



# Artistic Proclamations

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## Competitions and Commissions

National identity is a rather narrow remit, but it is worth asking what gets refracted when national celebration is illuminated by artistic competition. Aligning awards with official enthusiasms might bring publicity, fresh eyes, ears and hearts to artworks. It perhaps also provides a context in which people might reflect upon the works. It certainly invites commentary because works are measured against the expectation that they speak to, about, or on behalf of a nation. When the winners of the Arts Council of Ireland's call to 'invigorate the Irish imagination' were announced, and nine entries from among 258 applications were each offered a portion of the 1m allocated, the editor of the *Irish Arts Review*, for example, belittled one of the winners by comparison with W.B. Yeats' great poem of commemoration, *Easter 1916*.<sup>1</sup> John Mulcahy's ire was drawn by *In the Shadow of the State*, curated by Create (Ireland) and Artangel as a series of performances and discussions through which Sarah Browne and Jesse Jones proposed to

examine how institutions, laws and practices of the State have impacted on the female body. Since the formation of our state, women's bodies have experienced and endured the deeply physical impact of State ideology. This has included industrial incarceration (the Magdalene laundries); obstetric violence (symphysiotomy without consent or admission of wrongdoing); the legality of marital rape (until 1990); reproductive injustices (too many horrors to name).<sup>2</sup>

Mulcahy was disappointed both with medium and theme. As for medium, he wanted the state to commission a permanent work of sculpture, painting or tapestry, and not the programme of installations, discussion and

'immersive-performance' works projected by Browne and Jones.<sup>3</sup> As for theme, he noted that the artists proposed 'exploring statehood from the perspective of the female body', whereas Yeats had focused instead upon 'dead, male, but highly relevant bodies, "MacDonagh and MacBride and Connolly and Pearse"'.<sup>4</sup>

Mulcahy implies that the act of commemoration itself serves only to be commemorated in its turn. *In the Shadow of the State* would, regretted Mulcahy, leave 'nothing permanent – except what remains on video'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, of course, Browne and Jones' question about the 'relevant bodies' in the context of 1916 had reverberations of its own, even when incarnate only as a proposal. The desire for permanence is a nostalgia about fixed meanings and an interpretation of 1916 that should be both evident and authoritative, but, as Pierre Nora has argued, in modern times, the repetition of myth is always subject to the critical challenge of historical revision.<sup>6</sup> Mulcahy may prefer the myth of a purely male 1916, but others will find the sexism in it, and will find it too in Yeats' own poem where the only female historical figure, a 'relevant body', is criticized as forgoing her feminine duty to emotion in favour of the hard-hearted militancy more proper to a male. Not having been executed, Constance Markievicz does not get transformed back into 'terrible beauty', and is not named in the final verse but yet she haunts these lines:

That woman's days were spent  
In ignorant good-will,  
Her nights in argument  
Until her voice grew shrill.  
What voice more sweet than hers  
When, young and beautiful,  
She rode to harriers?<sup>7</sup>

When, on 28 October 2015, the Abbey Theatre launched its own 2016 'Waking the Nation' programme of ten plays, only one was written and only three directed by women; of the new commissions for the programme, all were given to men. The Director of the Abbey Theatre, Senator Fiach Mac Conghail, promised that 'our intention is to interrogate rather than celebrate the past'.<sup>8</sup> The promotional video for the commemorative season presented an account of 1916 in the words of Helena Molony, 'Abbey Theatre actress and 1916 rebel', and read to camera by current Abbey actors Kate Stanley Brennan, Hilda Fay and Nyree Yergainharsian.<sup>9</sup> Rarely can form and content have been so divergent. On Facebook, set designer and arts manager Lian Bell 'just did a quick tot up' of the gender balance of playwrights and directors for '[t]he big symbolic centenary programme to commemorate the

symbolic start of the nation at the cultural institution most identified with that part of our history', and in a tone of righteous indignation concluded: 'But, like, REALLY?'<sup>10</sup> Mac Conghail was challenged and he responded on Twitter: 'All my new play choices are based on the quality of the play, form and theme. It's my call and I'm pleased with the plays I picked for #wtn'.<sup>11</sup> As for the gender balance, he protested that none of the works he had commissioned from women had worked out, but, in his words: 'Them the breaks'.<sup>12</sup> In the previous eight years he had programmed women playwrights for about one-eighth of the plays put on at the Abbey, three-quarters of those were for the smaller of the theatre's stages.

