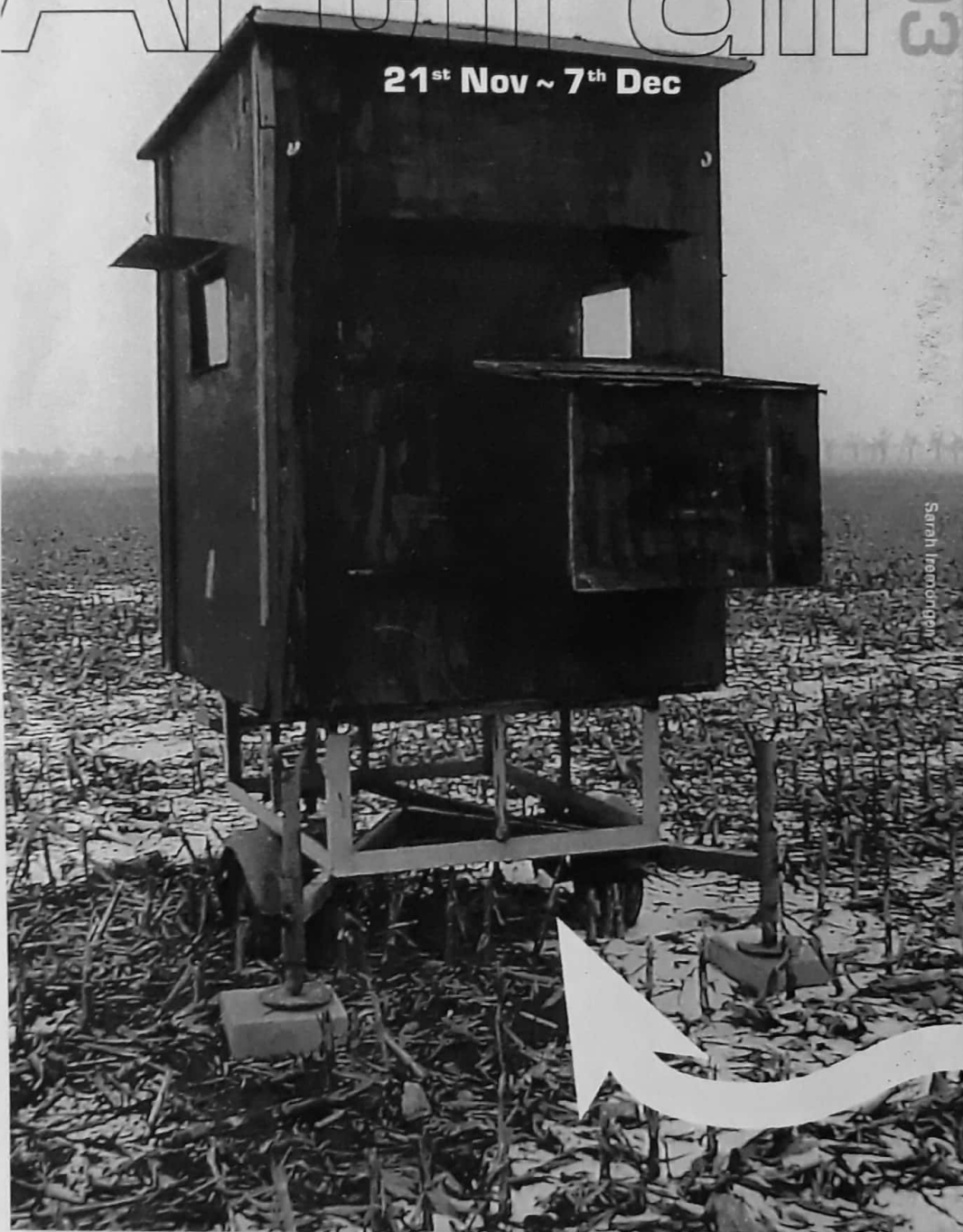


# ArtTrail 2003

21<sup>st</sup> Nov ~ 7<sup>th</sup> Dec



Sarah Lamington

## Haunting Theory | Jools Gilson-Ellis

I have been given an award to critically reflect upon an artistic process. I am a language mirror; I reflect things critically. Let me stand close to you while you're doing your art, and if you look at me, you will see a written reflection on my body. What a performance! Jools Gilson-Ellis - Marvellous Critical Mirror! Roll Up! Roll Up! Come see the miraculous transformation of artistic endeavour into critical language! Not in some dusty old book, my friends! Oh No! These knotty theoretical ruminations emerge from her skin! Oh Yes! Oh Yes, my friends! Let us take you beyond belief! Let us take you to the very edge of credibility! Jools Gilson-Ellis - Corporeal Calligrapher! Yes, ladies and gentlemen! Come and see the flesh of reason! Come and witness the embodiment of theory! Witness for yourselves the miracle of the new century . . .

