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# Difficult Conversations



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# Taking Positions

Alastair MacLennan, Brian Connolly,  
Dominic Thorpe and Sandra Johnston

## Introduction

Performance artists from the island of Ireland have consistently made work responding to a range of situations of conflict, oppression and trauma, not least work related to The Troubles, gender based violence, and institutional abuses (Philips, 2015; Sverakova, 2001). The following article has been developed from a collective interview with journalist Sarah Travers and four key practitioners of performance art; Alastair MacLennan, Brian Connolly, Sandra Johnston and Dominic Thorpe (Connelly et al 2022). During the interview, the concept of 'difficult conversations' was considered from various perspectives of performance art practice. Interview transcripts have been taken as a starting point to continue the discussion and develop a text that further elaborates on key ideas around the role and scope of performance artists' social contributions within conflicted societies and polarised discourses.

The position of the artist, as explored here, is understood to resonate with several philosophical points of reference related to ethical responses to situations of violence. The post-enlightenment ethics of Emmanuel Levinas proposes that ethical responsibility for others is grounded in an ineluctable relationality so fundamental to existence as to be considered a 'first philosophy' (Levinas, 1996, p. 161). This perspective on ethical responsibility echoes the Buddhist thinking on relationality embraced by Alastair MacLennan and others when responding to decades of conflict and violence within Northern Ireland (MacLennan & Snoddy 1988, Watson & Hunter 2003, Johnston et al 2021). A characteristic of much performance art from Ireland has been the creation of gestures that defy the separation that can result from violent actions and attitudes. The motivation to refute violence through the potentially provocative gestures of performance art also resonates with Butler's

contention that non-violent action is 'a force or strength that is distinguished from destructive violence, one that is manifest in solidarity alliances of resistance and persistence' (Butler, 2022, p. 202). In this way, making performance art can be understood as a political stance that exceeds notions of passivity.

In order to introduce and explore the contribution of performance art to difficult conversations, this article values and centralises the experiences and perspectives of performance art practitioners. Among the issues discussed are the complexity of violence and atrocity, the inter-relational nature of performance art encounters, and the potential contribution of artists to positive societal transformation. In addition, the embodied, contextual and relational nature of performance artwork is emphasised by images from the work of MacLennan, Connolly, Johnston and Thorpe.

## Addressing complexity

The layered dynamics of performance artists' gestures can be intended to both offer solidarity with those who suffer because of atrocities, at the same time as addressing the complexity of social, political and cultural contexts in which that violence and suffering is occurring. In the process, performance artworks made in response to violence and resulting traumas can present a challenge to problematically simplistic and divisive framings of what can be multi-faceted issues and situations. This section underscores how performance artists frequently work against points of resistance to formulate personal responses to violence through suggestive and exploratory gestures. As such, making artworks is understood not as an articulation of complete understanding of issues but a process in which the artist can identify, reflect upon and elaborate their own position in relation to others.



**Figure 1.** Sandra Johnston and Alastair MacLennan *Avert/Avow*. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin 2022. Image: Fergus Kelly (2022).

**Dominic Thorpe (DT)**

I try to develop strategies that respond to and attempt to understand certain subjects and questions for myself, and then communicate that process of attempted understanding and resulting grasp of complexity to others in so far as is possible. However, the intention is not necessarily to make statements as if I have a complete understanding of the dynamics of what has happened or is happening in a certain context.

This is not to say that having a position is not important. It can be vital to take a position in terms of social justice and abuse. It is crucial to look at the suffering of victims, to stand with victims, and reject oppression and violence. But I also want to acknowledge that these are frequently complex issues. For example, there can be a vast spectrum of culpability and involvement that must be looked at. This can involve a sensitive navigation of difficult issues.

**Sandra Johnston (SJ)**

In some situations, it is not viable to make performance art, where the encounter is so ethically charged and the alienation so extreme that it is impossible to make anything. In those moments it is just about stillness and acknowledgement of the stalemate. It is not that you have the answers, you are in the process of forming your response and, since the nature of the response is improvised, how it unfolds in front of an audience can appear hesitant and symptomatic of the tensions existing in the moment (Figure 1).