Within a couple of days, the discussion on social media was extensive and on 30 October, theatre director Maeve Stone tweeted: 'Waking the Feminists'.<sup>13</sup> The next day Lian Bell adopted it as a hashtag, yielding also the irreverent #wtf (what the fuck?) in response to the Abbey's invitation to tweet about the Abbey programme under the hashtag #wtn: 'Huge FB activity re @AbbeyTheatre & @fmacconghail's male-heavy #WTN programme. Will start tweeting quotes here now. #WakingTheFeminists'.<sup>14</sup> Both national and international press and TV began to take note. By 9 November, the Board and Director of the Abbey Theatre had accepted that their initial response was inadequate, that gender equity needed to be addressed and, conceding the need for a discussion, offered the main stage of the Abbey as a venue for the afternoon of 12 November.<sup>15</sup> The tickets were claimed in less than seven minutes, and a crowd in the foyer and bar also heard the thirty speeches by women from the stage of the Abbey. Following this, Mac Conghail, from the floor, read a prepared statement that admitted his unconscious bias: 'This experience has presented a professional challenge to me as a programmer and has made me question the filters and factors that influence my decision-making'.<sup>16</sup>

The Abbey episode repeated earlier failings and previous attempts to address gender bias, such as followed the publication in 1992 of the first three and male-heavy volumes of the *Field Day Anthology*.<sup>17</sup> The Waking the Feminists movement showed gender bias to be general across Irish theatre, but worst among those receiving the most state funding.<sup>18</sup> Institutions both in the theatre and in film were challenged to monitor and produce policies to address gender equity, and the Abbey published its own Guidelines for Gender Equality in August 2016.<sup>19</sup> The movement collected international accolades including 'a Lilly Award in New York – the first time the female participation and achievement prize went to a person or group from outside the US'.<sup>20</sup> After a year in which the movement secured commitments to gender equality from various arts bodies, including the seven best-funded theatre organisations in Ireland, Bell reflected: 'I got a sense of what it

must have been like to be part of a revolution'.<sup>21</sup> The equality agenda of James Connolly and Constance Markievicz was clearly there in the Proclamation but, as Olivia O'Leary put it in a piece for *The Guardian*, 'the document's message became stifled by a conservative culture obsessed with female chastity and purity'.<sup>22</sup> In this respect the focus upon the Proclamation during the Centennial gave men and women a chance to rekindle the idealism of the socialists and feminists who had joined the Rising, and to campaign for gender equity within arts institutions.

## Proclaiming Freedom

What of the works themselves? In what ways does the cultural space opened around national anniversaries incite and welcome creativity? I want to consider one such public commission that made room for the Proclamation in national celebration. In March 2015 An Post commissioned Valerie Connor, educator and curator, and Ruairí Ó Cuiv, Public Art Manager for Dublin City Council, to prepare a curatorial brief for 'proposals for public art for an internal courtyard' in the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin.<sup>23</sup> The work might be from any of the 'contemporary art practices', including both performances and temporary installations, and should make a '[c]ontemporary connection with the 1916 Proclamation and the commissioning context'.<sup>24</sup> The budgets offered for projects were between 10,000 and 50,000. One of the two successful offers was from the Dublin Dance Festival (DDF) for a set of performances in a number of the spaces within the GPO. After a further call for dance-works, and following the selection of six pieces by the DDF, choreographer Liz Roche was brought to the project as Director; she oversaw the thematic continuity of the pieces and their placing within the GPO.<sup>25</sup> *Embodied* comprised 'six new dance solos by female choreographers working in Ireland', '[c]alling attention to the role of women as initiators of change within Irish society'.<sup>26</sup> Three times daily during the period 20–22 April 2016, groups of fifty enjoyed the dance performances of *Embodied*, being led through six locations within the buildings and grounds of the GPO.

