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## Contemporary performance art by Helena Walsh: embodiment as empowerment in an Irish context

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### Résumé

Depuis les années 1970, la performance, a permis aux artistes d'utiliser leur corps pour remettre en cause le pouvoir patriarcal tel qu'il s'exerce sur les femmes. En Irlande, où le corps féminin s'est trouvé au cœur des débats sur la contraception, l'avortement ou le divorce, la pratique de la performance au féminin s'est avérée particulièrement pertinente pour substituer au corps allégorique et fétichisé un corps réel et organique. Dans ses performances, Helena Walsh incite les spectateurs à percevoir l'effet de l'idéologie sur le corps physique. L'incarnation et l'incorporation lui permettent d'imposer une corporalité palpable et de ré-examiner certains dossiers de l'histoire.

**Mots-clés:** Performance – Allégorie – Nationalisme – Avortement – Contraception  
*Magdalene Laundries* - Prostitution

### Abstract

Ever since the 1970s, performance artists have used their bodies as a means to question the patriarchal control of women. In Ireland, where the body is at the center of debates over contraception, abortion and divorce, feminist performance art has proved particularly pertinent to substitute the real experiential body to the allegorical or fetishized female body. Through her performances, Helena Walsh incites the viewers to respond to the effect of ideology on the physical body. Embodiment, impersonation and incorporation make the body explicit and re-open historical wounds.

**Key-words:** Performance art – Allegory – Nationalism – Abortion – Contraception  
*Magdalene Laundries* - Prostitution

Irish artist Helena Walsh, one of Ireland's prominent live art artists, has exhibited in Ireland, Great-Britain, where she is now working, and abroad. She has also co-organized *Labour*, a group exhibition featuring 11 female performance artists. Her PhD (Drama Department of Queen Mary University, London) and her critical writings explore the performing body in a feminist perspective. Her practice testifies to the vibrancy of performance art in today's Ireland, a vibrancy which evidences the relevance of this art form for a reassessment of the political, social, or visual representation of the female body. Like other performance artists working in or on Ireland, Helena Walsh situates her practice within a European artistic tradition stretching back to Marina Abramović (Morisson, 2012) while adapting the militancy of this artistic idiom to issues related to abortion, motherhood, and the confinement of women to the domestic sphere in Ireland<sup>1</sup>.

Since the 1970s, the contemporary feminine art scene has been a political arena where women battle for self-representation (O'Reilly, 2009, 17) and reopen gender-related debates. European theories on gender have long equated masculinity with the rational mind and agency as opposed to femininity, associated with the body, emotionality and receptivity (Campbell, 2009, 8). Since the 1970s, female performance art has been used to reverse the dichotomous construction of man as self/subject and woman as other/object. Performance art, as an embodied, corporeal practice, has challenged the gendered distribution of roles on the art scene and the myth of the masculine creator engendering art that is disconnected from life: "while abstract artists favored an intellectual and detached approach to art, performance artists restored bodily presence and relational subjectivity" (Creissels, 2013, 76). By turning the objectified and metaphorical image of femininity into "a confrontational and self-conscious subject" (O'Reilly, 2009, 13), female artists stage their bodies as a weapon against invisibility, silencing and oppression. As a matter of fact, the agency which characterizes performance art contradicts the passivity long assigned to women: "the female body becomes "a contested site –a battleground for competing ideologies" (Conboy, 1997, 8). Indeed, feminist performance art uses the real, organic body as material but also tackles the representations of the female body –the body-image, the social, relational, the fantasied or the emotional body.

1 The 1937 constitution celebrated women as mothers and introduced the marriage bar which excluded women from certain jobs. The 1935 law which banned the sale and advertisement of contraceptives was repealed in 1979 only. Abortion is still restricted to specific cases and the law against abortion was consolidated in 1983. On the issue of abortion, see Randall, V., 1992, "The Politics of Abortion: Ireland in Comparative Perspective", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Women and Irish Politics, 121-128; Smyth, L., 2005, *Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland*, Aldershot, Ashgate; Martin, A.K., 2000, "Death of a Nation: transnationalism, bodies and abortion in late twentieth century Ireland", in Mayer T., *Gender Ironies of Nationalism, Sexing the Nation*, London, Routledge, 65-88.

By turning their own bodies into a tool for political expression, feminist artists have undoubtedly challenged aesthetic, ethical and political norms (Jones, 1998, 13). They expose not an originary, true, or redemptive body but the sedimentary layers of signification that their bodies harbor (Schneider, 1992, 3). As British sociologist Bryan S. Turner notes, "the body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing –a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity. The body is the most proximate and immediate feature of my social self [...] and at the same time an aspect of my personal alienation in the natural environment" (Jones, 1998, 12). Being a relational and contextual art form, performance is particularly apt to convey the multifaceted potentialities of the body and to explore the many entangled meanings which riddle the body, thereby "bringing ghosts to visibility" (Schneider, 1997, 2).

