



DIFFERENCE FOSTERED





Type of output:
Performance
by
Sandra Johnston

Cover and left:
Difference Fostered, Kilmainham
Gaol, Dublin.
Photo credit: Joseph Carr

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
TIMELINE	5
INTRODUCTION	6
RESEARCH CHALLENGE	7
CONTEXT	8-9
MATERIALS	10
METHODS	11
DISSEMINATION	12-13
REFERENCES	14
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	15

SUMMARY

Difference Fostered (DF) was a collaborative, eleven-hour performance with Dominic Thorpe, developed in response to the challenges of commemorative re-engagement with traumatic cultural memory.

The project aimed to develop performance strategies for re-positioning historic memory in contemporary contexts and address ideas of commemoration through ephemeral actions. *DF* also extended Johnston's long-term research into empathetic encounter as a transformative form of political testimony.

Commissioned for Future Histories, marking the centenary of the Easter Rising, *DF* explored Irish national history alongside a contested communal memory at Kilmainham Gaol. Directly contributing to an influential tradition of site-responsive performance art (Kaye 2000), the action refused to perpetuate over-literal symbols or grand narratives, instead unfolding 'present' Irish identification with the Easter Rising through an interpersonal dialogue between artists from different backgrounds and oppositional historical perspectives. Johnston's approach to conveying trauma is through embodied acts of commemoration that engage an 'Empathetic Vision' as explored in depth by Bennett 2005.

The durational approach of the work extended Johnston's ongoing working association with Thorpe – involving strategies of reconfiguring explicit political content through non-verbal, sustained gestures. Preliminary research, undertaken through a series of site visits revealed the prison's past capitulation to colonial power. Situating the work in the Governor's Quarters made this historical abuse of power palpable, and also enabled a contemporary political reframing by encompassing a window view of Dublin's present financial sector.

This centenary project confirmed the capacity of contemporary performance art to interact meaningfully with Ireland's history, an outcome recognised by a major Arts Council Ireland award. The event accrued an audience of 400 viewers, and has been widely disseminated through a catalogue and a film documentary screened at conferences and European festivals, including *Networking Performance Histories*, at Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Zurich and NGBK Gallery, Berlin.

TIMELINE

2015 Dec	2016 Mar	2016 Apr	2016 May
<p>5th December 2015 Johnston has discussions with curator Áine Phillips.</p> <p>22nd December 2015 Site visit 1, Johnston met with Future Histories curators Áine Phillips and Niamh Murphy, as well as the museum Kilmainham Gaol curatorial team.</p>	<p>12th March 2016 Johnston/Thorpe meet and discuss collaborative approach.</p> <p>18th March 2016 Submission of proposal plan.</p>	<p>7th – 19th April 2016 Rehearsal Phase 1, Johnston and Thorpe do site visits, research in museum collection, have discussions with museum team, and rehearse at Fire Station studios.</p>	<p>13th – 14th May 2016 Rehearsal Phase 2, site visits, purchase materials, rehearsals in Fire Station studios.</p> <p>19th – 20th May 2016 Install phase in Governor's Quarters.</p> <p>21st May 2016 Future Histories event, 12-hours (including install/de-install) with 16 artists working simultaneously throughout the Gaol.</p>

Below: *Difference Fostered*, Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. Photo credit: Joseph Carr



INTRODUCTION

Difference Fostered was a performance artwork created collaboratively with Dominic Thorpe as part of Future Histories, a 12-hour live art event on the 21st May 2016 involving sixteen Irish artists performing concurrently throughout the historically charged site of Kilmainham Gaol.

The research emerged through a series of site visits enabling discussions with the museum historians, and exploring archival material. It resulted in a work that responded through disciplined, iterative actions to the particularity of that location.

The purpose of the collaborative approach was to problematise the prevalent commemorative narratives by testing ideas of received memory between two artists from backgrounds of oppositional historical perspectives.



Right: *Difference Fostered*,
Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.

Photo credit: Joseph Carr

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The context of Kilmainham resonates with powerful historical associations, in particular it was the site of the incarceration and execution of the leaders of the Irish republican movement during the 1916 Easter Rising. The purpose of the collaboration was to test the potential for responding to this state sponsored centenary event, in ways that might reposition and problematise the accepted historical narratives surrounding the 1916 Rising, with a more multi-layered approach to representations of traumatic social memory.