As audience members, we began at the front of the grand hall abutting O'Connell Street, and Jesse Keenan's *In Her Supreme Hour* showed us 'how women are forced to adjust and change, physically and vocally, in order to be seen and heard in our male dominated society'.<sup>27</sup> The backing track for Keenan's solo shared snatches from the Proclamation including 'seizes that moment' and 'she strikes', reminding me not only that the Irish people were feminized as the abstract nation, Ireland, but also, with Keenan holding various shapes, that women in public, just like Madonna in *Vogue*, must

always 'strike a pose'.<sup>28</sup> The title of the piece quotes the Proclamation, from its final sentence: 'In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called'. There are twenty-three pronouns referring to Ireland in the Proclamation, ten are neuter, including the three here, but thirteen are feminine, justifying Keenan's choice for her title. Following Keenan's performance, we were directed further back within the main hall, where Liv O'Donoghue issued *The 27<sup>th</sup> Manifesto*, with extracts from twenty-six political orations by women, 'a collation of speeches and ideals'.<sup>29</sup> As we gathered in the space, she sat behind a desk franking the envelopes containing her manifesto, and then passed them to us before she stepped up to a glass screen upon which were projected images of her dancing. O'Donoghue then inscribed a large white X upon the screen, making me think of women's voices under erasure but also of the suffrage claim in placing a cross on a ballot paper.

After this we went into a side-room, where Sibéal Davitt and Tristan Rosenstock presented *Fógraím/I Proclaim*. This piece, in three parts, followed the narrative of the Rising more closely than did any of the others. Over a soundtrack with huffing and pushing rather in the manner of a steam engine, overlain with electronic beeps like a telegraph transmitting morse code, Davitt began with tentative dance steps, looking around nervously as an announcement appeared as a projection onto the back wall: 'Volunteers take possession of the Telegraph Office in DN and all links have stopped in consequence'. The dancing was interrupted at times by a whistle until the whistle shrieks were ignored and the dancing picked up pace, while on the wall behind Davitt letters aggregated to form a message: 'Irish Republic declared in Dublin today. Irish troops have captured city and are in full possession. Enemy cannot move in city. The whole country is rising.' This first part seemed to show, in the words of the Proclamation, a movement that 'patiently perfected [its] discipline' (the drilling that is perhaps implicit in the commanding whistle) before 'striking in full confidence of victory' (the faster pace and the concluding gesture with arms aloft). The second part took the form of an amusing parody of a radio magazine programme, with Davitt being asked by Rosenstock what exactly she was up to with the Proclamation. In response to his questions, she would stand up, tap out in morse-code the answer and vocalize the morse-code dots and dashes, as dits and dahs. The screen behind eventually spelled out 'comhionannas' (equality), leaving the interviewer responding sarcastically to this plea for equality: 'You're not asking for much are you?' Davitt is reduced to an exasperated scream. The final part of the piece, following the Proclamation, works with



Figure 1. Sibéal Davitt in *Fógraím// Proclaim*, by Sibéal Davitt. Part of *Embodied*, directed by Liz Roche for the Dublin Dance Festival; commissioned by An Post's GPO 'Witness History', curated by Valerie Connor and Ruairí Ó Cuív. (Photo: Luca Truffarelli, 2016, used with permission of Dublin Dance Festival.)

loop tapes of tap to build up a soundscape against which increasingly frenzied dancing can produce a sort of delirium of rebellion, a defiant proclamation of freedom, until Davitt freezes, extends arms forward in a pleading gesture and then, laughing hysterically, falls to the floor as if shot. This is a fairly literal translation of the desperate defence of the GPO, followed by surrender, and then the laugh that was Davitt's nod to what she sees as Pearse's 'reckless masochism', welcoming his execution (Fig. 1).<sup>30</sup>