Like other female artists of her generation<sup>2</sup>, Helena Walsh uses her own body to place women back at the core of Irish history and contemporary society. With this artistic background very much in mind, the curators of the Labour Project hint at the "possibilities [of performance art] for directing the traumatic histories and realities embedded in Irish culture towards the development of empowered feminist discourses" (Cadman et al., 2012). Helena Walsh claims out that her live art "seeks to positively violate the preconceived systems, borders and rules that construct gender and impinge on individual identity" (Walsh and Healy, 6). She addresses several facets of the enculturated and sexualized female body: the values of domesticity, which women have internalized; the regulatory practices of bodily ornamentation and body discipline; and motherhood, which is more specifically tied to Irish culture. Irish history and memory lie at the very core of her works. The allegorical female figure that has long embodied the Irish Nation is kicked off her pedestal. By re-enacting history through embodiment, impersonation or incorporation performance artists create a different connection to the past and delve into the "historical vacuum" (Smith, 2007, 433) surrounding the sexual oppression of Irish women. As Margaret Ward writes in "The Missing Sex" (Boland, 1994, 218), women are part of history, not on the fringes of it even though in Ireland, nationalistic heroines have been ignored by historians and women more generally have been written out of history<sup>3</sup>. Though feminist groups were created in Ireland<sup>4</sup>, until very recently, the Church was instrumental in maintaining a status

2 One may name Louise Walsh, Pauline Cummins, Amanda Coogan, and Kira O'Reilly among others. See Morisson, 2012.

3 It must be borne in mind that in Ireland, women were excluded from direct action as national citizens (Ryan and Ward, 2004, 2). Irish women have always been involved in nationalist rebellions: Cumann na mBan, the feminine branch of the IRA, gathered 3,000 members during the War of Independence and played a key role but their participation has remained largely invisible (Ryan, in Ryan and Ward, 2004, 46).

4 The first women's liberation group was created in 1971; the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) was created in 1973 and aimed at empowering women; the Women Against Imperialism was set up in 1978. Other groups tackle specific women's issues ranging from rape to job discrimination.

quo on abortion and sexuality<sup>5</sup>. The election of Mary Robinson in 1990 and Mary McAleese in 1997 brought much hope for change and feminist groups such as the Irish Feminist Network, and Cork Feminista fight hard for gender equality. If the body has been in the center of political debates in Ireland, it has also been crucial to women's art practices, particularly in the field of performance.

Walsh's artistic apparatus consolidates rather than clarifies the multi-layeredness of the body in an Irish context. Alienation is dwelt upon in the two performances that this paper purports to analyze, namely *The Wrens*<sup>6</sup> and *Invisible Stains*<sup>7</sup>. Two other performances dealing with similar issues will equally be scrutinized: *Consuming Colonies* and *The Red Case*. Far from merely commemorating female victims, these works replace historical discourse –wavering between victimization and neglect— by a physical, embodied experience of the past. The body of the artist acts like a proxy that reconnects the spectators to a traumatic history.

### ***The Wrens (2009-2013)***

In *The Wrens*, Helena Walsh pays a tribute to the Irish prostitutes known as 'the wrens' who gathered nearby the military camp of The Curragh, Co. Kildare and its vicinity during the 1860s and 1870s. These women, whose life is relatively well-documented (Luddy, 2007, 61-76), were described as "wretched and desperate outcasts" looking like wild animals and stripped of all femininity (Luddy, 2007, 68). In her performance, Walsh embodies one of them. She rests under a tangle of branches which evokes the nests in which the prostitutes lived (ill. 1). The artist drew her inspiration from illustrations published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1867) in an article on the wrens by James Greenwood, a social observer of Victorian society. The description is fraught with empathy but most people condemned the prostitutes: "There are, in certain parts of Ireland and especially upon the Curragh of Kildare, hundreds of women, many of them brought up respectably, a few perhaps luxuriously, now living day after day, week after week, and month after month, in a state of solid heavy wretchedness, that no mere act of imagination can conceive" (Greenwood, 1867). The journalist argued that "contrary to popular opinion, the women did not live in the furze because they loved vice. They were there because it was known that those who sought refuge in the workhouse at Nas lived in even worse conditions" (Costello, 2012). Their belongings, saucepans and

5 The marriage bar (keeping married women out of working life) ended in 1973, a few years before the Employment Equality Act (1977). Divorce remained illegal until the 1995 referendum which allowed divorce under conditions but by a very narrow margin (50.3%).

