

## review

## Articulate: A response to issues of Rape and Sexual Abuse

Hilary Gilligan & Lorna Healy

A Critical Access Project, ArtHouse, Temple Bar, Dublin.  
February 16th–21st

Jane Kelly in a recent discussion of the work of Stephen Willats has pointed to a generalised nexus of critical concerns in respect of community arts, issue-based work and alternative critical art-practices in general.<sup>1</sup> Citing the work of Hal Foster (who in turn cites the 1930s polemics of Walter Benjamin) Kelly identifies certain key aspects to Willats' methodology. Importance is attached to the fact that the "ideas framing the work, the choice of sites, the imagery, are coordinated, in negotiation". This dimension of negotiation is presented as multifaceted and includes "individuals in the area where the project takes place, the gallery and its curators, the city and its elected representatives" and also what is loosely described as "local community involvement" and the "responses of participants". The project ARTICULATE was initially conceived as a modest intervention into the larger problematic of issue-based work which sought to consider the resources of negotiation in relation to the project of a socially engaged art practice.

Initially artists were invited to submit expressions of interest and/or proposals in respect of a weekend residential dialogue and exchange centred on a specific subject area. The other participants in this exchange would be a small group of non-artists with diverse and particularised relationships and engagements with the specific subject area. Thus for the first phase of ARTICULATE the subject area identified was Rape and Sexual Abuse. The participants in the weekend long exchange were invited from different agencies and constituencies with a specific engagement with the topic - Rape Crisis Workers, Survivors, Law-workers etc. The intense and intimate exchange was facilitated in such a way as to ensure safe and responsible dialogue. The artists' brief was to enter into this dialogue as participants with the objective of realising sometime afterwards, a project which in some way furthered, or was informed by, the open-ended exchange established by the residential weekend. That is to say, they were asked to develop not to document the exchange. They had no brief to represent or to speak for the other participants, but they were requested to listen and in some way respond to the multiple voices present. The artists' were not obliged to realise this practical outcome necessarily as a conventional and discrete artwork. The form of their productive activity was to be at their discretion.

This process culminated recently in the presentation of two art works in Arthouse, a centre for Digital Arts in the trendy Temple Bar area of Dublin. The works were by the artists Hilary Gilligan and Lorna Healy. Hilary Gilligan's work *Articulate Exhibit B* involved a performance embedded in an audio-slide projection installation. Lorna Healy presented *The Dancing Subject*, a short video projection with accompanying audio track featuring the voice of an actor reading a theoretical text intercut with the sounds of young girls laughing and singing.

In Gilligan's work the viewer sat and watched a series of slide dissolves in a darkened room while the artist stood back in a darkened corner of the space, just behind the viewer's preferred position. The slide images began with representations of hair which became bound up with the notion of forensic evidence and inspection. This reading was promoted both by the narrative drift of the accompanying audio-track but also by the presentation of images of evidence-bags and a disposable speculum. There were two particular vectors to the narrative. Firstly, and overridingly, a story was proposed around the construction of legalistic representations of rape and sexual assault. Secondly, and imbricated in this first story, there was a story about the crude and abrupt cutting of the artist's own long

hair. This overdetermined and ambiguous sign of shame / guilt / defiance / refusal / self-negation / self-transformation, finally resolves into a playful acting out of various roles implicated in the legal narrative. Thus the artist appears in a series of slide images goofily playing out the roles of doctor, police officer, barrister and so forth. The central position occupied by images of the artist in the work imputes the status of survivor to her and suggests an autobiographical dimension. The central slide-dissolve presentation is interrupted at several points by an askew lateral projection of varied images of the speculum. Upon the conclusion of the slide-sequence and the audio track, the artist steps forward a little and speaks several short phrases in a contrived and performative manner. Her intonation is suggestive of poetry or formal theatre and abruptly terminates with an alarmingly forceful though not overridingly emotive injunction: "articulate!"