Language is the core of this piece, as Davitt told me: 'The first thing about the solo [is that it] was about communication'.<sup>31</sup> The final message of the first section was the morse-code message sent out by the rebels, which we could hear on the soundtrack. This message was sent out from the Wireless School of Telegraphy, at the corner of Abbey and Sackville streets just down the street from the GPO. Whereas radio transmission in those days was directed to a specific receiver, this one was thrown onto the airwaves and repeated for about an hour in the hope that there might be someone out there to tune in and receive this declaration. In fact there was, and the news reached the US newspapers. This innovative use of radio, engineered by Joseph Mary Plunkett, meant that James Connolly's defiant and vainglorious message was the world's first radio broadcast.<sup>32</sup> This was a new form of communication for a new circumstance, a modern world, and Davitt saw parallels with the Irish neologism, *poblacht*, for republic, likewise a new world needing a new word: 'I was drawn to the idea of how we communicate something new and create a language for new ideas'.<sup>33</sup> The Proclamation was the first Irish republican manifesto to use the Irish language at all. Several of its seven signatories were fierce advocates of the Irish language but, perhaps surprisingly, only two of them put the Irish version of their names to the document (Seán Mac Diarmada and Éamonn Ceannt). Irish is otherwise confined to the banner heading in block capitals (POBLACHT NA H EIREANN) and there is no attempt to adopt Irish orthography, even to the extent of reducing the stand-alone 'H' to a lower case. Thus, one of the few Irish words that was used on the Proclamation was that new one for 'republic', which had been brought into the revolutionary movement by Mac Diarmada who, wanting an Irish name for the reading groups he was organizing through the Irish Republican Brotherhood, had approached his friend Liam Gógán, a graduate in Celtic Studies from University College Dublin:

The term 'poblacht', one of the most resonant in the language, was coined and first used by Liam S. Gógán in an address to fellow students at University College Dublin in 1913. 'Ba é a thugas do Sheán Mac Diarmada, mar aistriú ar *republic* le haghaidh a chuid Clubanna na Saoirse, agus ar an gcuma sin dheim sé an chéad fhocal d'Urfhógra na Cásca.' [*It was*

*the word I gave to Seán Mac Diarmada as a translation of 'republic' for his Freedom Clubs, and that was how it came to be the first word in the Easter Proclamation.]*<sup>34</sup>

The modernity of Irish is one aspect of communication in this dance, but alongside the promiscuous productivity of language, the piece also asks about its reception. By converting her body into a tool of physical communication, Davitt can present the Morse-code tap as a form of subliminal communication: 'I'm really interested in dance being an instrument'.<sup>35</sup> We are asked to think about new words for a new world, *poblacht* for republic in 1916, and, although not a new word, *comhionannas* as a word given new currency by the Marriage Equality Referendum, and worn as a badge by people with relatively little Irish: 'Imagine being back in 1916 and viewing the word *poblacht* for the first time. How would you feel about that; a new word come out that we had to get used to'.<sup>36</sup> But presenting this novelty within the Irish also runs counter to its marginalization as a language of a regressive, disappearing Ireland. Davitt's first tongue is Irish. Her mother is a traditional musician and her father was an Irish-language poet. *Fógraím/I Proclaim* finds a place for the modern world within the Irish language but, in communicating in dits and dahs, Davitt also presents to us a modernity that most of us cannot immediately apprehend, and in that sense we would be like the Irish speaker taken to an English-speaking town, such as Dublin. We would have to learn to reach out from our language to our new situation, just as the rebels allowed themselves to dream with *poblacht*, and now today with *comhionannas*: 'When your first language is a language your nation doesn't speak, sometimes you feel voiceless. When the dance you do is [seen as] a niche dance, it's like *listen man*'.<sup>37</sup> And so the language can stretch and renew, just as might the dance, not only by forcing the feet to make a dance from the arrhythmia of the telegraphic message, but also by including as steps within the improvised sean-nós, the jazz contractions and body popping popularized by Michael Jackson: 'The reason I started dancing was Michael Jackson. He's my absolute dance hero [. . .] All through my childhood I learned all the dances'.<sup>38</sup> So these steps, then, become part of a body memory fed also by steps seen and then practised from the example of older sean-nós dancers. There is a very political sense of fun about this engagement with tradition, its own proclamation of freedom, the freedom of a tradition to renew itself within a modernity it also shapes.