6 *Daytime Drama, I'm With You*, Rivington Place, London 2013.

7 *Invisible Stains* was performed in several different places: *Right Here, Right Now* (collective show), Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, 2010 ; *Transversal*, Dublin, 2010 ; *Response*, Landguard Fort, 2010 ; *I'm With You*, 2010 and *The Fringe Out West*, Strokestown Park House and The National Famine Museum of Ireland, 2011.

crockery are described in these accounts, which enabled Walsh to recreate the nests faithfully. The artist sits on an upturned saucepan while a bottle of whisky placed behind her hints at these women's drunkenness. The wrens were vilified by the population and safely confined to their nests: "These women provoked fear and fascination and were the polarised opposite to society's expectations of how women should behave and how they should appear in public" (Luddy, 2007, 62). The artist's dress, which is in keeping with contemporary descriptions<sup>8</sup>, testifies to these women's desire to seduce. Femininity is encapsulated in the golden high-heeled shoes, the tulle hat and the short white dress that the artist is wearing. By borrowing from past representations and popular images of femininity, Walsh makes clear that she questions representations. Like other feminist performers (Cindy Sherman for instance), Walsh is aware that "the battlefield of identity is inextricably wrapped up in the histories of the way identities have been marked, imaged, reproduced in the realm of cultural imagery" (Schneider, 1997, 10). Walsh is interested not in women as an essential category but in the way some women were victims of widespread representations and reduced to objects of moral discourse. Now, performance turns the symbolic into the literal, the object into a subject, the category into individuality.

In *The Wrens*, the stereotypical representations of purity and glamour are negated as the artist paints one of her leg in camouflage green before soiling her dress and skin with the paint (ill. 2). This gesture is reminiscent of Carolee Schneemann's use of paint, grease and chalk on her naked body in *Eye Body* (1963), a performance transferring the abstract expressionists' techniques onto the female body. In *The Wrens*, the green paint explicitly keys prostitution to the presence of the military. As a matter of fact, up to 500 prostitutes lived in the wrens and its vicinity; in 1879, 2,900 prostitutes were prosecuted for trespassing on the Curragh Camp (Luddy, 2007, 68). The camouflaged female body symbolizes the tacit acceptance of prostitution by the military and the government<sup>9</sup> (Luddy, 2007, 61-63). However, by painting her own legs in green, Walsh also restores agency and self-will.

Many feminist theoreticians, drawing their inspiration from the anthropological writings of Mary Douglas as well as from the writings of Foucault and Bourdieu, have viewed the body as a surface on which the central rules and hierarchies are inscribed and reinforced: the female body is submitted to exacting and normalizing disciplines such as diet, make up, and dress (Bordo in Conboy, 1997, 90-91).

8 "Their clothing consisted of a frieze skirt with nothing on top except another frieze around the shoulders. In the evenings when the younger women went to meet the soldiers, in the uninhabited gorse patches, they dressed up in crinolines, petticoats and shoes and stockings" (Costello, 2012, <http://www.curragh.info/articles/wrens.htm>)

9 The government eventually tried to solve the problem because many soldiers were with venereal diseases. Women with VD were not treated as no doctor would come and visit the Wrens.

Feminist phenomenology has overcome the mind-body division and the ensuing sex-gender dichotomy by positing that oppressive systems operate through bodies which become “practiced and subjected bodies” (Bartky, 1990, 71) and that “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 519). Elizabeth Grosz’s emphasis on corporeality, as well as Judith Butler’s conceptualization of gender as being performative, gives much credence to feminist performance and its capacity to probe the construction of the gendered body. In *the Wrens*, Walsh uses body language rather than articulate discourse to testify to the predicament of the prostitutes. Far from victimizing them, she occupies the space of the gallery in a defiant and arrogant manner. She reclines provocatively in a licentious stance, splaying her naked legs. This pose is deliberately at odds with accepted representations of feminine behaviour. Indeed, women are known to be more restricted than men in their movements; they must display grace and an eroticism restrained by modesty; they are normally reluctant to stretch their bodies. Undeniably, “woman’s body language speaks eloquently, though silently, of her subordinate status” (Sandra Lee Bartky in Conboy, 1997, 134–135). As Luna Dolezal contends, body shame, which may be a mechanism of social control, functions in a context of social interaction and visibility (Dolezal, 2015, xv). Walsh’s unashamed transgressive and insubordinate position erases shame while the performance, as a re-enactment, reintroduces the lost relational equilibrium between the viewers and the character.

