Listening Differently: The *Croon* Collaboration

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Early in 2002 the National Sculpture Factory (NSF) and Meridian Theatre Company in Cork initiated a cross-disciplinary collaboration between the writer-director Johnny Hanrahan (artistic director of Meridian) and the visual artist–sculptor Daphne Wright. Hanrahan had selected Wright as an artist with whom he would like to collaborate. Wright was subsequently invited to participate, and accepted. Mary McCarthy (then director of the NSF) suggested inviting Jools Gilson-Ellis to engage in a critical reflection on the project. This was agreed, and Gilson-Ellis was invited to work on the project, and also accepted. In March/April 2002, the NSF applied for two awards from the Arts Council: a Commissions Award to allow Daphne Wright to develop a collaboration with Johnny Hanrahan, and a Critical Reflection Award to allow Jools Gilson-Ellis to write about the work. Both awards were granted. Hanrahan and Wright began their collaboration in the spring of 2002, and Gilson-Ellis joined them in the summer of the same year. The initial context and starting point for the collaboration between Hanrahan and Wright was the city as a "universal concept idea" and Cork City in particular. Additionally, the collaboration was intended to provide "the context of a 'cultural laboratory' in which new ways of working (could) be explored."[1] The starting point for Gilson-Ellis was to critically reflect on the development and success of the collaboration, and on issues related to each artist's individual practice as well as their arts disciplines in general. Additionally the critical reflection was intended "[t]o explore and critically evaluate the experimental or innovative nature of the project within the context of Irish theatre and visual arts."[2]

This was the context within which this collaboration was conceived and initiated. From the beginning, however, practical problems of geography (Wright lived in England), as well as other work demands, made sustained meetings

difficult, not only between Hanrahan and Wright, but also with Gilson-Ellis. Instead, the process became dominated by meetings in airports and cafés. There were also several postponements of the final production, which came to be called *Croon*; initially planned for November 2002, it was then moved to November 2003, and subsequently to February 2004. By the time of production, the Wright–Hanrahan collaboration had been ongoing for nearly two years, and Gilson-Ellis' critical reflection for more than eighteen months. During this time there was also a changeover of the staff who had conceived of the collaboration at the NSF (the artistic director and program co-ordinator left and were replaced). Gilson-Ellis' work in relation to this collaboration was also challenging, firstly because of the itinerant nature of the Hanrahan–Wright meetings, secondly because of the difficulty of incorporating a third presence in a developing collaboration, and lastly because of the loss of the guiding voices of those who had initiated the project at the NSF. Whilst there were significant difficulties related to this project, it also raised important critical and artistic questions about the nature of collaboration, commissioning, critical reflection, and the place of the artist scholar within Ireland. This article addresses some of these questions and comprises one of the outcomes of Gilson-Ellis' Critical Reflection Award.[3]

CRITICAL REFLECTION AWARD

In the Republic of Ireland, the Arts Council's Critical Reflection Award comes under the category of Artists' Bursaries. These are awards specifically aimed at the individual artist. Other awards in this category support travel, living expenses, training, residencies, and mentoring. The Critical Reflection Award is unusual in this context because it is aimed at developing critical practice in relation to arts practice, which could be the artist's own, but need not be. All other awards under the Artists' Bursaries scheme specifically support artists *doing* or *developing* their own practice. This award seems to be located here because critical reflection is conceived as an aspect of arts practice worthy of financial support by the Arts Council. As such, its location is innovative as well as provocative.[4] The introduction to the award in the Arts Council literature reads, "This bursary aims to broaden and inform critical debate in the contemporary arts and on art in various contexts. It is also intended to develop the practice of critical writing and thinking by encouraging research into the theory and practice of contemporary arts" (Ireland, *Support* 13).

Interestingly, academic research is excluded from eligibility for this award. Within Ireland, this is presumably because there is another body – Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) – that funds academic research. Government of Ireland Research Fellowships funded by the IRCHSS support "research in the historical, analytical and theoretical study of subjects which normally fall within the Humanities and Social

Sciences" (Ireland, *Government*). The IRCHSS was formed in 2000, and its model of research is traditional and academic. There is no possibility within these funding structures to engage in practice-based research or experimental criticism. The whole idea of practice-based research within the creative and performing arts is simply not conceived here. Within the United Kingdom, the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) offers Fellowships in the Creative and Performing Arts, which are practice-based research fellowships in third-level institutions, for up to three years. One of the AHRB's key priorities is to support the development of practice-led research in the creative and performing arts. This scheme distinguishes itself from the type of research supported by the Irish Research Council in the following way:

> [T]he research questions or problems, the outputs and – most importantly – the research methods, must involve a significant focus on practice as distinct from history or theory. A project that is purely historical or theoretical, with no element of practice embedded in the research process, is not eligible for this scheme. ("Fellowships" 6)

I would suggest that the Arts Council's Critical Reflection Award is located somewhere between the antithetical conceptions of research of the IRCHSS and the AHRB. How is writing associated with this award *not* academic research? It may be that within Ireland this goes beyond duplicating the funding strands of the IRCHSS and involves a conception of academic writing that is primarily theoretical/historical, as well as distant from the materiality of making work. The spirit of the Critical Reflection Award seems to be that it should be *closer to practice* than traditional academic research might allow. This bursary is open to "critics, theorists, writers, researchers, artists, arts practitioners" (Ireland, *Support* 13). Who are these "critics, theorists, writers and researchers" who operate outside of third-level institutions, and yet have track records in "writing/research" with "an existing body of work of recognised quality and significance?" (13). Journalists and art critics, of course, but probably as likely to be candidates are "artist scholars" like myself – artists who have engaged with academic contexts as researchers and teachers. How else could we have received a training in contemporary arts theory and criticism? These ambiguities are telling about the lack of a discourse about the phenomenon of the artist scholar in general, and within Ireland in particular.