In Healy's work the image of a relatively neutral green open-space with an ambiguous, distant, and vaguely urban horizon-line is projected onto the gallery wall. The camera does not change position or focus. However, there are a number of rhythmically paced edits (cuts and dissolves) which mark off various phases of activity in this open space. Two young girls are shown variously running into, through, and around this space, playing, spinning, singing, laughing, and dancing. The tone of their activity is in part defined by the snippets of a Spice Girls' song discernible in their repertoire. At various points their play converges on the camera which they address directly by blowing raspberries and laughing. This also interacts with the theoretical text being read aloud on the audio-track which is derived from a text by Luce Irigaray and describes the eponymous "dancing subject".

Rather than engage in an explicative reading or a critical evaluation of these two works, these short descriptions may serve as points of departure for a consideration of the larger problematic of issue-based work. However, before pursuing such a direction for discussion it is necessary to provide some preliminary remarks about the general terms of this discussion. It might be argued that the ethnographic paradigm as employed by Hal Foster to describe a general area of practice is perhaps overly focused on the specifics of a North American art scene. Therefore it should not be unproblematically generalised to define the broad remit of socially-engaged practice. The North American cultural debates in respect of cultural pedagogy and critical practice which underpin Foster's discussion have foregrounded throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s the paradigm of identity politics. Issue-based work has recently most often been construed as a question of constituency, alterity and identity, most often understood through the nodal terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, and biography. There is of course a clear historical premise for this manoeuvre. The universalist claims of modernism and the autonomous-aesthetic project both concealed a specific set of interests to do with gender (male) ethnicity (white) and class (privileged). They also both operated to make illegitimate the locating of aesthetic practice in relationship with these very same concerns. (A typical instance of this was the controversy around the 1993 Whitney Biennial.) It is in dialectical tension with these conditions that the issue-based arena has been discursively constructed in North America. Foster's work reproduces this discursive frame hence he draws on the notion of a revision of the Benjaminian formula Artist As Producer in the positioning of the Artist as Ethnographer. The central terms of



HILARY GILLIGAN  
*Articulate*  
*Exhibit B*



LORNA HEALY  
*The Dancing*  
*Subject*



HILARY GILLIGAN  
*Articulate*  
*Exhibit B*

this discussion are "difference" and the "other". The central terms of post-60s oppositional politics in North America have been those of identity and difference.

It is important to register that issue-based work can be construed in terms other than alterity. The term "issue-based" implies a privileging of the discursive and the unresolved as the supporting structure for art practice. *Articulate* attempted in its programme structure to privilege precisely the polyvocal and open-ended discursive dimension. However, in privileging the artists' take on this dialogue it did run the risk of producing the "Aesthetic Evangelist" scenario which proposes the artist as some kind of ideal subject capable of accommodating and transcending the particularised positions of non-artists.<sup>2</sup> In this sense the ethnographic paradigm might be applicable however, this would involve ignoring the specific programme pursued in the project. There is a further dilemma thrown up by the particular space of exhibition. Arthouse and Temple Bar in general are ideologically loaded sites where a boomtime Irish bourgeoisie is busily reinventing itself as culturally progressive and

vital. That the work is consumed in this context is inevitably problematic as it contributes to the myth of reinvention. On the other hand, this is possibly a productive intervention in as much as it attempts to position the issues of rape and sexual abuse in an arena other than moral panic and/or sanitising entertainment. It must be underlined here that both

works under discussion employed devices which attempted to interrupt any simple co-option of the work.

The performative dimension to Gilligan's work rendered the viewer's encounter with an instance of representation ("here is something to do with rape") reflexive: "here is something to do with rape, which is to do with me, but also to do with you". The implication is that responsibility in respect of questions of rape are not simply to do with victims and offenders but to do with all who participate in the circulation of representations of rape. The issue of rape is not identified with an identity or a position but with a multifaceted network of relationships and discursive exchanges. This does not dissolve the experiential density of rape into an endless relay of signifiers but it does interrupt the assumption of an essential truth of rape which can be known from an objective and unimplicated distance.