"I'm thinking on my feet, and they are usually dirty" Carol Brown, Perforum presentation, University College Cork, October 2003

Critical writing often performs its own exclusivity through the complexities of jargon, communicable only to the initiated. Its professionals in the academy are also often under the delusion that everything can be subsumed into its discipline, refusing to understand that there are knowledges which resist writing's thrall. This is sometimes even the case when such language-mongers are fluent in the territory of post-modernism and poststructuralism; fluent in a world of linguistic anxiety, deferred meaning, and proliferating plurality. Articulate in the language of doubt, such academicians list carefully their publications, weighing the heft of their own documentation of uncertainty. I can say this because I've been there; I have mongered inside the tower.

The sculptor Daphne Wright, and the Theatre Director / Playwright Johnny Hanrahan have been collaborating on a performance / installation called Croon for over a year. Croon was initiated by the National Sculpture Factory and Meridian Theatre Company, in Cork. This experimental interdisciplinary work will premiere in February, 2004. Funded by an Arts Council Critical Reflection Award, I've been developing a series of critical writings in relation to this collaborative project. Because interdisciplinary collaboration is likely to interrogate issues of form (here the processes of visual art vs. theatre production), I am interested in whether writing itself could participate in such a collaboration; in a process which questions the form of writing I produce. The models for critical writing operating in relation to art practice are really only two; the academic article, or the review. Both are written as a response to finished work; they do not engage in the difficult process



of making work. This buoys up an already powerfully prevailing sense of writing's authority. What this means in a practical sense, is that there is no recourse to a review or an article. The vulnerable act of placing work in the public sphere is not mirrored in the processes of written response. Indeed, it is considered poor form to engage in debate with one's critic, although we all delight in those instances when this happens (Jeanette Winterson [novelist] turning up with a gang of women late one night, at the house of someone who gave her a bad review). The academic or review article is not subject to the same constraints of space and time as print journalism, but its theoretical discourse, and the often lengthy delay between performance / exhibition and publication, produces further separation between practice and theory. So I want to ask the question; are there other ways to haunt the space between the artist and the critic? And if there are, what kind of ghost does that make of me?

From, Missive No. 1, (sent to Johnny & Daphne, March 2003) Big Head

In the foyer of Isaacs Hotel, we measure each others' heads. Daphne had measured her own in preparation for the meeting, and offers the data. "Measure my head" says Johnny "my head's as big a head as you'd get." From there we go back to Daphne's head, imagining an aperture the size of Johnny's head around her head. "It's a bit big" says Daphne, and the two of them turn to me to measure my head, because my head's as small a head as you'd get. It's clear that if my head were at an aperture the size of Johnny's head, you'd see quite a lot else beside my head. Daphne and Johnny wrestle a bit more with sizes. He says to her; "do you want just the face framed, or do you want to see the whole head?" It takes fifteen minutes to agree a size for the apertures in the big vat of singers. There will be twenty of them. One for each singer.

There is a form of contemporary experimental critical writing called 'performative writing', which I use extensively in my own critical work. The term 'performative' comes from a grammatical form described by the linguist J.L. Austin, in the 1950s (Austin 1976). The 'performative' describes a phrase in which the saying of the words is also the doing of an action. Examples of this would be 'I do' in a marriage ceremony, or a head of state saying 'I declare war.' Critical theorists, particularly in the area of Performance Studies, became compelled by the idea that language, and possibly writing, could engage in processes of action, rather than simply describing and responding to events. This doing kind of writing does more than reflect on finished events; this is a writing that shifts between poetic and critical tenors; between fiction and non-fiction; between autobiography and critical theory. This is a writing

that is playful for a serious reason; a writing that resists the difference between practice and criticism; a writing that isn't only 'about' other things (i.e. metatextual) but is, in a powerful sense, itself.

From, Missive No. 2, (sent to Johnny & Daphne, May 2003) Dream No. 2

From where she stands, she sees moving shadows on the columns. A hushed audience wanders between them. They're self-conscious. It's too charged for comfort, here in the eye of the theatre. Something unsettles them, and they look out into the empty auditorium, with nostalgia. Someone hushes a child, pulling an outstretched hand away from an opalescent surface. The pillars long for touch, but no one dares. We glance upwards to see perfect things leaping silently into a mess of rope, and metal and wire. And then someone close whispers to her to move on, and as she leaves, she trails her fingers slowly across a curved surface.