The Critical Reflection Award also stresses "evidence of artistic developmental need" and "the potential of the work to inform future theory and practice" as two of the criteria for the assessment of applications (Ireland, *Support* 13). The first of these clarifies the difference between current academic research in Ireland, and the kind of critical reflection this award funds: This is writing likely to have an impact an artist's development. It is criticism/theory close to the difficulties and promises of making work. It is intended that such

writing will *do something material* in the world, writing that should make different kinds of art practice possible. And if it is to inform future theory and practice, then it must also be able to go beyond the particular example of the individual artists and suggest general conclusions or trends. Such writing must be willing to engage dynamically with contemporary art practice, as well as with the wider world of arts criticism. It must also make itself publishable. It needs, in fact, to be fluent in the languages of art practice, contemporary arts theory, and contemporary arts publishing.

JOOLS GILSON-ELLIS: CRITICAL AND ARTISTIC BACKGROUND

I am a choreographer and writer. The most relevant experience I brought to this collaboration was a long background in the theory and practice of interdisciplinary collaboration, and a developed practice in experimental critical writing. My background in interdisciplinary collaboration includes four years' teaching and researching at Dartington College of Arts in the United Kingdom. Dartington is a small experimental college of performing arts with a specific focus on interdisciplinary practices. Additionally, since 1995 my professional arts practice has been largely realised through a collaboration with the composer and digital artist Richard Povall.[5] My critical-writing practice has developed in parallel with this art and performance work. Just as my art practice is informed by my critical thinking, so my art-making informs my critical writing. More than this, because my art practice *is* my research, it is often the subject of my critical writing. I publish critical writing that constructs tensions between orthodox theoretical language, poetic text, anecdote, and performative[6] writing.[7] I also wrote a practice-based PhD that did the same thing.[8] I have developed these practices as a way to allow critical writing to approach art practice differently. This is practice-based research; and as its instigator, I am an artist-scholar.

THE CRITICAL REFLECTION AWARD AND THE *CROON* COLLABORATION

When I began this critical reflection, I wanted to avoid writing from a cool distance on finished work. I wanted to collaborate with the sculptor and the theatre-maker; I wanted critical, theoretical, and performative writing to engage in the process of making work itself. I wanted my writing, as well as sculpture and theatre, to be open to failure, to wrestle with difficulty, to be unfinished. I wanted to meet this work in collaborative space, to resist the models already rehearsed for me of critical essay, or review. My idea was to be a practitioner-provocateur in the realm of writing. I wanted to do this because I believe that there are more compelling models for critical writing to engage with the making of work than those we already take for granted. But I ended up critically distant from a project I had anticipated being directly part

of. This article is written in the space of that distance but is also haunted by other collaborative models in which critical writing might bring itself into the studio and engage in the difficult labour of making work.

During the first year of this Critical Reflection Award I tried a range of strategies aimed at finding a way of engaging with the collaboration between Hanrahan and Wright. I struggled with all of this because my role was not as mentor, nor as primary collaborator, but as something else. In the spring of 2003 I began to develop texts that I hoped could participate in this ongoing discussion. I reflected back what I heard, offered critical essays, wrote creative versions of what I imagined they were imagining. I gave these to the artists, with the idea that they might respond in some way, tell me I was off the rails, useful, or nearly there. These texts were playful, risky, and provocative. They were performative texts. They attempted to do what I perceived was not happening in this collaboration, that is, engaging in practical play. By the end of the summer of 2003, it was clear that these strategies were not working as I had imagined. Whilst I was pleased with the texts, they were not producing any dialogue. I was finding it difficult to reflect on a process I wasn't witnessing regularly, or to keep writing without any response. By October 2003, it had become clear to me that there would be no space or time in which to collaborate in the way that I had hoped, or in other ways that we might have developed together, so I made the decision (in consultation with the NSF) to withdraw from the collaboration and to focus instead on the final performance. This article, then, is a critical reflection on the work that was produced after two years of collaboration between Hanrahan and Wright. It is an attempt to look at the difficulties of the process and to place them within a wider context. It is also a musing on the things I wished were part of the collaborative discourse and were not. One of these things was my entanglement with the notion of *metalanguage*, and the space between *making work, talking* about making work, and in my case, *writing* about both. Allow me a brief digression.