It is important that the work is not prescriptive and remains sensitive to the fact that you are working mainly with acts of suggestion, moments of encounter, and not in the business of telling others how to live. You are often vulnerable because you are putting yourself on the line and into that sort of space of intervention where there is generally no separation, stage or barrier between you and the audience – it can be incredibly close and intimate.

**Alastair MacLennan (AMaL)**

You can have a core value or principle that you don't compromise, but still be very flexible and adaptable with forms it may take. The vulnerability Sandra also speaks of is very important in performance art, especially if you're doing it spontaneously on the street, which is different from acting a piece of pre-rehearsed theatre in a controlled, indoor theatre space. Performance art is 'live' and anything can happen in the 'now' moment. You embrace vulnerability as part of the work. If deemed appropriate, we can modify, alter, and adapt how forms of the work evolve.

**Brian Connolly (BC)**

It is about interaction and that depends on the individual and I think in most cases you don't know the reaction you are going to get. It can depend a lot on the kind of day a person has had or what is happening in their life. You have to be mindful and sensitive. I think artists do tend to be aware of those things.

## Connections

Performance art routinely enables direct and unmediated encounters between artists and audience members. Artists can position themselves in relation to audience members in ways that act on and articulate what is understood to be a fundamental connectivity and interdependence that exists between people, including within contexts where conflict and divisiveness otherwise appear to dominate. The ethics of such work pivots on artists and audience members committing to spending time together in ways that may enable new questions and deeply felt connections to surface.

**AMaL**

Before I got involved in performance art, I became intrigued by how an 'outsider' could be an indicator of social and cultural malfunction in society and how this being could become a societal 'signal', as such. A main aspect of early rituals I developed was about holistic thinking, trying to overcome binary contradictions in how we live and split things up, trying to find ways to tap into actuality, as it is, before conceptual splits appear in our thinking.

I'd perform in public spaces and become a purposive personal manifestation of such issues (Figure 2).

There are as many different ways to make performance art as there are artists making it and each practitioner may well have a different sense of his or her responsibility to self and others within society. I feel balance is important, not either/or thinking, but 'both/and' inclusiveness, finding ways to embrace and overcome separation and difference.

One of the real problems of our time is we've split, through divisive, oppositional thinking, politically, socially, and culturally, ethics from aesthetics. If ethics and aesthetics are not integrated, art (so called) can be vacuously superficial. Early on an older student I was at college with said to me that my art suggested the fullness of emptiness. I was intrigued by this statement. A few years later I began going to Zen retreats and practising with Zen koans (problems to meditate on) such as how to realise your true nature, while artmaking. It's a way of merging art and life, so instead of art needing to be on a canvas, art's dimensions can be the time you have and the space you're in, with the responsibility of making your whole 'life' art, not as a concept, but as an ongoing, daily actuality of interfused relationships.

## SJ

Quite often when travelling you would be working with organisations that have a strong activist ethos behind their projects, so you are not completely unprotected or isolated. Making work maybe in a museum one day, in a rural situation the next day, and in a shopping mall the next day. It is very eclectic, and you are continually accumulating knowledge through conversations in the street and with the other artists and the organisers. You build a sense of where you are and what is appropriate regarding concept and behaviour. And what you are bringing with you is this physical language that you are constantly evolving in your body, a kind of empathetic connection beyond the verbal. I think that most performance artists are driven by a strong desire to communicate, to find a point of interconnection and interdependency with audiences.



Figure 2. Alastair MacLennan. Target. Belfast 1977. Image: Photographer unknown.

**AMaCL**

I completely agree with the idea of working with, not talking at. Having travelled a lot over the years I notice that people in diverse parts of the world are not so different. Specifics of politics and daily life may vary substantially, but the core aspects of what makes us human are the same. You see 'sameness in difference' wherever you go.