In my own art practice, it makes a difference that I am trained in contemporary critical theory. It makes a difference, not because I use these theories, and see if I can 'try them out' in my work, but because they have altered profoundly my understanding of how meanings are made in contemporary art practice. Such a training, also enables different kinds of questions to be asked of art practices, including my own. In the processes of making work, I need to be willing not to know what it is I'm making; I need in a powerful sense to cut the ropes from critical theory, at the same time as allowing it to inform me indirectly. I write this here, because I think it makes a difference to the kind of writing I am working on for the Wright / Hanrahan collaboration; I know what it means to place work in the public sphere, and I know what it means to write reviews for print media, and academic articles for journals. But I want to play another game than these already rehearsed for me.

I take risks. I leap, unsure how to land. I'm liable to bruising, and so are they. How will I translate the trouble of collaboration into language? How will I hem in months of meetings into grammar and nouns?

From, Missive No. 3, (sent to Johnny & Daphne, June 2003) The Clay Model

Sudden quiet, except the radio in the background, an English voice saying "you were talking in a mixture of French and English, and turned to me... beautiful smile"

It looks like a ruin. Round things are piped into walls. Amphorae. Concrete bunkers, gourd shapes, cisterns, piping. Two tall urns / vessels. It's beautiful, haunting and distressing. It isn't clear what happened here. It is resonant of habitation or incarceration. There is the



possibility of peeping, but it isn't a peep show. And then Daphne peers at me looking at a flashing red light on the camera, and then the tape runs out...

Perhaps performative writing is the only kind of writing that can meet the difficulty and vulnerability of making work. Earlier I wrote about the dangers of imagining that writing can somehow 'have' everything else, including performance and visual art. What performative writing does is implicitly acknowledge this, and instead "enact(s) the affective force of the performance event again" (Phelan 1997: 12) through a writing that does. So I write Daphne & Johnny missives, and send them off. They combine documentation with provocation; fiction with questions and requests. Such critical writing performs itself as capricious, able to speak in different voices, but also willing to stumble.

From, Missive No. 3, (sent to Johnny & Daphne, June 2003) Falling

I am trying to find a way to be useful. Not by being a polite documenter, and distant thinker of lofty thoughts, but by being a practitioner-provocateur in the realm of writing. I want to join in. I want you to notice what I'm doing, and tell me what you think - is it useful? Is it not? Do you take issue? Do you disagree? Are you confused? Would it be better if I'd stayed at home / missed the bus / never set foot in the country? Or are you warmed by my presence? Are you pleased in a vague kind of way that I'm there? Would you let me join in more if I allowed you to measure me again? Am I the right size, the right shape? The right theory, the right approach? Am I right? Can I write? Should I stick to being a playwright, even though I never wrote a play? Will this thing be different because I'm here? Will I make a difference? Will we make a difference? What good is all this writing when we've got things to measure?! Indeed. I am trying to measure poetry, by standing in the shadows close to you. I am getting into bed with your images and getting down to it. Such adultery! This is a game I'm making up; you two are holding the rope, but I'm skipping. And if you don't notice me jumping, I'll fall.

Story 1: I send a postcard to Johnny, and ask him to tell me what the crooner will sing. I send another postcard to Daphne and ask her what would the performers do if they just turned up on the day. I get odd cryptic replies from both of them . . .

From, Missive No. 2, (sent to Johnny & Daphne, May 2003)

Not It

That isn't it, that isn't it at all, you've not got it, that's not what I meant, that's' not what we meant at all. We wanted it to be bigger, wider, more disturbing. You've not quite grasped, it, not quite got a handle on it. It's really a very different kind of cookie. We're not sure, we're just not really sure. We think you may have got the wrong idea, the wrong impression, the wrong end of the stick. It may be that you misunderstood in some way, misread. Perhaps some kind of mistake was made? There are even moments of misinterpretation! Things are missing, they've been missed, passed over, forgotten. We may even have been misconstrued, misapprehended. We're not sure you've really got it at all . . .

Not at all.

But once she was done, the audience raised themselves in unison from their seats, and clapped and roared until they were hoarse from the effort of it all. To leap in such a way! To imagine such possibilities! What a miracle! Her nouns were sweaty, and adjectives lay out of breath beside weary pronouns, but she valiantly took her bow, stepping over her verbs, to meet her audience. And she smiled a slow twinkling smile.