METALANGUAGE

My interest in the function of metalanguage stems from my reading of the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, and in particular her theorisation of *parler-femme*.[9] More than a decade after I first read her work, I remain compelled by two aspects of Irigaray's revolutionary writing practice: (1) that *parler-femme* has no metalanguage, and (2) that critical writing might be the site of radical change, as well as a place where such change is described. Irigaray's example of *parler-femme* is compelling, not only because of its specificity, but because of Irigaray's contention that unheard of possibilities exist outside of the analytical, theoretical, and intellectual, that we cannot know what they might be, yet we can feel their affective force.[10] Irigaray's strategy for writing into this conundrum is to engage with readers to provoke the cultural possibility of

parler-femme. Irigaray's texts operate in an oscillatory and troubling relationship to dominant culture and language. With their irritant playfulness, they refuse to prescribe or describe what might constitute *parler-femme*, at the same time as continuing to insist on its possibility.

So my "process writings" written as part of this project were intended to operate in the same way in relation to the *Croon* collaboration, as Irigaray's writing acted in relation to *parler-femme* – not to tell the collaborating artists what the work should be, but to provoke its full realisation; to act as a parallel irritant, reflecting back things I heard in playful as well as provocative ways.

Irigaray's proposal of *parler-femme* led me to an exploration of the limitations and possibilities of metalanguage. They led me to begin to believe that it wasn't only the idea of a woman's language that might be resistant to the authority of metalanguage's explanatory zeal. I began to understand that there was much about the body, voice, space, and live performance in particular that exceeded the tenets of critical writing. This did not mean that I felt there was no point to critical writing about art practice, simply that other strategies might better meet its sensibilities.

In my own practice-based research, I need to operate in a space away from the analytical and intellectual sphere when I am making work. This is a giving up of the need to know precisely what it is I am making; it is a space of present-tense doing. This does not mean that theory and history do not influence my work, only that they operate on me through a different corporeal and mental process. This is the only way I know how to make work. Like Irigaray's theorisation of *parler-femme*, I cannot tell you precisely what this process is, but I know how to get there, and I know how to provoke its possibility in others. I know also that such a creative space/place is fundamentally apart from metalanguage, and were I to try to use an intellectual language to inhabit its sphere, I would quash the possibility of my own creative process. This is relevant here, because one of my major criticisms of the collaboration between Wright and Hanrahan was that it seemed to remain primarily on the level of metalanguage (meetings that *talked about* the process) for the majority of its duration, and that the fundamental structure of this engagement precluded an in-depth investigation into the worlds of each other's practice. The rhythm of our meetings also meant that I was not able to have a conversation of any depth with them about the things I am writing here, and I regret that.

CROON

Tuesday, 3 February 2004

Space One: The Ballroom

We have been told to meet in the foyer of the Everyman Palace Theatre, on

McCurtain Street in Cork. From here, we are led by our guides a few metres east along McCurtain Street to the Metropole Hotel, where we enter the hotel lobby. It is busy with people moving about, ordering drinks, and lounging in alcoves. We pass through all this, up a small flight of stairs into a small ball-room. There are maybe twenty of us. Inside there are two large objects. In front of us as we enter, there is the white vat of singers. It is a great squat cyl-inder, with recesses at various heights for the faces of the singers. I loved this object. I loved its perfect whiteness in the riot of red of the ballroom carpet, how it was placed beneath chandeliers, like an awkward friend. At the other end of the room, there is a white wooden ramp, angled at one corner. There is a chair on the platform at the top, and as we enter, the crooner (actor Jack Healy) is busy in his shirtsleeves, doing something underneath. His dinner jacket hangs on a hanger. There is one other sculptural object in this space, and that is a small, prone, almost-naked homunculus, lying with his face into the carpet, between the vat and the ramp. It is easy to miss this, between the authority of great white objects hefting into this formal space.

And then the door is closed behind us, and signals are made between fig-ures in black. This is the hieroglyphics of theatre. And the performance begins. We follow the crooner to the microphone where he plays at language with a series of percussive "one, two's" and proceeds to sing a little, and move into his text, about the loss of romance. Intermittently, the vat of singers hum. It is gorgeous; the sounding of the cylindrical room, with all its shutters closed. Later, the crooner returns to his ramp, smokes several cigarettes, sings again, and then moves towards the vat. There are various stages to the singing, the humming, and then a few sing a song, through open hatches, and towards the end there is a kind of finale, when all the hatches are open and the choir sings a sentimental song in harmony. This is a beautiful, enchanting, and unsettling image. I wander around the perimeter, watching working faces, framed precisely, their skin-colour, a series of visual shocks within white curving surfaces, so that as I move around its arc, I see silhouettes of singing faces, and then they come to me as moving portraits. And underneath all this, and conjured by all of them, is the richness of their communal singing; their centrifugal harmony. This was by far the most successful element of *Croon*; Beckettian in its uncompromising framing of the human body, moving in its simplicity, troubling in its understated boldness.