So as to subvert imposed acts of discipline, many feminist artists have soiled or stained their bodies or clothes. For Walsh and other performance artists, staining is “a creative gesture, a form of mark making, yet also as a politically subversive act, a retort to notions of purity” (Walsh and Healy, 2011, 7). To challenge norms of conduct further, in *The Wrens*, Walsh eats grains that she spits on stage. Purity is therefore desecrated in many different respects by the artist’s secreting organism. It is Julia Kristeva’s claim that the female nude in art, an icon of idealised feminine sexuality, has transformed the base nature of woman’s nakedness into culture and removed “the abhorrent reminders of her fecund corporeality –secretions, pubic hair, genitals, and disfiguring veins or blemishes all left out of the frame” (Ussher, 3). Secretions and excretions are instantiations of bodily excess. They bring the real body to visibility. Walsh’s ‘unwomanly’ position and the smears on her body—including her face—and dress are a response to the idealized representations of women as Odalisques. While male artists have often fantasized about women in Oriental harems, Walsh crudely hints at prostitution in this work, following in the path of Marina Abramović who, in 1975, had exchanged roles with a prostitute in Amsterdam (*Exchanging the Role*, 1975)<sup>10</sup>. As Rebecca Schneider shows, “the prostitute appears to embody a paradox: as both commodity and seller she embodied a bizarre and

<sup>10</sup> This act of self-display was strongly feminist in tone and foreshadowed the self-eroticization of many other feminist performers (e.g. Yayoi Kusama or Hannah Wilke).

potentially terroristic collapse of active and passive, subject and object, into a single entity” (Schneider, 1997, 24). In Ireland, prostitution has received little attention so far. Back in 1992, a public sculpture was commissioned to commemorate the lives of women working in a red-light district of Belfast. Because she was reluctant to reduce the representation of working women to prostitution, Louise Walsh, the artist selected, conceived a group in bronze referring to poorly-paid female workers and unpaid housewives. As the initial brief mentioned prostitution, this commission provoked a controversy and the work, to be placed in Amelia Street initially, was displaced. For a long time, Irish nationalists argued that prostitution was correlated to the presence of British garrisons. Walsh emphasizes the colonial dimension of this situation: “As Irish sex workers servicing the British military while Ireland remained under British colonial rule, ‘The Wrens’ were one of the most vilified groups of Irish women and suffered much violence”<sup>11</sup>. In the *Pall Mall Gazette* articles on the Wrens, the women are called bush-women on account of the nests they lived in and are compared to Hottentots or Aborigines, which betrays the racist and colonial approach to misery at that time. The slang meaning of the word ‘bush’, that is female pubic hair, is more disparaging. Subsequently, the Irish nation state constructed the myth of the purity and moral righteousness of Irish women so that prostitution was ignored for years even by historians consistently stressing Ireland’s morality (Luddy, 2013, 2).

The orange, white, and green fur scarf that Walsh wears around her neck refers to the national construction of femalehood. Sexuality in the Republic of Ireland was constructed on the basis of Victorian sexuality, that is as a shameful impulse to be controlled and repressed, as well as through Irish Catholic perceptions of morality. Both the Irish Republic and Victorian ideals promoted motherhood as the highest achievement for women. The perfect woman had to be highly emotional, sensitive, childlike, and sexually naïve. Women were overwhelmingly portrayed as helpless and unable to make informed decisions (McGrath, undated, 10). They were seen exclusively as child-rearers and home-makers (Boland, 1994, 49). Beyond the shores of Ireland also, “men have produced and enforced a representation of the female body as passive, helpless, or in danger of violation” (Conboy, 1997, 3). Women’s sexuality, long seen exclusively through male eyes, was also misrepresented as passive (Ryan, 2010, 93; Viney, in Boland, 1994, 59) with censorship silencing the expression of female sexual desire (Ryan, 2010, 94). Irish nationalism, and its emphasis on motherhood, has tightened this repressive framework. In *Nationalism and Sexuality*, George L. Mosse demonstrates that nationalism entails the promotion of women as national symbols, as guardians of the continuity and immutability of the nation, and as the embodiment of its respectability (Ryan and Ward, 2010, 1). In Ireland, “women have been recognised, not as subjects with their own identity, but have instead been reduced to symbols of the nation” (Meaney, 1991, 203; Ryan 2010;

<sup>11</sup> See the artist’s web site: <http://www.helenawalsh.com/> (last accessed January 2016).