**DT**

In terms of sharing space with audience, I have made quite a lot of work responding to institutional child sexual abuses and the cover up of this. One work, *Glass Mouth*, was in an Anglican Church in Folkstone in England in 2017 (Figure 3). Some people were in the church to pray, others were working there, and some were there for the performance. A core element involved standing in front of a small altar with a large sheet of glass and working with sandpaper to repeatedly scrape into the glass. Because the glass was being scratched, I couldn't see anybody very clearly and they couldn't see me very clearly. A priest, who indirectly questioned the validity of the work, nonetheless, came and sat with it, enabling a very potent moment of sharing between us. This work exposed a proximity to each other, that he and I both acknowledged with our presence. In many ways what motivates and charges such work is an understanding that we are all connected. You are trying to find and expose a constant and underlying interconnection and even dependency with individuals that exists prior to instances and attitudes of violence and division.

**SJ**

I am working a lot with young people and noticing that mental health issues and the relationship between trauma and creativity has never been more openly discussed, which is important for me as an artist who began working with trauma thirty years ago. I would see performance art as a form of self-healing. And to now be working with young people who are actively making this equation of considering their mental health and recognising their sense of estrangement and separation or fragmentation from society,

suddenly they are asking good questions about holistic living. I am impressed at their resilience and this inner reflective process that is happening, so I take a level of hope from that. But the opposite is also true in terms of aspects of distractedness and division through virtual interactions. There is a dilemma in how these polarities of exploring human connection develop.

**Transformative potential**

This final section explores understandings and intentions regarding the transformative potential of performance art. Transformative potential is understood here to largely relate to the cumulative positive reverberations of ongoing and evolving practices, as opposed to more easily quantifiable one off actions.

**AMaCL**

Within institutions the term 'impact' seems to be important regarding accessing research funding. However, the cumulative effects of 'drip, drip' community work over several years may be far more beneficial than a one off 'impact' talk of conflict resolution.

**DT**

I think about the idea of 'usefulness' more often than 'impact'. There are social, political, and cultural moments where a certain collective notion or way of being is breached in a seismic and irreversible way, but not before some underlying slow-motion process of transformation creates the conditions for that breach. The question can be how to usefully and positively contribute to or direct that inevitable transformation.

For example, while there is no subject that is off limits, there can be less productive moments to explicitly address certain issues. This is a navigation of difficult conversations. Whether in a particular situation or moment in time you work within certain parameters or push beyond them, is an ethical consideration underpinning what you do and why. Motivation is crucial and difficult conversations have also to be thoughtful.

**SJ**

It is not a situation of wanting to shock people into an actuality of reckoning. Confrontation tends to entrench attitudes and opinions. It is more about enabling a different kind of meeting point.

**DT**

I often make work that isn't explicit in revealing what it is I am intending to address. This can, in part, be understood as a productive ambiguity that facilitates wider possibilities and audience interpretation. It can also be about the gradual unfolding and engendering of a difficult sort of sharing that can bring things into view that may otherwise be difficult to see. For example, I have made works addressing the perpetrator trauma that can exist within collective trauma experience. If perpetrators' experiences of various forms of violence are excluded, how are we to create a productive means of working through generations of atrocity and trauma and break cycles of violence?

**SJ**

In my early work I began to insert myself into public space – but very discretely, invisibly. There was also recognition that women at that time in Northern Irish society were largely invisible. You were either a target for specific reasons, or you were literally invisible and living under the kinds of paramilitary

surveillance that was happening in working class areas at that time. So, I started to make performance as an antidote to that sensation of worthlessness. I would say that my practice really developed out of that idea of coming forward and slowly becoming visible. I would do actions in the middle of the night, in alleyways, on roadways, in waste grounds. The tipping point was a series of killings in the early 90s when five women were murdered. One was called Margaret Wright and her body was dumped naked in a wheelie bin after she was tortured. This was directly addressed in the work *To Kill An Impulse* (1994), contextualised in a review by Robinson (1995) This turning point in my life forced a recognition of my female gendered body and what it might mean to work in the public context through gesture and precise positioning.

**BC**

Thinking politically, bravery is necessary in Northern Ireland, but whether we have reached that point, I doubt at the minute, because there is so much investment in keeping the polarity for the maintenance of particular parties. They need the duality and the opposition for their own right to exist and in my opinion that needs to change for things to move.