The white ramp, angled as it is towards the cylindrical house of song, approaches the squatness of the vat like a semiotic interrogative. This is clearly marked as the crooner's territory. He moves beneath it, along it, sits on top of it. But it leads to the vat, and whilst the space invites him, he doesn't ever really go there. It is here that the work in the ballroom stumbles, in the detail of the crooner's relationship with the vat of singers, and the creature-puppet lying on the carpet. His text doesn't help him in this, filled as it is with phrases about heartbreak and irony. It is as if the logic of the theatrical perfor-

mance, and the logic of the objects in the space, are at odds; they miss each other, and instead of discovering the grain of their approach, they fail to meet at all. Nothing was clear about the relationship between the crooner and the vat *or* the doll. The actor moved uncomfortably *around* them, gestured *towards* them, but never seemed clear about the underpinning of his approach. Perhaps this was because the form of this theatre didn't have any space for such a monumental symbolic presence as the vat of singers. The actor's text rattled about in the space, like a superfluous present at a party; perhaps because *it was the wrong kind of gift to bring*. So whilst so much about the vat of singers was wonderful, overall this was a performance that struggled to occupy and engage with space and object.

Daphne Wright and Voice

I happen upon a small catalogue about Daphne's work. The two essays in it are beautifully written and speak in particular about the peculiar tension in Daphne's work between the images/objects and the sound that accompanies them. One of the writers describing a recent exhibition from 2003 (entitled *Anonymous: Daphne Wright*) says, "Drama crosses over but not into the pictures" (Ashton 4). When she says this, she is describing the choreography of image and sound in this work. Wright repeatedly uses recordings of voices that fail at performance, intentionally. These voices have always been members of her family, often reading lyrics in a deadpan and unrehearsed demeanour. These ordinary voices move inside a code of sentimentality or melodrama. Such codes have already failed before they are inhabited by these voices – country and western songs or sentimental ballads. This work attunes our ears to strange kinds of melancholy; the voices assert the everyday in a linguistic context of sentimental yearning. If this were theatre, we might call such voices "bad acting," but this is not theatre, and as Ashton suggests, Wright's drama crosses over her photographs, it doesn't enter them or seek the folly of explanation. Wright is an artist who has often made work that labours intricately with hand-made processes – filigree plaster wallpaper (in *Nonsense and Death*, 2001), tin-foil trees (in *Still Life*, 1994–95). Her use of voice, seen in the context of such processes of repetitive labour, is a compelling one. In his essay on Wright, David Jeffreys suggests that Wright undermines the promise of pleasure in her work; her filigree wallpaper contains real chicken hearts (in *Domestic Shrub-bery*, 1994–95), the trees have dead skinned birds hanging from them (in *They've Taken to Their Beds*, 1997). Perhaps her use of voice operates in a similar vein. These voices, never overly intrusive, loop quietly in the sculptural space of these works. They rumble quietly, like half-heard chat. They sound insignificant, ordinary. But when we listen, we hear something much more unsettling than these unassuming readings might suggest; they read lyrics of yearning and melodrama, and because they do this, they rob the words of their

musical underbelly, their *crooning*. What is left behind is a kind of strange afterimage of sound and language – voices that conjure the lost song, as well as allowing us a different access to the odd narratives the songs perform. In their originals, these songs lull us into a sonic space of musical geography – the music moves us, or makes us wince, but whatever it does, it represses the starkness of the words alone. And it is this, of course, that Daphne Wright steals, in her understated use of their unfettered language.

Back in the Ballroom

I am struck by the space between Daphne's use of voice in her sculptural work, and the use of voice in the ballroom space. Voice in Daphne's work is a subtle, half-heard thing. It is another texture, like the detail of folded tinfoil. In Johnny's work, and we could say in text-based theatre in general, voice is the performance of text and the primary focus of meaning-generation. Somewhere between these two islands of practice, there is another way to work with voice and text. Daphne clearly came to this collaboration with an established interest in voice and sentimental songs. Early in 2003, I imagined (wrongly) that the crooner would be grubby and kitsch. Instead he was scrubbed and ambiguously genuine. He didn't croon in a way that made us laugh, nor was he melancholy. He feigned bad singing, which is difficult . Daphne's recorded voices in her other work are simply inexperienced, so their stumbling is genuine. The choir, on the other hand, are very good performers – they sing out of tune perfectly, as well as in tune and harmony. There is no edge of failure, feigned or genuine. I had imagined them as funny, popping out of hatches, singing, like in a pantomime, but I was wrong. They are perfect at performance in their pristine house.

And then the door is opened for us, and we are told to leave, and all of us behave ourselves and do as we are told.

OBJECT PROBLEMS IN THEATRE

The Prop

I am curious about theatre's relationship to the object. These are things to do with the ways in which objects relate to space, and the ways in which objects resonate with and perform their impact on space; how they make the air vibrate differently. Historically, objects used in theatre performance are known as "props". This comes from *properties* because they "belong" to the production; the production owns them – they are not themselves. In this object hierarchy, such things also "prop up" meaning, rather than being the source of it themselves. What I mean by this is that such objects *support* meanings intended to be happening elsewhere. They are deictic markers, pointing

towards a "something else" that they aren't part of. Such props support a great weight of narrative and character. The very name of these objects within a context of theatre suggests precariousness. They are owned by the production and they prop up meaning. Both these scenarios hold within them the kernel of revolt and collapse. This is one of theatre's blindnesses, its failure to investigate the performance of the object, and in particular the relationship between the performer and the object.