Boland, 1994, 188-189). One can find sacrilegious depictions of Mother Ireland as a whore in Seán Herron's *The Whore Mother* (1973) (Steele, 200) or Patrick Graham's *My Darkish Rosaleen* (Ireland as a Whore) (1982). In *After Labour*, one of Walsh's most radical performances, the artist extracts the Irish flag out of her vagina. This parodistic, carnivalesque delivery duplicates Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (East Hampton, New York, 1975) during which the artist painted her naked body with mud before extracting from her vagina a paper scroll that she read. In both performances, the mock umbilical cord first looks like a penis. Walsh adds a further twist to the desecration by placing the Irish flag in her vagina, that is to say by replacing embodiment (the female allegory of Ireland) by incorporation. In giving birth to the flag, Walsh reclaims her position in the body politics.

Stances and poses, costumes and props are semiotic devices essential to live art; the decor is equally meaningful. In *The Wrens*, the nest symbolizes entrenchment. In many societies and cultures, women's space is "an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined" (Bartky in Conboy, 1997, 134-135). In several of her works, Walsh positions herself in an enclosed space, standing on a mound, behind a door, or surrounded by objects only to lay a siege. This position is not coterminous with exclusion since, by turning the notions of confinement and entrapment (Conboy et al. 1997, 2) into literal set ups, Walsh builds up a visual syntax of resistance. Whereas the wrens were indeed contained in the area of their nests, the artist occupies the space of the gallery. The ditches which sheltered the "uncivilized" wrens were on the margins of society, in a space in-between the city and the military camp. Conversely, the gallery with its white walls and clean floor epitomizes culture and intellectual domination. The performance is an act of territorial occupation and the artist's alert gaze seeks to invert power relations, surveillance and controlling, to borrow from Michel Foucault's theory in *Discipline and Punish*.

As noted by historian Maria Luddy, if the wrens lived in the outskirts of the villages and the camp, they also exercised forms of rebellion that "constantly violated the boundaries set for them" by visiting the villages nearby and defying the condemnatory gazes of the inhabitants (Luddy, 2007, 74). These women's refusal of their own invisibility is echoed in the performance. Walsh's pose and defiant gaze testify to their rebelliousness and compensates for the silence and hypocrisy over prostitution. During the 19th century, if prostitution was considered to be a huge problem in Ireland, it was mainly because of its visibility (McGrath, 6): "All women who worked as prostitutes were exposed to a rhetoric of condemnation, from the police, from the local community and from the clergy, though society was relatively at ease ignoring the problem as long as it was hidden from the public view" (Luddy, 2013, 75). The visibility of Walsh's body and her stares at the public restore agency and counter the hypocritical silence of the military, the government

and clergy over prostitution. The artist's individual presence, which differs from the collective perception of the wrens as forming a "colony", leads the spectators to new awareness as they get involved physically in the restaging of hushed history and the reopening of wounds.

To protest against denial, silence, and gagging female performance artists "produce new modes for communicating what it is to be without discourse" (Walsh and Healy, 2011, 7). The absence of a cut-out performing stage or space separating the performer from the spectators induces a close proximity with the audience. In all her public performances, Walsh boldly stares at the viewers, who thereby feel some discomfort. While well-disciplined women cast their eyes downwards, and nice girls "learn to avoid the bold and unfettered staring of the "loose" woman who looks at her" (Bartky in Conboy, 1997, 134), Walsh gazes straight at the viewers, impersonating the emboldened Olympia in Manet's painting (1863). However, while the defiant gaze of the Olympia painted by the French master existed only under Manet's authorizing signature, being "a defiant gaze framed by an authorizing gaze" (Schneider, 1997, 25), the prostitute embodied by Walsh has become a subject capable of self-representation. Like other feminist performers, Walsh thereby subverts the to-be-looked-at-ness which Laura Mulvey famously defined:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 2010, 44)

As Peggy Phelan argues, in *Unmarked, the Politics of Performance* (Phelan, 1993, 10), women should not believe that increased visibility equals increased power but should aim at representational shifts and a deconstruction of the ideology of visibility. Walsh's bold gazes are part of this shift and the ensuing emphasis on a Lacanian reciprocal gaze rather than on a fetishized image of women eliciting male desire. In this respect, performance is a means of resisting the metaphorical reduction of women which Peggy Phelan views as hierarchical and vertical. Performance art does involve the viewers who cannot remain passive beholders, nor be pleasantly entertained; contemporary performance creates a reciprocal and conditional situation often fraught with ambiguity and in which the artist, artwork and viewer together negotiate an intellectual and sensory experience (O'Reilly, 2009, 192-193). The female body is no longer fetishized but proves a subjective sentient body. Through the individualization or particularization that performance art induces, the relation between the self and the other is revisited and history is translated into subjective experience facilitating inter-relatedness and empathy.

