay.

O'Kelly's performances of *Chant Down Greenham* are characterised by self-reflexivity, meaning that they acknowledge and consciously make reference to the processes that drive the performance, namely the inhalation and exhalation of breath that enables the keening. Self-reflexivity is also evident in relation to memory as evoked throughout this series of performances, because it serves to reconstruct the past while acknowledging the present moment.[38] According to Jan Assmann:

> Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance.[39]

Reflexivity is present in the interpretation of cultural practices such as proverbs, rites and rituals. These are self-reflexive as they draw dialectically upon memory to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticise, censure and control the ways in which a society represents its self-image. Furthermore it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system.[40] In performance art reflexivity draws awareness to the various processes through which the visual arts imagines and mediates memory through the condition of being present in the moment. Reflexivity in *Chant Down Greenham* acknowledges that the construction of identities are reliant on processes of refiguring and reformulating memory in an effort to interrogate the construction of gendered and sexual identities.

The focus on the ephemeral in performance has far reaching implications for O'Kelly's practice and more broadly on the continuing importance of performance. What remains of *Chant Down Greenham* are traces of the performance; half remembered images and emotions held in the minds of those who witnessed the work, written accounts that cannot possibly address all aspects of the experience and sound fragments on an old cassette tape that are inaccessible because the technology used is now largely obsolete. A viewer might not remember specific details about the intricacies of the performance, however one may recall very clearly the feeling of that intimate encounter. The distance from the actual performances highlight the various processes of remembering and forgetting, and it is in this element of temporality that the medium of performance holds the greatest potential to emphasise the complexities of fragmented identities and the acknowledgement of difference.

The performances of *Chant Down Greenham* established a discursive space through which the artist interrogated contemporary and historical issues in order to posit female subjectivity that critiques dominant notions of Irish identities. Through it the artist addressed the personal and the collective experience of loss: the loss of culture to repressive colonial and patriarchal narratives and the loss of a fixed understanding of identity. In these performances history, memory, and identity converge. The emphasis of performance as a medium of process allows for the possibility of a slippage between artist and viewer, exposing vulnerabilities that undercut static perceptions of identities. Furthermore the intimacy of these moments reveals an important non-hierarchal relationship between artist and viewer. Keening remains an important strategy in O'Kelly's practice, resurfacing in various performance and video works including *No Coloring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* (1992), *Sanctuary/Wasteland* (1994), *Omós* (1995), *A'Beathú* (1996), and the more recent *Burial of Patrick Ireland* (2008), to

interrogate subjectivities. Through temporarily privileging marginalised identities, O'Kelly demonstrates the potential of performance art to transform individual and collective memory and to destabilise cultural narratives.

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reconceptualises Irish cultural identity and narratives using the original poem as a starting point.

16 Patricia Lysaght, '"Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp": The Lament for the Dead in Ireland', *Folklore* 108 (1997): 65.

17 Angela Bourke, 'The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process', *Women's Studies International Forum* 11.4 (1988): 288. One of the best-known examples existing of keening is *The Lament for Art O'Leary* (1773) an orally composed four-hundred-line poem by Eibhlin Ni Chonaill upon the death of her husband.

18 Patricia Lysaght, 'Hospitality at Wakes and Funerals in Ireland from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century: Some Evidence from the Written Record', *Folklore* 114.3 (December 2003): 406.

19 John Millington Synge, *J.M. Synge's Guide to the Aran Islands*, ed. Ruth Wills Shaw (Old Greenwich, CT: The Devin Adair Company, 1977) 53-54.

20 Interestingly, a few male storytellers recorded examples for the Folklore Commission. This aspect adds another layering to the traditional gendering of the practice.

21 In conducting research on O'Kelly's keening, the author used these examples to gauge her level of engagement with traditional keening.

22 Deepwell 139.

23 Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 513-15.

24 Lucy Cotter, 'Art Stars and Plasters on the Wounds: Why Have There Been No Great Irish Artists?', *Third Text* 19.5 (2005): 590.

25 Deepwell 138-39.

26 *Chant Down Greenham* was performed in several different high profile exhibitions and galleries including the Franklin Furnace Gallery, New York (1987) and *Documenta 8* (1988).

27 *Sound Moves* was an anthology of sound works by women artists compiled by Sharon Morris and Michelle Baharier and coordinated by Projects UK. The works, accessed by telephone, were broadcast on British Telecom from 4 May to 6 September 1988. O'Kelly's contribution was a specially recorded version of *Chant Down Greenham* that lasted approximately ten minutes.

28 *Passage in Performance*, DVD, directed by Heather Thomason, 2006.

29 Fionna Barber, *Off the Map; Chisenhale Works*, exhibition catalogue (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1987) 1.

30 Jean Fisher, 'Reflections on Echo: Sound by Women Artists in Britain', *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Rickett (London: Phaidon Press, 2001) 249.

31 Angela Bourke, 'More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry', *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 162.

32 Lyell Davies, 'Review: Sound Moves, Telephone Sound Works Organised by Projects UK', *Circa* 40 (1988): 46.

33 Alex Mason, 'Pentonville Performances', *Irish Arts Review* 4.2 (1987): 67.

34 James Pritchett, 'What Silence Taught John Cage: The Story of *4' 33*', 8 April. <http://www.rosewhitemusic.com/cage/texts/WhatSilenceTaughtCage.html>.

35 Pritchett.

36 Heather Thomason, *Passage in Performance* (2006), DVD.

37 Deepwell 138.

38 Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,' *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 132.
39 Assmann 130.
40 Assmann 132.