The challenge was to produce a temporal intervention – using processes of improvisation, simple objects and focused gestures, to enable a direct and often intimate relationship with audiences, illuminating the specific and difficult history of the Governor’s Quarters as a site of immense colonial power. In this regard, the specific room with its habitual function of formal ceremonial gatherings offered scope for the use of objects such as the dining forks and champagne glasses to indicate through the actions a certain subversion of civility and decorum.

Right: *Difference Fostered*,
Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.

Photo credit: Joseph Carr



CONTEXT

Johnston and Thorpe selected the location of The Governor's Quarters which is inside the Gaol archive, among the artefact collections. The strategic position of this room encompassed a powerful viewpoint over the Gaol's entrance gateway and former site of execution. On the other side, the view from two of the windows look out over major corporate and civic developments. Certain actions performed by both artists subtly referenced this outer environment and encouraged the audience to momentarily pause and observe the view.

The work Johnston and Thorpe make together contributes to a lineage of practices that investigate the role of 'testimony' within performance art through unmediated, improvisatory processes. Actions made in the live moment gradually activate the space between them as they establish trust, interdependency and risk. This intimacy of correspondence - often through concentrated simultaneous movement, in turn, becomes a means of responding outwards, to the particularity of the site and complexity of its historical narratives.

Kaye 2000 and Jackson 2011 have explored the diverse strategies of artists who locate their work in precise ways to galvanise audience recognition of contesting perspectives arising from the control of space. *Difference Fostered* is part of this field of enquiry where the artist is both respondent to received historic narratives, yet also involved in the act of reinterpreting place, according to affective, somatic-based information and response.

Right: *Difference Fostered*,
Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.

Photo credit: Joseph Carr



These methodologies and concerns are the legacies of site-specific performance, practiced as acts of endurance and advocacy in a trajectory of UK/Irish practitioners notably including Stuart Brisley and Alastair MacLennan. Despite working within the stringent safety limitations of a national monument, Johnston/Thorpe were nonetheless able to produce a rigorous and uneasy encounter of endurance performance which extended this particular area of practice as research.

Johnston adapted and innovated the slow processing of traumatic memory as a form of empathetic communication (Bennett 2005) within her dialogue with Thorpe giving rise to individuated perspectives, yet retaining a sense of connectedness and will to develop meanings together, and in relation to the audience.



*Difference Fostered,
Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.*

Photo credit: Joseph Carr

MATERIALS

62 champagne glasses,
300 dining forks,
dining table,
2x blue chairs from the 1940s,
1 blue table cloth,
sheets of plastic,
2x plastic bowls,
1 black plastic bucket,
rags,
2x respirator masks,
2x safety eye goggles,
box of latex gloves,
metal cutters,
1 hammer,
sand paper.

Found objects-
birds nest in fireplace,
ribbons,
scraps of paper,
earrings,
paper clips etc in floor boards.

Right: *Difference Fostered*,
Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.

Photo credit: Joseph Carr



METHODS

The context of the Future Histories event presented significant challenges for Johnston/Thorpe in terms of communication, since the performance had to address the expectations of a diverse international audience moving through the extensive Gaol site, largely at their own pace and volition. These logistical considerations formed the core structure of the work as iterative, involving a score of a few sequences of agreed actions, which could be repeatedly returned to, but nonetheless were open and liable to change. Throughout the 11-hours duration the selected objects migrated around the room and became altered by these repeated interactions, such as: the prongs of the forks being cut off with metal cutters and then used as nails to attach objects to the table. A number of objects were found in the fireplace and between floorboards which were gradually imbedded into the actions and 'contaminated' the initial score.

Johnston and Thorpe were invited to use the Fire Station Artists' Studios project space for a series of rehearsal days. This enabled experimentation with materials and the development of physical gestures that were mutually meaningful. Based on these rehearsals they decided not to use any literal symbolic devices or gestures that could be too easily assimilated into the conventional heroic narratives that surround the site. Instead choosing to focus on artefacts and documents in the museum collection (forks, nails) which were used as prompts for actions that could be developed from the perspective of civilians incarcerated as a result of the social turbulence and inequality, not the martyrs of the Rebellion. Our interest lay in how the Gaol as location continues to encapsulate a larger social perspective of Irish identity and entitlement.