Literalness, duration, and silence allow the artist to strike and interpellate the viewers. In *The Wrens*, *The Red Case* and *Invisible Stains*, silence opens up a critical space: “in fact, in this noisiest of centuries, silence has emerged as one of the richest areas of critical enquiry and most powerful elements of artistic expression” (McDonald, 1999, iii). Susan Sontag wrote that “traditional art invites a look. Art that is silent engenders a stare”, adding “the artist’s activity is the creating or the establishing of silence ; the efficacious artwork leaves silence in its wake” (Sontag, 1969, 16 and 23). Helena Walsh’s silence has a double function in that it draws attention to the silencing of women’s plight and is a tool for empowerment. As the artist claims:

A long history of silence has been observed in Ireland, to endure, to say nothing, has been until recently commonplace. Nothing: a word, a concept, a feeling. Silence has been of great interest to many artists but certainly to many Irish artists. Silence is a space, a space that you enter, it has a beginning and an end and is irrevocably, inextricably connected to time. It is intangible and is most powerful in the experience of it. Perhaps this is one of the many reasons that durational performance has been so popular in Ireland. For it offers a space, to explore many histories, both personal and national linked to those silences in a very direct, honest and accessible way. A way to speak without words, to speak beyond words. (Walsh and Healy, 2011, 4)

***Invisible Stains* (2010), *The Red Case* (2013) and *Containing Colonies* (2007): from embodiment to incorporation.**

In *Invisible Stains*, The artist’s silence takes on a new meaning owing to the site where the performance takes place, namely Kilmainham gaol<sup>12</sup>: “On arrival at the Gaol, a crowd had gathered and was already moving amongst the performers, who seemed at first like remnants from hidden histories trapped here. Physically present, yet as if out of another time. Their movements slowed down in constant repetitive action, or silently still” (Shaffery). As Walsh herself explains, silence enables the artist to betray the discourse and mechanisms imposing silence upon the victims (Linsley and Walsh, 2012, 162-164). Silence is all the more compelling in durational performances which force the participants (rather than viewers) to experience and acknowledge silencing.

<sup>12</sup> As stated in note 7, the work was performed in other sites as well. The artist has produced a video also entitled *Invisible Stains* (see <http://www.helenawalsh.com/>) which, for want of space, we shall not discuss here.

*Invisible Stains*, a four-hour long performance which was part of a collective show, refers to the Magdalene Laundries, institutions run by Catholic nuns in which unmarried mothers and women of ill-repute were submitted to forced labour to cleanse their impure souls. The title refers both to the invisibility of these ‘sinful’ women and to the denial of their fate in the Irish society and history. In the hall of the prison, which recreates the panoptical organization of labour in the laundries, Walsh performs repetitive acts. Like Mary-Magdalene, the repentant prostitute, and the victims of the Magdalene Laundries, the artist washes linen (ill. 3). She fills baby-gros with washing powder so that they look like motionless dummies that the artist rocks gently. On the back of each baby-gro, a number is printed together with the word “unknown”. The baby-gro is then repetitively plunged into the bucket of water until it loses its human shape (ill. 4). The water dripping in the buckets looks like milk. Once emptied of the washing powder, the baby-gros are squeezed until they look like both phallus and woman’s breasts, and put to dry on an S-Hook. At times, the artist addresses someone in the audience and says “She fell asleep in the Sun”, a quote from Pierce Hutchinson’s poem on babies born from unwed women. Walsh views the regular sounds of the dripping water hitting galvanized bucket or the splashing, sounding as “a contained, measured, throbbing” (Walsh, 2013, 344).

The alienation induced by the repeated gestures is made obvious due to duration. Duration is particularly pertinent in Kilmainham Gaol, a place of long confinement where time seems to have come to a standstill. Pioneered by Abramović<sup>13</sup>, durational performance, which strains the artist’s body while deepening the uncanniness of repetition, impacts the viewing experience as it forces the viewer to bear and share the performer’s pain or alienation (Morisson, 2016). As artists do stretch their physical limits, the audience becomes the uncomfortable witness of bodily pain. Walsh’s fatigue and strain, thus shared with the spectators, is conducive to empathy. Both silence and duration bestow solemnity upon the work (Walsh, 2013, 343) in that they create a breach in time which runs counter to the swift rhythm of contemporary life so as to leave room for understanding and interpretation. The repetition induced by duration is both obsessive and comforting (Howel, 30), an attempt at reaching at the unconscious and losing the ego, as well as holding an image for the viewers (Amanda Coogan, in Walsh 2013, 343). Now, cleaning is a powerful image.