## Insurgent Women

Upstairs in the GPO, and to a soundtrack of Óscar Mascarenas' beautiful baritone, Jazmín Chiodi assembled, balanced upon, and insinuated herself within, a makeshift barricade. Commenting upon this piece, *The endless story*



of trying to make new out of a single self, Liz Roche remarked that while rebellion begins as a concept 'everything becomes real when the barricade is made'.<sup>39</sup> A barricade is not only to protect but is a platform for a revolution: 'In the geography of revolution, a barricade is the front line of action, in the same way that the proclamation is the frontline of concepts'.<sup>40</sup> Chiodi took on many roles: with the large white gloves beloved of performers from Al Jolson to Bob Fosse, she recalled for me a construction worker of the 1930s confidently stepping along girders while building a New York skyscraper; then, wrapped in bandage-like material, she seemed to be tying herself to the barricade in the manner of Odysseus bound to the mast and facing the sirens; and then, emerging from the swaddling as from a pupa, all elegance, she was like a diva from the opera. Even if all the specific associations here are merely my own, the contrasts in persona were evident. If there is a new self under revolution, it must be motile and multiple.

Half of us were then brought outside while others enjoyed Luca Truffarelli's video installation, *Here and Through*. Out on the rooftop terrace, I heard mumblings and went over to a wall and looked down into a courtyard space where Olwen Fouéré and Raymond Scannel performed Junk Ensemble's *Walking Pale*. It began with Fouéré smearing and dribbling black oil over her back. This might be gun oil,<sup>41</sup> the lubricant of violence, as if the woman makes herself into munition, but it also marked her back, making visible the scars of lashes or the stumps of angelic wings torn away, the shoulder blades jutting up as white peaks amid a tracery of grease, bringing to mind the tarring before feathering of the bodies of the Catholic women vilified for consorting with British soldiers in Northern Ireland, or making flesh the stain of the sins,<sup>42</sup> the sackcloth and ashes, that Catholic Ireland associated with dangerous women. By fiat or regulation independent Ireland dissolved women's right to work, and even suspended their sovereignty over their own bodies; women truly survived only in the shadow of the state. The notion of women as at, or below, the limit of citizenship is, for me at least, also evoked by the title: the woman being beyond the Pale of full citizenship and as she moves through the fair land, a visible reminder of these limits, and in that sense a walking embodiment of the Pale. This liminal creature, dressed in white, smeared in black, seemed to be wrestling, almost beast-like, as Fouéré backed towards us up a narrow corridor to the head of a long chiffon drape, which was weighted down at one end with iron spoons. Taking up the other end of the cloth she wrapped it around her shoulders as a mantle, and, shuffling and boxing, while incessantly muttering, Fouéré strained to drag her cape back down to the far end of the corridor, leaving behind a spoor of spoons, shed serially from the tail of the cloak. Over this was a soundtrack of strain and effort, but also of beauty, with Fouéré

aspirating the seventeenth-century Irish poem 'Táim sínte ar do thuama', translated by Frank O'Connor as 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave'.

The central images here reference a feminist-socialist revolutionary, Helena Molony, who, as editor of Ireland's first woman's newspaper, ensured that *Bean na hÉireann* (Woman of Ireland) covered both fashion and revolution, and who once described the paper as 'a mixture of guns and chiffon'.<sup>43</sup> The performance claimed a space between the two, with the martial oil at one end and the decorative material at the other. The contradictory subject position of the revolutionary woman was likewise referenced by the spoons, at once a domestic object weighing down a radical female, but, in Molony's case also the tool with which she tried to break through the walls of Kilmainham Gaol, dislodging two blocks before she was discovered.<sup>44</sup> Even the poem has its ambivalence for, while Sinéad O'Connor's canonical performance of Philip King's song version of 'I am stretched on your grave' gives us an achingly beautiful plaint, with the bereft lover courting death and organic reunion ('It's time we were together | For I smell of the earth | And am stained by the weather'), in fact, the poem was clearly the proud boast of a man who had loved a virgin child and in celebrating both his restraint and her purity had himself turned suicidal: 'Calling out to the air | With tears hot and wild | My grief for the girl | That I loved as a child'.<sup>45</sup> The virgin child is not an obvious icon for a radical woman, it draws more upon the idealized image than the organic reality of women,<sup>46</sup> yet, as Olwen Fouéré explained to me, the sound of the words contributed powerfully to the mood of the piece (Fig. 2).<sup>47</sup>