In a different but related mode Lorna Healy's work also implicates the viewer in the questions of rape and subjectivity. The critical moment of the presentation when the young actresses address the camera, and (medially) the viewer, by blowing raspberries, operates to disrupt the safe-distance of viewing. It is a theatricalised interruption of theatricality. This combined with the modified Irigarayan text definitively challenges the construction of identity through representations of rape. The raspberry blowing interrupts the authoritative masculine voice reading feminist analysis/theory thus:

The dancing or whirling subject offers a line of enquiry which isn't led by the finished art object / art fetish ...allowing for a consideration of the performative aspect of art making ...it also allows for considerations of where and how work is made public. [Raspberries blown.] ...Within Western art, since the Renaissance, rapist and rape have become objects of the artistic narrative. [Raspberries blown] Culture's recurrent representations of brutal victimisation through sexual violence is not only seen within histories of fine art but also across a range of representations within literature, the press, pornography, film, TV, etc. Images are controlled by key institutions i.e. the church, state, art world, social work, counseling and the legal system. ...We are what we can talk about. ...The dominant imagery of the entertainment industry ...persists in portraying the victim



LORNA HEALY  
*The Dancing Subject*

as narcissistic, taboo, sensational and/or eroticised. Cape Fear. Pulp Fiction. Last Exit to Brooklyn. Innocence as sexual commodity. [Laughter].

Clearly, the issue of rape is here construed again as relational and situated within an economy of representation. In arguing to problematise Foster's analysis in its wider application outside his highly localised frame of concerns. I am not proposing to disavow the wealth of critical insight presented within his analysis. Rather I wish to challenge the overall drift of his analysis whereby the terms of alterity are privileged as the defining characteristics of issue-based work (which is variously in opposition to aestheticism / formalism / uncritical pluralism.) Martha Rosler and Grant Kester have also drawn on a specifically North American context to elaborate critical analyses of socially engaged practice but have done so in a way that does not prioritise the logic of othering *tout court*.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to the specific case of *Articulate* there is a good deal to be gained by applying some of Foster's insights in this instance. He has pointed out that the "deconstructive ethnographic approach can become a gambit, an insider game that renders" the art encounter "not more open and public but more hermetic and narcissistic, a place for initiates only where a contemptuous criticality is rehearsed." This is clearly a possible criticism in respect of elements of *Articulate*, although it might be seen to underestimate

the experiential texture of the actual encounter with the work. An important aspect of that encounter was the sense that there is a gap in knowledge which cannot be bridged by appeal to experts, and yet, this gap in knowledge implicates the viewer in some way. A further factor requiring consideration is that the art world continues to demand the discrete artwork product and privilege the moment of exhibition. It is therefore necessary to strategically foreground the methodological and procedural specificity of a project like *Articulate*. Thus the weekend residency and the fact that the enabling organisation is a voluntary collaboration of artists (Critical Access) who are displacing their own direct art production in favour of a facilitative role in respect of the discursive and productive activities of others needed to be underlined. It is not trivial either that this is also a process of self-education and self-enabling on the part of the group. Furthermore the manner in which the *Articulate* show is discursively followed up will be of central importance in displacing the model of the Art "Statement" in favour of an emergent model of ongoing art-dialogue.

#### Coda:

Finally, it needs to be remarked, in respect of the issue-based initiative in general, that there is a wide constituency for whom to challenge their investment in the art object, the transcendent artist, and the autonomous aesthetic as ideological (with the inevitable ideological-unmasking), is quite simply redundant. If we are to engage in issue-based work we must also then be engaged by this issue and by/with this broad constituency. This matter is of course inflected by (but not reducible to) the political terms "left" and "right" or the terms of "identity."