The washing of the cloth evokes cleanliness, domestic tasks, but also the erasure of such stories from national history even though the last Magdalene Laundry closed in 1996. Despite the receding power of the Church since the economic boom, and in spite of protests from the victims after the bodies of 155 women buried in unmarked graves on a Dublin Laundry site were excavated in 1993, the scandal over

<sup>13</sup> Marina Abramović, who exerted a strong influence on young performance artists, had consistently explored the limits her body could endure.

the Laundries is still largely hushed. The institutional records have been withheld since 1900. Moreover, the State has offered the victims neither compensation nor recognition and denied the 2010 IHRC report, which recorded many human rights violations in the laundries. The scandal that burst out in 2014 over the mass grave of babies in Tuam in an institution for unmarried mothers run by the Bon Secours order has put the laundries system in the limelight. The silence in Walsh's performance is therefore both a reminder that the 'penitents' on rehabilitation had to remain silent as they washed linen and a reference to the silence imposed by the State, the "social amnesia" over the Laundries (Mercier, 2013, 31).

The performance echoes many aspects of oppression in the Laundries:

This exploitation included constant surveillance, physical and emotional abuse, forced silence and prayer, invasion of privacy, deprivation of education opportunity, denial of leisure and rest, and deprivation of identity (through the imposition of 'house names', the cutting of hair and the confiscation of personal clothing and its replacement with shapeless and featureless uniforms). Though the women were deemed to be residents of their own volition many survivors state they were never informed of their right to leave and were forcibly contained. (Mercier, 2013, 40)

The artist's breasts are bandaged to evoke the oppressive containment of the female bodies as well as the repression of motherhood. In the laundries, women were forced to bind their breasts as a means of maintaining modesty (Walsh and Healy, 2011). Her heavy dress, hampering her movement is made up of nappies and baby-gros, which gives the impression that she is physically overwhelmed by the burden of her sins. By performing in Kilmainham Gaol, Walsh suggests that the Laundries were part of the Irish "carceral archipelago" in that they sought to contain deviancy (Mercier, 2013, 31). The Magdalene Institution served the functions of removing moral contaminants from social circulation, providing moral education for the 'respectable' Irish woman and creating deviancy in order to control women (Mercier, 2013, 45). The panoptical architecture of the gaol evokes the constant surveillance of the fallen women while the viewers become either witnesses of voyeurs in their own turn.

On the boxes of washing powder, Walsh has stuck the Proclamation of Independence, thereby reminding the viewers of the responsibility of the State. As Gerardine Meaney argues, women had become "scapegoats of national identity" (Meaney, 1994, 188). The recent debates over abortion have been linked to attempts to define the moral, political and economic boundaries of the Irish nation in a European and global context (Martin, 2000, 66). Besides, the performance suggests that the analogy between women and the nation is not merely a symbolic or abstract representation but has a direct impact on women's bodies (Martin, 2000, 67).

Similar issues are dwelt upon in *The Red Case*, a three-day durational performance (Something Human, The Terminal, Push, 2013) performed in a warehouse in Bermondsey, a hostel in London Bridge, and its surroundings. Each of the ten artists involved had to check in, to give their identity card on entering the precincts; they could not go out but could bring a 10 kg bag with them. Walsh's performance, whose title refers to what is known as 'the X case', evokes the secret journey of many Irish women trying to get an abortion abroad. In 1992, the Irish state had banned a young woman pregnant after being raped to abort. In the artist's own words, "this performance sought to offer a retort to the draconian patriarchal ideologies that deny women bodily integrity and subvert the shaming and silencing of women from Ireland who have abortions"<sup>14</sup>. The artist drew a large X on the ground before placing Irish flags stuck in Catholic altar bread reading 'Exiling Women's Rights'. Then, she placed a red suitcase on the X, the interior of which was full of statistics on abortion, and sat in it, replacing figures and statistics by her real, individual female body. Being surrounded by a fence made up of a tattered Irish flag, she occupied a space which was redolent both of defensive battlements and sacrificial places or funeral pyres. In the end of the performance, the artist sat in the case, her legs splayed to reveal a bleeding vagina evoking abortion in an utterly literal, physical way. The re-embodiment at play in this performance reasserts the fact that abortions are first of all lived and corporeal experiences which affect the body. The artist's intention is to make the issue visible and to put the women's body in the center of the debates. Both the duration of the performance, turned into a siege, its explicit references, and the body of the artist stretching well out of the suitcase, splayed and bleeding, partake of an aesthetics of visibility and empowerment.