Molony rejected stereotypical femininity and insisted that capacity not gender determine her role in the revolution, recalling that 'part of our military duty was to knit and darn, march and shoot, to obey orders in common with our brothers in arms', and she responded acerbically to repeated questions about the role of women in the Rising: 'I felt they might as well ask me what did the tall fair haired men do in the wars and what did small dark men do. [. . . T]hey did [. . .] whatever they were capable of by aptitude or training'.<sup>48</sup> In her private life she resisted the social pressures to pass as heterosexual, and spent most of her adult life cohabiting with other women.<sup>49</sup> Molony is a most suitable subject for a work that celebrates the Proclamation. She was one of a group of three radical women which decided that, on the first anniversary of the Rising, they should 'get out the proclamation, and proclaim it again', so they had facsimiles printed and then pasted them up around Dublin.<sup>50</sup> As an actor as well as an activist, her restless shade agitates *Walking Pale*, ironically recalling her words as used in the Abbey Theatre's commercial for its men-only commissions: 'We saw a vision of Ireland, free, pure, happy. We did not realise this vision. But we saw it'.<sup>51</sup>

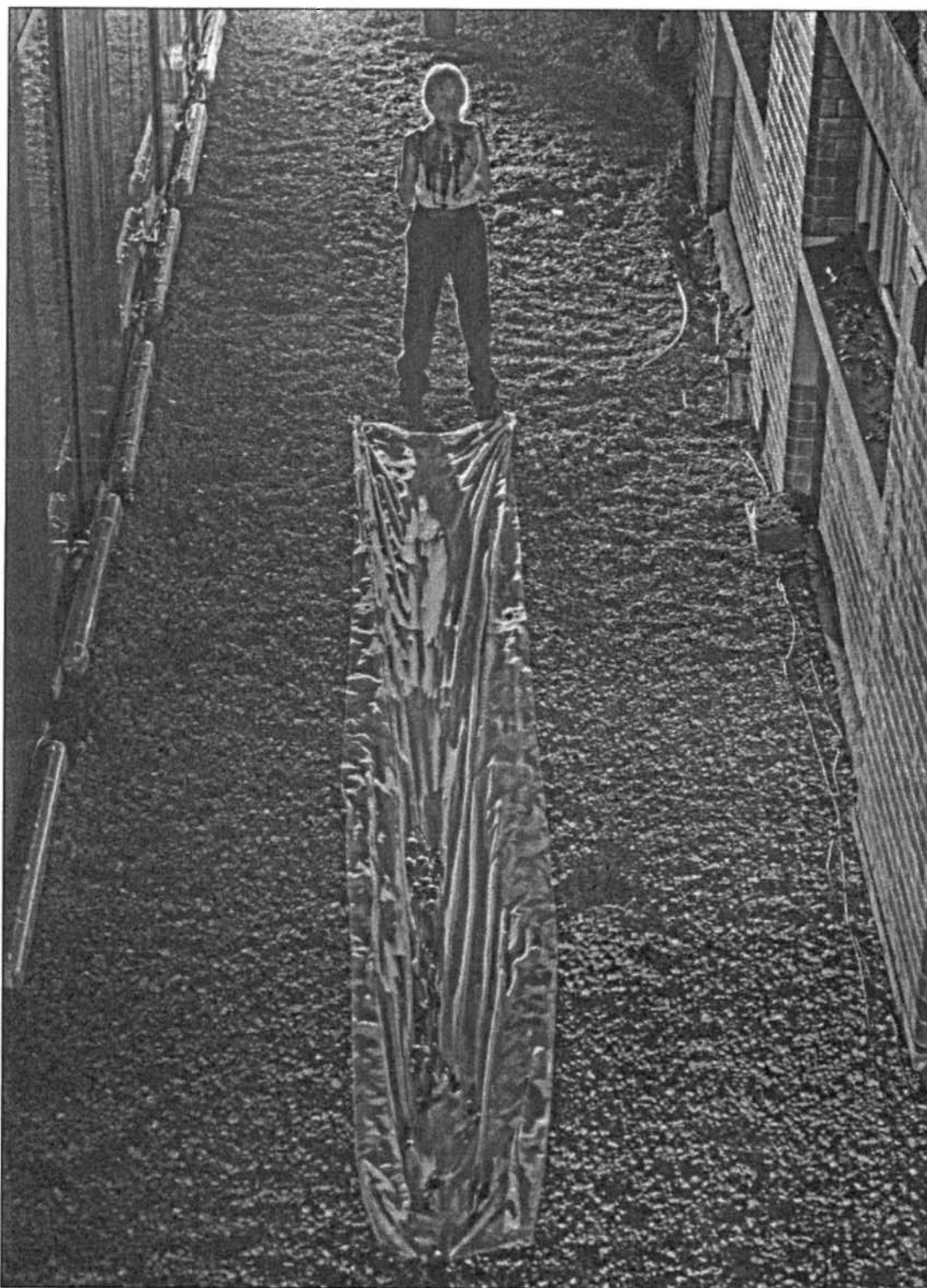


Figure 2. Olwen Fouéré in *Walking Pale*, by Jessica Kennedy and Megan Kennedy (Junk Ensemble). Part of *Embodied*, directed by Liz Roche for the Dublin Dance Festival; commissioned by An Post's GPO 'Witness History', curated by Valerie Connor and Ruairí Ó Cuív. (Image by Luca Tuffarelli 2016, used with permission of Dublin Dance Festival).

From there we took our seats on a circle of chairs around Emma O’Kane as she performed *160 Voices*, which included some of the anonymous responses from women using the modern GPO when they had been asked: ‘[W]hat are you willing to risk to improve your life and have your voice heard in 2016?’<sup>52</sup> We were given responses and told to read them aloud as and when we wished, while Emma danced before us. Some of these texts were sad, many were very moving, and a good few suggested that insurgency might yet spark in modern Ireland. There was a plea for economic fairness in many of the offerings, a plea that I did not find reflected in the official ceremonials of commemoration. In turning back to the Proclamation, then, O’Kane gave voice to a hunger for justice beyond mere formal equality. The energy of the protests around charging for and privatizing water found an echo in *160 Voices*.