Right: *Difference Fostered*, Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. Photo credit: Joseph Carr

DISSEMINATION

Future Histories was commissioned as part of the National Project in ART: 2016, funded by the Arts Council as part of a year of Centenary events. The event was prominently positioned within this programme and was attended by more than 400 people.

2018 Networking Performance Histories, NGBK Gallery Berlin, (February).

2018 Networking Performance Histories, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, (December).

2019 Re-Framing the 90s, Department of Art History, University College Cork.

2017 Europe & The Social, BRESAL National University of Ireland, Galway.

2017 Research in Real Time: Performance as Research, O'Donoghue Centre for Drama Theatre & Performance NUI Galway.

2016 Future Retrospectives, Arts Council Symposium reflecting on the ART 2016 programme.

2016 Irish performance art, Theatre Research Conference, 2016 Waterford Institute Technology.

2016 Collaborating women performance artists, Home II: 2016, Waterford Institute of Technology, 21 October.

2016 Future Histories, Bodies Politic Symposium, Maynooth University 25 February.

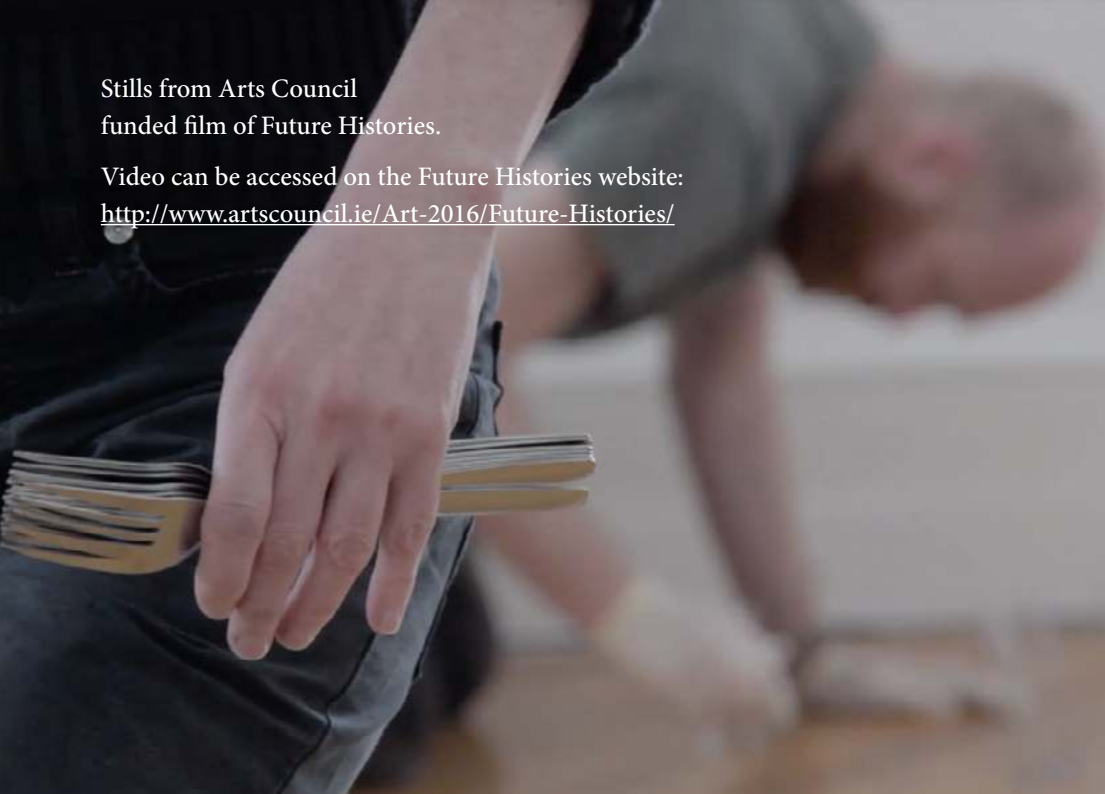
2016 Live Art Development Agency, London.