**Figure 3.** Dominic Thorpe. Glass Mouth. Holy Trinity Church Folkestone UK 2017. Image: Andrea Abbatangelo (2017)





**Figure 4.** Brian Connolly. Market Stall. Trhovisko Zilinska Market Bratislava 2016. Image: Erica Hudcovicova (2016)

**AMaCL**

I am very conscious that many people within polarised contexts don't go to galleries or museums. Art doesn't affect their lives directly. Many are also seduced by the banalities of social media and populist thinking. So, it's important for performers now to take their art onto the streets and into communities, to query this strategised conditioning.

**BC**

I was part of a project in Poznan Poland in the late 90s. They had an exhibition in the city gallery, and I was told I wasn't included in it for some reason. This provoked me to think about making work in the city in a different way. I decided to work in a marketplace, trying to sell satirical objects or ideas to people, without announcing it as a performance (Figure 4). This work has subsequently had many iterations. To give examples of the kind of activities, in many such works I have tried to sell Western power using a UK plug. I also sell centimetres at 50p a centimetre. I would actually cut the centimetre and people could have their favourite number, so you would go away with one centimetre. It is a ludicrous idea to cut up a wooden metre ruler but, in a way, it is an intriguing idea to have your own centimetre, because you need as many centimetres as you can get as far as I am concerned. I also try and sell countries of the world, relating to the question of what is of value, or second-hand teeth with a buy one get one free offer. These things were about the idea of power and structures or economy. I pretty much plant seeds. I also offer experiences. You can buy a product, or you can have an experience for free that is about seeing differently. For example, I have a member of the public seated and give them a pair of glasses which are called 'virtual reality goggles', a pair of altered glasses with one lens looking up and one lens looking down. You are simultaneously looking up at the sky and you are looking down at a book in front of you.

Your mind is seeing the two images combined. I realised that the 'Market Place' was a really important context because people are coming to find things, so they are actively really looking, they want the best deal or whatever, but they actually find an artist doing something which they don't expect. They are receptive to it, so that just sparked off a whole genre for me of practice. My role is to interact with the public with a light humorous touch, leading them through ideas that question value, power, and authority.

It is necessary to point at things and hopefully open up awareness or discussion and I think politically we are in a very dangerous time, where power is going to too few hands. Social media is aiding this. There are dangers where as a race and a species we have to be aware of the implications of the choices we make.

**Conclusion**

Centralising the experiences of artists reveals a shared understanding of how the exploratory and propositional gestures of performance art carry an ethos of observance, adaptability, and responsivity that emerges through a reflexive convergence with place and communities.

**Complexity**

Performance artworks that stand in a clear and solid rejection of violence have also been understood as suggestive propositions seeking to recognise and respond to the complexity of human conflict. Works that are staged in defiance of simplistic framings of what are often multi-layered and multi-faceted situational dynamics also illuminate the range of direct and indirect actions and divisive rhetoric that contributes significantly to the conditions of atrocity.

**Connections**

This is always simultaneously a test of one's own presence and proximity to others and atrocities occurring. Questions of responsibility arise for artist and audience members, as it is particularly intrinsic to live performance art for the artist to become a presence that explicitly illuminates implication in what transpires in the immediate situation.

The issue here is around accepting a level of responsibility for how the various gestures and reactions that emerge within a performance action might impact positively or negatively upon those watching and, by extension, the social situation(s) we exist within.

As well as the fact of being physically present within such work, the artist has also, by extension, been understood as a social presence in proximity with others within public space. Working live in this way emphasises an ethical connectivity and the impossibility of constructing any single autonomous body as a neutral, objective entity.

### Transformative potential

Finally, for the artist, in certain ways the success of making work can be explored against the proposition of not actively and visibly responding to situations of oppression and division. In simple terms, doing something may at least prevent from contributing to the silences and inactions that can precipitate violence. Importantly, the transformative potential of performance art was also particularly understood to relate to the progressive impacts of repeatedly developing and sharing performance gestures. Where the persistent practice and contextualising of art can contribute to gradual positive transformations in the conditions of atrocity. By taking positions on societal issues there is potential to resist complacency in self and others, to actively learn from communities, to engage, remind, confront, and to be challenged in return.

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