## Proclaiming Again

Liz Roche, the director of *Embodied*, believes that in response to the public commissions for 2016, artists ‘made work that they cared about and for audiences they cared about, they wanted people to feel something’.<sup>53</sup> She argues that, as artists: ‘a lot of work that we make is questioning society, [. . .] so an event such as a commemoration when it comes, is just a more concrete or recognised context from which to be making work – because, for me, it’s always about place and belief and history and memory in some shape or form’.<sup>54</sup> The An Post call asked for responses to the Proclamation that would suit the very place where it was given and this invited an embodied response: ‘They were very excited with the idea that dance could provide physical proclamations and they defended and supported the transient nature of such events to those who maybe felt a more long-term or concrete response would be more appropriate’.<sup>55</sup> Roche also thinks that a proclamation is not entertainment, not something to be received merely on one’s own terms: ‘Why can’t you be told? [. . .]. There is often an unspoken agreement of sorts between an audience and a contemporary dance maker that the audience is at liberty to free associate, and make any meaning they wish from what they are seeing/experiencing, and in *Embodied* this was still the case in some ways, but the concept of a physical proclamation is a very direct intention and therefore I think it’s a different way of being with an audience. Instead of “Well [. . .] as long as you’re comfortable, you can feel anything you want during this dance performance”, it’s actually saying, “Well you have to feel this”’.<sup>56</sup>

There was an urgency about the pieces in *Embodied*, and it clearly met the challenge of the cultural space that President Michael D. Higgins draws out, where the arts might ‘shape and challenge us, give us pleasure, help us

to know who we are and where we are going: their distinctive, creative power is an essential feature of our consciousness and conversation'.<sup>57</sup> Political commissions incite that conversation, making the social contract both visible and vulnerable, and allowing some artists once more to nourish what E.P. Thompson celebrated as 'the utopian nerve of failure'.<sup>58</sup> 'Fail better', wrote Beckett, and we might yet.<sup>59</sup>

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