Mick Wilson

#### notes

# Marlborough Maze

Amidst the recent hype surrounding young British art, the pundits promoting this scam overlooked a number of cultural forms that might have provided a more solid platform from which to promote their rather dubious agenda. Early in 1997 the Norton Museum of Art in Florida hosted a major exhibition entitled *An Amazing Art: Contemporary Labyrinths* by Adrian Fisher. Portsmouth based Fisher has been designing labyrinths for donkey's years and played a major role in organising *The Year of the Maze* in 1991, a celebration of the 300th anniversary of Hampton Court, the oldest surviving hedge maze in England.

Many new mazes were built as part of the 1991 celebrations and Fisher bagged the prime spot in Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire. Blenheim occupies the site of the legendary Rosamund's Bower, an architectural labyrinth with heavy defences in which Henry II is said to have installed his mistress Fair Rosamund. According to the story propagated by various popular ballads, when Queen Eleanor finally penetrated the maze in 1176, she forced her rival to drink poison. Blenheim Palace replaced the ruined medieval buildings in the eighteenth century and was given to the First Duke of Marlborough in recognition of his many military victories. The Marlborough family's other famous military scion, Winston Churchill, was born at Blenheim in 1874.

Fisher based his Marlborough Maze design on Grinling Gibbons' Blenheim Palace roof carvings depicting the Panoply of Victory. Seen from above, the lines of yew hedges that make up the labyrinth portray pyramids of cannonballs, a cannon firing, and the air filled with banners, flags and bugles. The maze has entrances on the left and right with a central exit. Two wooden bridges add an exciting additional aspect to the puzzle element of the maze, while simultaneously providing viewing points from which to survey the work. One of Fisher's colour mazes can also be found at Blenheim. This labyrinth consists of nodes connected by coloured paths, the choice of path at each node being determined by the colour of the path previously taken.

Mums and dads stop on the bridges of the main maze to view a piece of symbolism that makes Sarah Lucas look subtle. Children race around the labyrinth enjoying the three dimensionality of the work in the same way that they might relish Tracy Emin's *Everyone I Ever Slept With* tent. The Marlborough Maze isn't difficult to solve, the first time I went in it took about twelve minutes to get out again. Alongside the aesthetic frisson of the mock pompous symbolism, the twists and turns of the labyrinth cause the maze to echo with the noise of laughter and wonderment. The crowds flocking to Blenheim are very different to the audience attracted by young British art. On the surface those using the labyrinth may appear less sophisticated than gallery groupies, but beneath this superficial appearance their aesthetic tastes are actually far more radical.

The institutional defeat of modernism has resulted in an increasing assimilation of art into representational categories of popular culture. The Marlborough Maze is a perfect example of an art that does not have to justify such pleasures to its audience. This has generated a certain amount of confusion in the interpretation of Fisher's work and while his mazes have received coverage everywhere from *Scientific American* to *Der Spiegel*, they are largely ignored by the art press. Art critics generally view Fisher as politically conformist, intellectually timid and an aesthetic revisionist. Such views are extremely parochial since they are based on the surface appearances of Fisher's work at the expense of the wider cultural context.

While young British art has been justified as a demotically voiced assault on politically correct post-modernism, the Marlborough Maze attacks something infinitely more sacrosanct. Woodstock Park in which Blenheim Palace is situated was landscaped by Capability Brown, whose naturalistic aesthetic resulted in the destruction of many mazes and the formal gardens of which they constituted a part. Hampton Court maze only survives today because Brown was told not to touch it. This must have irritated the Royal Gardener, since he lived in the house next to the maze for twenty years!

The Marlborough Maze is much more than simply a slap in the face for aesthetically 'educated' taste or a simple parody that sets ghosts walking. Despite Fisher's unqualified regard for the voluptuous pleasures of popular culture, he does not seek to assimilate himself to popular culture in fazed admiration, as if his only ambition was an anti-intellectual release of libidinal energy. Rather, he treats the aesthetically despised pleasures of maze making and walking as something that is first nature and commonplace and mutually defining of subjectivity. The labyrinth is a vibrant cultural form precisely because it has avoided the aesthetic hype of the contemporary art market. As such, Fisher and maze walking represent the future direction of visual culture.

Stewart Home