The Set

The dressed environment in which theatre performance takes place is most often called a "set." In more traditional theatre, this is a series of "flats" that "pretend" to be actual rooms. Such a word troubles grammar in its moving meanings: it is a verb when it is "set" on stage, a noun when it is in place, and an adjective in my criticism. Such objects are "set" in the sense that they are not to be moved, or touched. They are "set" in the sense that they remain a poorly interrogated aspect of theatre performance. Theatre is "set" in its ways from the point of view of the set; it is stuck, unable to shift, resistant to imagining a different kind of relationship. Such rigidity is symbolic as well as literal; meaning happens *in front* of it, not *in relation* to it; and this as another of theatre's blindnesses.

Theatre Production

In the rhythm of theatre, objects and spaces are only made close to production, and performers have to work in rehearsal rooms that "stand in" for the actual space, with "stand-in" props pretending to be the actual objects. Anyone who works in professional theatre knows that these rhythms are normal and largely unavoidable in a context of pressured time and economics. Few can afford the luxury of rehearsing in the space of performance for any length of time, and it is rare to have the actual objects available for performers to work with in advance. However, it seems to me that if the aim of this collaboration between theatre and sculpture was about investigating *form*, then it is precisely these rhythms that needed to be profoundly shifted. Performers and directors needed time and space to work with *actual* space and *actual* objects. And from the evidence of the final production, this didn't happen.

CROON

Space Two: The Warehouse

We are led across town to a cavernous warehouse on the docks. It is a vast space, and after the bright lights of the ballroom, it is dank. Great swells of

industrial sound fills the air. Intermittent stands with working lamps light the space gloomily. Beyond us, more than a hundred metres away, the janitor (performer Cindy Cummings) sits smoking on a raised perch. Between her and us, there are catacombs made from breeze blocks, one large, and another smaller one. The dramatic impact of this space on entering is very powerful. The sheer volume of space ricochets into flesh, the sound chills, and the image of the janitor compels us towards her. One of the reasons this is so powerful is because this great weight of space, the vast sound, the industrial lighting all elaborate the distant image of a creature in overalls, sitting up in her little raised house, smoking slowly. All this allows us *to look*, it allows space for image to resonate. Soon she comes down from her perch, walks over to the catacomb closest to her, and pulls out a great oversized trolley made from rusty corrugated iron. She is a diminutive thing, and she must raise her arms up above her head to push this great metal trolley around. This is the most pleasurable part of the performance, because the performer is allowed to use the distance and heft of this great space. She rumbles towards us, and then away, then she's up inside the small catacomb and appears above it, where she cries out, "Holy Moly!" in a hammy American accent. We are not allowed into the second half of this space (because of fire regulations), and so she comes to meet us where most of us are standing, at the first catacomb, and all of the rest of the performance takes place here. After such a spatial seduction, this has the effect of collapsing space around us. She remains close to us until the end, first bringing her great trolley up to us and parking it in our catacomb, and then embarking on a journey of a text and a series of tasks focused on a collection of oddly shaped tools. There are some moments when image is allowed to resonate once again – when the janitor places one of the great tools on a hook and lets it sway gently. But mostly these are rare moments. We are now in the same space as the janitor, as she scurries around retrieving tools from inside her trolley, from other rooms, and places them elsewhere in the space. And although these objects are designed not to "fit" into their sockets, they seem so antithetical in terms of material and texture that it seems as if the janitor is playing a child's game with play tools. There is no haunting sense in which we are troubled by these objects, and perhaps this is mostly to do with the lack of a resonant relationship, either between the janitor and her tools, or between the janitor and her text. Both seemed clumsily placed together. We are told fragments of a story about a dissatisfied janitor, and Baxter is con-jured for the first time. In this troubling place, we are given a conventional story of working-class frustration. I did not understand how such a narrative could in any sense meet these unsettling objects. These pristine tools became cast as bad actors in someone else's story; they didn't get to tell their own. So that at the end, when it has all gone on for too long, our janitor is reciting chemical compounds, standing on one of the breeze block walls, shouting towards some red fairy lights at the other end of the warehouse. And we leave

because another young woman in black has made the sign to our guides. And as we go, the janitor tries to fill the great space with her voice, and struggles.

And back we go across two rivers to the Everyman Palace Theatre where we began, and up the grimy back steps onto the stage itself, where there is a grove of pillars.

NARRATIVE PROBLEMS IN THEATRE

HARRY   What are you doing?

OTTO   Writing.

HARRY   Something new?

OTTO   Yes. What are you doing?

HARRY   Reading. Were you really writing then, or pretending to write?

OTTO   Well, sometimes I really write and at other times I just let the pen glide over the paper. I create crescendos of movement with the quill. I put in a few percussive scratches. Do you really read?