Impersonation, embodiment are used by female artists eager to disclose the layers of meaning attached to the female body and to foreground what Rebecca Schneider names 'the explicit body' (Schneider, 1997). As previously suggested, Walsh does not shy away from incorporating national symbols. In *Consuming colonies*, a thought-provoking performance which the artist created after the birth of her first child, she cooked her placenta and offered it to male guests gathered around a long rectangular table. Closely tied to the mother-child relation and the image of the mother as feeder, the placenta is an anti-symbol of motherhood which male eaters are forced to absorb<sup>15</sup>. By incorporating part of the maternal body, Walsh's guests reverse the Greek myth of Athena's birth. As a matter of fact, Athena was born not from a woman but from Zeus after he had swallowed up the body of his pregnant wife (Moirá Gatens in Conboy, 1997, 82). Feminist performance has often relied on

<sup>14</sup> The artist's website, [www.helenawalsh.com/](http://www.helenawalsh.com/)

<sup>15</sup> However, recently, eating placenta (human placentophagy), which is what many mammals do, has been said to be invigorating and a protector against post-partum depression. There is no scientific evidence of that but the artist, who is a vegetarian, may have born this in mind too.



the explicit body, on “the explosive literality” of the body (Schneider, 1997, 2). As Julia Kristeva suggests in *The Powers of Horror*, the maternal body, as the threshold of existence, is both sacred and soiled, holy and hellish, attractive and repulsive: it is an abject body, an ambiguous one, an object of worship and terror (Ussher, 2006, 7). Such ambiguity is particularly salient in *Consuming Colonies*, a performance riddled with a host of meanings. Being a vegetarian, the artist must be sensitive to the analogy that many feminist writers have established between meat-eating and the sexual consumption of the female body. Besides, she keys the physical experiences of the female body to political conflicts involving the occupation of one country by another. In feminist writings, the female body has repeatedly been compared to a territory to be conquered (Conboy, 1997, 2). The image of the female body as a space to conquer was used by Kathy Prendergast in her *Body Map Series* (1980s) but whereas the latter softens the penetration and occupation of the body by using soft colours and the visual language of cartography (Nash, 1994), Walsh substitutes an acting-out to a metaphor. Last but not least, she composes the scene as a parody of Christ’s Last Supper. Christ’s words, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” come to mind as the placenta is served to the guests. Walsh also parodies artistic representations of the scene while undermining the symbolism at the core of the Eucharist. The placenta is not a symbol of motherhood; it is a most concrete piece of the reproductive body and a symbol of women’s power to create life.

Annette Khun explains that there are three feminist strategies of resistance: censorship, feminist practices of representations, which Walsh’s works exemplify, and feminist critical practice (Conboy, 1997, 204). Criticism, and curatorial projects, may indeed be a political practice. As a curator and a writer, Helena Walsh creates a discursive work which runs parallel to her performances. The collective dimension of *Labour*, gathering 11 live artists must be stressed. In her seminal writings, Simone de Beauvoir had already underscored that women have always had problems organizing because they have no past, no origin, no religion of their own (Conboy, 1997, 6). Collective art projects have emerged worldwide to foster a sense of solidarity and resistance between women artists. Collective performance may instantiate Monique Wittig’s useful distinction between woman (the myth, the political and ideological formation) and women (a class in which fight is possible) (Conboy, 1997, 313-316). As a matter of fact, ‘women’ does not preclude individual selves nor does it negate the existence of individual subjects. Collective performance illustrates the presence of the subject within the category of class, that is the articulation of private narratives within women, as class. Helena Walsh has also authored the catalogue of *Brutal Silence* (2011) turning the eponymous silence into a sharp critical voice: her text intends to offer an “insight into some of the issues being dealt with in live art in an Irish context while simultaneously offering a grounding of these issues within a broader historical context.” Both on the artistic front and on the critical front, Helena Walsh wages a war against invisibility which may open many eyes.

## Illustrations



Helena Walsh, *The Wrens*, (2013), Daytime Drama, I’m With You, Rivington Place, London (Photo: Christa Holka), courtesy of the artist.



Helena Walsh, *Invisible Stains*, (2010), performed at Right Here, Right Now, Kilmainham Gaol Dublin (Photo: Joseph Carr), courtesy of the artist.



Helena Walsh, *The Red Case*, (2013), as part of *The Terminal*, London (Photo: Dominic Johnson), courtesy of the artist

More images are available on the artist's website. URL: <http://www.helenawalsh.com/>



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