Right: Screenshot of the catalogue cover, distributed free to the audience, contextualizing the event.



Stills from Arts Council
funded film of Future Histories.

Video can be accessed on the Future Histories website:
<http://www.artscouncil.ie/Art-2016/Future-Histories/>



REFERENCES

Future Histories, catalogue/programme, not available online.

Bennett, J. (2005) *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford University Press.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, Md., London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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

Kaye, N. (2000), *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Phillips, A. (2015), *Performance Art in Ireland*, Intellect and Live Art Development Agency.

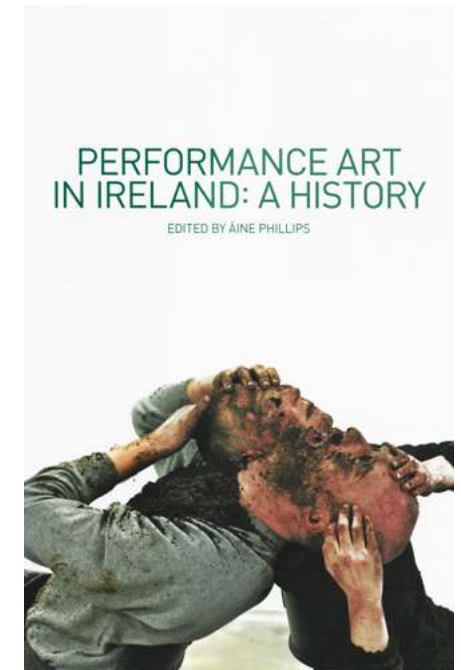
Ray, Gene. (2005) *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11 (Studies in European Culture and History)*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Saltzman, L. (2006) *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art*. University of Chicago Press.

Numerous artworks by MacLennan and Brisley are applicable to this research including:

Alastair MacLennan, *Bled Edge* (1988), *Wave to Waive* (2007), *Knot Naught* (2003).

Stuart Brisley, *Moments of Decision/Indecision* (1975), *ZL636595c*, (1972), *Mirror (Lustro)* (2018).



Right: The Publication entitled, *Performance Art in Ireland: a History* edited by Aine Phillips features Johnston/Thorpe on the front cover and discussion of their practices occurs in various essays within.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Future Histories was curated by Áine Phillips and Niamh Murphy as part of their Performance Art Live Foundation initiative. P.A. Live is dedicated to and invested in promoting live art practices in Ireland.

<http://www.artscouncil.ie/Art-2016/Future-Histories/>



ART:2016
OPEN CALL

View photo caption

Future Histories

Share this page

Niamh Murphy and Áine Phillips will curate a 12-hour live art and video event with 16 acclaimed Irish artists at Kilmainham Gaol to respond to its iconic historical associations with the 1916 Rising. The invited artists, from north and south of the border, who work in performance, live art and video will respond to the 1916 centenary, creating contemporary perspectives on our shared past, conflicts, crises and passions in relation to the Rising and its greatest monument, Kilmainham Gaol.

The artists are Danny McCarthy, Brian Connolly, Debbie Guinnane, Helena Walsh, Sandra Johnson, Fergus Byrne, Francis Fay, Katherine Nolan, Pauline Cummins, Ciara McKeon, Dominic Thorpe, Méabh Redmond, Dr. Laura McAtackney, Michelle Browne, Alastair McLennan and Sinéad O'Donnell.

Curator(s)	Áine Phillips and Niamh Murphy
Artist(s)	Michelle Browne, Fergus Byrne, Brian Connolly, Pauline Cummins, Francis Fay, Debbie Guinnane, Sandra Johnson, Dr. Laura McAtackney, Danny McCarthy, Ciara McKeon, Alastair McLennan, Niamh Murphy, Katherine Nolan, Sinéad O'Donnell, Méabh Redmond, Dominic Thorpe and Helena Walsh.
Dates	10am to 10pm, 21 May 2016 Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin
Partners	Performance Art Live Foundation

Right: Screen shot from the Arts Council Webpage.