HARRY   Sometimes I do, but mostly I just gaze at the page or let my eyes skim lightly over the words. Sometimes I wish I could build on it more. Move my head from side to side. But restraint seems to be what's required in a scene like this. (English 19)

The relationship between performers and objects in theatre is a curious one. Such a relationship is rarely the focus of a director's or a writer's work, and this is intimately bound up with the performance of fiction. Harry and Otto both pretend to write and read in the play they are in. Their relationship with pen, paper, and book is one of mimicry; they seek only to produce a simulacrum of *actual* reading or writing. Clearly, this extract satirises theatrical realism, but there is something telling about its irony. Here the objects might be a real pen, paper, and book, but the action of relating to them is *to be looked at*, so that what matters is not that they are *actually* writing or reading, but that they should look as if they are. In other disciplines, such as task-based performance, it is the *action itself* which is primary. So that were we to remove Harry and Otto from their theatrical stage and place them in a live art event, they might both be reading and writing for hours, with little heed to an audience who are able to come and go at will.

Stage props and sets are subject to the tyrannical turnaround of theatres. They are kept in stores or dumped once the show is over. They are reused, painted

hastily, chopped up, adapted. The rhythm, function, and temporariness of objects in theatre is at odds with the lengthy processes and detail of constructing sculpture. Not all sculpture is permanent or durable (Daphne's is often not), but it is usually made with detailed thought, with a concern for the crafting of materials, as well as the ways in which the object occupies its contextual space.

I did not see a resonant relationship between performers and objects in *Croon*. Often performers seemed to me to be strangers to the objects/spaces they performed with/in relation to. Actors gestured towards objects with shaking hands, seemed unclear about how to respond to their strangeness, or simply ignored their presence. I felt, in general, that the performance work did exactly what most theatre does to object and set: it used them as supports for text-based performances. It performed in front of, between, or beside objects and spaces; it did not relate to them directly. The subject of the performances did not seem to me to *arise* out of the relationship between object/space and performers. Instead they seemed to be forged from narratives (largely) brought in from elsewhere.

Visual art and theatre have a different relationship to time beyond the exigencies of audience. This is particularly true with regard to theatre, which uses narrative texts as its starting point. This is to do with narrative theatre resisting the present tense and repeatedly referring (like the prop and the set) to something outside itself, a deictic "beyond." This is a history placed elsewhere, which locates and brings meaning to the work. So that in *Croon* we have a figure called Baxter, who is never present but seems placed to provoke a sense of an elsewhere. The trouble with Baxter is that he avoids the present tense of these spaces. He (like the prop and the set) functions only to hold up a fragile meta-text. Some of this narrative – particularly the Janitor texts and the texts accompanying the pillars – jar because they colonise the visual space with story. They do not meet it on different terms. Instead it takes them over; it explains them. A story can terrorise space with explanation: *This* is what this *is*. In this context, such narratives suggest a fear of lessness. I wanted to hear writing spoken that engaged with sculptural space. I wanted to hear writing spoken that arose from the meeting of disciplines, out of the meeting of object, space, and performer. What I heard suggested instead that the visual and spatial aspects of this collaboration had not seeped into the flesh of grammar, and that whatever happened, the meeting of these two artists did not produce a context in which other forms of writing might emerge.

CROON

Space Three: The Grove of Pillars

I remember listening to Daphne saying how important it was to her that the pillars had a beautiful, perfect surface. I remember her speaking about the

smoothness of high-end concrete finishes. I write to her and Johnny about them, imagining the performance and documenting the discussions about how they could be different heights and diameters. In the end, they are all the same height and diameter. What is beautiful about them is that only a couple of them are fixed to the floor, and the rest are suspended, so that standing on the stage in the Everyman amongst their gently moving presence is like being at sea. It is as if the ground is moving. I loved this. But instead of smooth beautiful surfaces, there was rough plastering, and through it, you could see the wood construction. I wonder if a different decision was made, or if they just weren't made as perfectly as Daphne wished. Nonetheless, these objects weigh into the space of the stage like history. They impose their presence on us in a strange combination of classical authority and lightness. They are hefty pillars, but they sway in the breeze of us. For me, this was a powerfully resonant space. I loved the silence of it. I wanted to wander inside it, to discover how these vast things carved space. Slowly, a figure arrives. He is huge like the pillars, up on stilts with a great stick. He fits well in this space, with his great height. He is sort of naked. He has a sheer American Tan body stocking on over pants. I found him quite a powerful presence when he first arrived – a wizened face, his paunch of a belly, climbing like an ancient beige spider in the grove of swinging columns – and I regret, therefore, that there wasn't a fuller revelling in the impact of image. The sound of the stilts on the stage floor, his long stick that became another kind of leg. I longed for a *creature*. I longed for something that met the silent power of the pillars in some way. I longed for depth. Instead what we got was a rant, a text that – even though I have seen several drafts and even have them in my possession – I couldn't tell you what was said. There was such a poor integration of voice and body that any integration of both of these with the space was, for me, a lost aspiration. It was impossible to listen. Our American Tan stilt-walker moved in the grove doing good old-fashioned bad theatre, and we endured it, like the trapped audience we were, made to stay until the end, until another young woman in black gestured to our guides, who let us out into the foyer of the Everyman. I felt that the potential of this extraordinary space was lost in the tightness of the grip that theatre had on beginnings and endings, on scripted text, on story as opposed to texture and metonym. It was lost in the groans of the figure (also in an American Tan body stocking) lying on the floor between us all, poked at by the stilt-walker's stick, referencing emptily another prone figure (a puppet) on the floor of the ballroom. It was lost because theatre would not let the space breathe, because there was no air.

THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF AUDIENCE

At the very beginning of *Croon*, we gather in the foyer of the Everyman Theatre. There, beside the bar, and standing on carpet, we are told by the MC (Sean Kelly) that our guides will take us to three different spaces. He explains

that there is no specific place for the audience to stand and that we should feel free to move in the spaces as we wish. At the same time, we are to be quiet and heed the performances as they evolve. We can move anywhere, but we must respect the performances. This semiotic contradiction performed itself throughout *Croon* as an aspiration   towards reworking the audience–performer relationship, but without any genuine interrogation of what constructs such relationships in the first place, especially as they relate to theatre in theatre spaces, and sculpture in galleries.

Sculpture

In the gallery space, everyone waits for the appropriate time for the sculpture to begin performing. They stand at the room's perimeter, chatting gently, until somewhere a woman in black gestures to another figure behind a glass window, and the lights go down. The chatting ceases, and in its stead, hush swells, in a cross-fade with a spotlight blushing onto the sculpture. Everyone looks in silence from a still distance. People gaze in detail at the intricacies of the object: curves here, sudden drops and leaps. After ten minutes of this, the lights fade, and a circle of people begin to applaud in the darkness. General lighting returns, and the clapping trickles away. Once the performance is over, no one looks at the sculpture again. Instead, they resume their chat, leaving the gallery in twos and threes.

Theatre

He is in the middle of a weighty soliloquy, his voice a rich baritone, trawling depths for resonance. He has been performing for twenty minutes, but most of the audience haven't come yet. They arrive in small gaggles, holding a glass of wine and talking. There is an auditorium of seating, but instead of sitting down, everyone wanders around looking at aspects of the performance from different angles and distances. They notice the curve of the seating and how the cornicing is chipped. They continue to chat and climb occasionally up onto the stage to get a closer look at the performer, walking around him, noticing how the lighting and make-up brings out his best features. If he is still for a while, some of them take the opportunity to examine the quality of his corneas under the lights. Others cannot resist the temptation to feel the texture of the curtains, but this is going too far, and the invigilator requests that they not touch. Once they've had a good look round, they leave. And he goes on without them.

Theatre and visual-art practices have profoundly different relationships to time and space in the public presentation of their work. In *Croon*, unlike a gallery, we cannot really walk anywhere we wish. In the second space of *Croon* (the warehouse), we all want to move towards the janitor perched in her little

box at the far end of this vast extraordinary space. But as we approach her en masse, we are gently told that we're not to go there for insurance reasons. In the first space (the ballroom at the Metropole Hotel) some of us wander around to get different views of the performance, but we largely stay close to the walls. And in the last space (the grove of pillars at the Everyman) we are stuck immovably to the edges of the stage, with the odd brave few moving about between the pillars. This is a kind of pack mentality. It is *really hard* to walk across a performance space during performance. When performers come towards us, we shift to place a more comfortable distance between us and them. This is shoal politics, and it is difficult to resist. A live performer inhibits an audience's use of space profoundly, especially as compared to how an audience moves in relation to objects in a gallery.

Time tastes different in a theatre than in a gallery. Theatre is more tyrannical about time. Theatre performance is lassoed to a clock. There is a beginning and an end, and you clap when it's over. If you don't like it and you want to go, most people wait till the interval. It's harder to leave a theatre than a gallery. It takes public gall (or really terrible work) to leave during the performance itself, to force other people in your row to get up and let you out. A gallery is easy to leave in comparison.

Because each of the spaces in *Croon* had a performance element that used the model of theatre rather than the gallery to expound its content (that is, a specific time when performance was happening), the audience behaved like a theatre audience. Stage managers gestured to our guides when performance was finished. We were led away. This was a choice that was not a necessary choice. There are other models of performance, such as durational work, in which (like in a gallery space) people can come and go. (But as I have already suggested, theatre is tyrannical about time; you must see *all of this*, for *this amount of time*). Such performance requires that directors let go of the need for an audience to see *all* of the performance and allow them to come and go. It also suggests different forms of performance – ones that might be task-led, or textural, or structured as a series of improvisations. In some sense, such durational performances move towards dampening the *charge* of theatrical performance, into something that is an ongoing gesture, a loop, or an exploration within parameters. In this sense, such performance can allow an audience to look and move differently in relation to the work.

When you bring the disciplines of sculpture and theatre together, what might it be possible to craft that interrogates questions of audience? How might spaces be made that investigate ways of looking, as they relate to the proxemics of audience and performer? How might we look at the body in a more sculptural way than theatre normally allows? How might we take pleasure differently in looking at objects as well as performance? What does time do to looking and apprehending? And how might we use text in a more sculptural way, so that we might listen differently?

END

What happened in this project was that the structures were not in place for a collaboration between the three of us to succeed. It was hard enough for Daphne Wright and Johnny Hanrahan to collaborate with each other; bringing in a third person was too much. This was compounded by a lack of clarity about my own role. I could have simply written about the final performance, rather than wanting to engage with the process of making the work itself. I could have operated like a dramaturg, supporting their process with critical material. I could have simply documented their process and written about that. But I wanted to engage with them differently. I wanted to do this because I think the cool distance between critical writing and the making of work is itself a fiction supported by structures of academy, artist, and print media. Such an aspiration for collaboration could work if we had specifically chosen to work with each other out of a knowledge about or interest in each other's practice. It could work if we all began together with a shared goal. It could work if it engaged with actual practice regularly, so that we became familiar with the materiality of each other's work, and if our meetings were not dominated by talk. I remain convinced that critical/performative and experimental writing could participate fully in a collaborative process, and that such multi-levelled discourse could meet, provoke, challenge, and affirm the developing practice. Mutually addressing the unfathomable is a work of transgressing boundaries, and the one between criticism and art practice is just another border policed by academics and artists alike.

Projects of this ambition and aspiration are desperately needed within the cultural life of Ireland. For a short while in the 1990s, the Irish Arts Council had an award called "Interdisciplinary Collaborative Commission." This no longer exists, and whilst the more recent Projects scheme is aimed at funding new and experimental work, there is no specific provision for either inter-disciplinarity or collaboration. There are no specific training contexts within Ireland to learn either about processes of collaboration or about interdisciplinarity. Couple this with the relative dearth of experimental practices within Ireland, and it seems clear that this kind of work needs specific and targeted support.

Interdisciplinary collaboration requires a questioning of disciplines, especially one's own. It demands that one ask what is specific about a discipline: what are its presumptions, its exclusive languages, its structures of operation? Theatre and dance prioritise technical performance skills. Both (on the whole) require years of dedicated training to produce technically proficient practitioners. Such a structure operates to produce individuals ready to realise someone else's vision – a director, a playwright, a choreographer. This is not to deny the creative input of performers; but if we simmered down theatre and dance, this is the structure we would find in the juice. Visual-art practice is structurally dif-

ferent. Whilst it also trains in technical skills, it does not prioritise them, and focuses instead on the development of the creative vision of the individual artist. What this means is that artistic sensibilities are fostered differently in these disciplines: in theatre and dance, to "make it" as an actor or a dancer, you have to get into someone else's show. Within visual-art practices you also have to get into a show, but it's your own. What interests me about the operations of these arts disciplines is that they function as political and social systems, fostering particular kinds of sensibilities and making others less likely. They function, in fact, like political states, in which certain laws prevail. Interdisciplinary collaboration will often question the nature of disciplinary form. In its best incarnations, questions arise from a profound interrogation of the ways in which form produces meaning. These are questions about the reception as well as the production of work, so that whether the performance space is white (like a gallery) or black (like a theatre) impacts on our apprehension of the work; whether there is a daily practice (like a dance class) or a warm-up (like vocal exercises) impacts on the readiness of practitioners to work creatively; whether the quotidian practices of the discipline are solitary (like visual art) or collaborative (like theatre or dance) attunes the artist to how work is made.

Genuinely innovative interdisciplinary collaboration cannot happen at a distance. Contemporary Irish theatre largely labours under a narrative form that closes down the possible range of meanings. I believe that innovation in form could transform Irish theatre from literature to physical/vocal/visual event. Such a transformation would risk the corporeal in physicality, it would risk our seeing differently, it would risk experimenting with narrative forms, it would take a different kind of place in world theatre. What I suspect is that rather than losing its narrative longing, such a theatre would become "writerly" rather than "narrative." It might learn something about writing from the disciplines of sculpture, choreography, and poetry.

NOTES

1 This wording comes from the NSF's application for the Commissions Award.

2 This wording comes from the NSF's application for the Critical Reflection Award.

3 Other outcomes included: presentation/performance at Conditions of Criticism conference, Dublin Theatre Festival, October 2003, and "Haunting Theory," published in *Art Trail Catalogue*. Both of these outcomes focused on the "process writings" written during the collaboration between Wright and Hanrahan, rather than on the final production.

4 There is no funding specifically aimed at supporting critical writing and art practice within any of the arts councils in the United Kingdom, for example.

5 This collaboration has developed through our performance production company *half/angel*, also founded in 1995. Richard Povall and I are the artistic directors of this company. For more information see www.halfangel.ie.

6 The "performative" is a grammatical form in which the saying of something is also the doing of an action; such as "I do" in a wedding ceremony (see Austin). A body of critical/creative writing has since emerged, which aims to perform the affective force of live performance again in the realm of writing. Such writing is known as *performative* writing because it "does" something, at the same time as "writing about" something. See, for example, Frueh, Parker and Sedgwick, and Phelan. See also my later comments about meta-language.

7 See Gilson-Ellis, "Get Your Feminine"; "Girling"; "Loa and Behold"; "Mouth Ghosts"; see also Gilson-Ellis and Povall.

8 See Gilson-Ellis, *The Feminine/Oral.*

9 Speaking (as) woman. See Irigaray.

10 Margaret Whitford suggests, "[W]e might understand the idea of a woman's language as the articulation of the unconscious which cannot speak *about* itself, but which can nonetheless make itself heard if the listener is attentive enough" (qtd. in Whitford 39, emphasis in original). This is not the place to dwell on *parler-femme*, except to say that it is a radical proposal that goes beyond the essentialism such a brief summary might suggest.

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