

Fabulous Fictions and Corporealities

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World-building. Hypothetical Fabulation. Benign Monstrosities.

My thoughts filled with these words and ideas when I first encountered Celina Muldoon's work *Sirens* in 2019. Four years later Muldoon has evolved and distilled her concerns and artistic language into a monumental multi-part project *Kurnugia NOW!* This work explores how the understanding of identity formation and subjectivity can promote agency and the behavioural change necessary to address the most pressing issue of our day, the climate and biodiversity crisis.

Muldoon's innovative artistic language over the last decade has engaged with communion and connections between subjectivities, between groups within space, time and materiality. *Kurnugia NOW!* employs the productive strategies she has developed to explore relationships between narrative identity, collective experience in performance and how the behaviour of people can be ushered for beneficial emotional and empathic purpose.

This essay aims to discuss how Muldoon has developed and refined her methods, and put them to good use. I also situate her work in a national and international contemporary art context and show how this unique artist's work builds on its aesthetic and conceptual precursors. Muldoon's practice also exists in a vibrant contemporary conversation with creative peers, to speak about and perform critical topics. As my area of research is performance art, I interrogate and examine this central aspect of her multi-dimensional practice.

Sirens

To encounter something denotes an unexpected meeting, or to be faced with something difficult. *Sirens* was exactly that, a strange and transformative experience for its viewers. It was a public performative event with bizarre stupendous creatures made of DIY materials who were enacting mystifying identities within an invented fantastical existence. Muldoon somehow transformed the everyday materials and space they inhabited into an alternative reality. The city street they occupied was infected by their eccentricity and suddenly seemed outlandish. The people who stood around watching the mesmerising spectacle seemed altered too.

The Siren characters physically engaged with their audience in confronting ways, sometimes provocatively but also with tenderness and affinity. They somehow triggered a ripple of inter-subjective relationship and emotional connection. I viewed the performance as video documentation not in real life. Even mediated through a screen, this reverberating connection was evident and unambiguous as it gestated, manifested and mutated uniting *Sirens* and viewers. It struck me that the engagement Muldoon created between the human audience and these creatures - who appeared visually so inhuman in nature and character - modelled a demonstration of openness and empathy for who and what is 'othered' in our society. The *Sirens* embodied absolute 'otherness', but their general malformed strangeness did not render them unloveable.

The audience were charismatically drawn to physically and emotionally engage with them. Muldoon had created characters that displayed a wide range of social and emotional sensitivity, control and expression despite their bizarre external forms and non verbal acts of communication.

The Sirens functioned as stand-ins for any marginalised individuals, who within society could be defined as outsiders: but they effectively performed the sort of insider identities that everyone wanted to get to know.

In both her live action and performance films such as *We Are In Cahoots...You and I (I)* 2016 and in the current work *Kurnugia NOW!* Muldoon successfully manages to disrupt the viewers commitment to reality and in doing so transforms our understanding of being human and inhabiting this natural, social, political world with its contingencies and force. Her use of humour, satire and a sci-fi reworking of mythological narratives have been useful strategies, likewise the deployment of live duration, interaction and location. Muldoon's work transports the viewer-participant back in time historically and into the future.

Antecedents

Celina Muldoon's original, distinctive visual and performative language is striking and speaks to its contemporary time and culture not least because of its materiality and satirical play with technological and pop culture references. There is a communitarian, socially engaged purpose to her performances that seek to involve the public and generate new forms of connection. This deep motive to her work emerges from and is nourished by a cultural movement in art and performance that developed throughout last century.

The unrivalled precursors of the approach Muldoon practices were two companies operating since the 1960s: Bread and Puppet Theatre in New York City co-founded by Elka and Peter Schumann and Welfare State International (WSI) in the North of England by John Fox, Sue Gill, Roger Coleman and others. They were two parallel, radical, socio-political art groups who used public participatory performance, colossal unsettling puppets and non-linear narrative subject matter that addressed topics such as rents, rats and police in New York. WSI co-created their large scale outdoor works with communities to explore performative and collaborative ways to work out issues such as deprivation and social alienation, developing new rituals and secular ceremonies for rites of passage and political transformation.

The high ideals and aspirations that drove both groups seeded many other artistic experiments in the decades since. Macnas in Galway was one such offspring. As a art-school graduate, I left Dublin to work with the company in the late 1980s and in those early days we were highly activated to address social and political ills such as corruption, global imperialism and religious dogma with live performance and provocative, visually stunning masks, props and monstrous articulated figures.

Muldoon's contemporary aesthetic and conceptual approach is a magnificent germination and rebirth from these old seeds. The historical companies transmogrified ancient mythos too but the fantastical non linear narratives Muldoon presents generate a novel form of reality that seems to have little bearing on the real world we occupy. She transforms received reality into a hypothetical narrative and fabulous fiction, to help us clearer understand our lived experience. While these older companies created entertainments and spectacles that showed alternative ways of being in the world, Muldoon conjures a blazing new world and shows us ways of engaging with it.

Artistic peers

Another progeny of those forebears is Monster Chetwynd, born Alalia Chetwynd in 1973, a British artist known for re-working iconic moments from cultural history in improvised performances. In the service of important social and environmental issues, like Muldoon, she makes outlandish costumes, masks and creatures with a makeshift aesthetic. She brings together participants into absurd group performances that are often collaboratively devised and loosely improvised. Chetwynd describes her playful approach to art making as "unbridled enthusiasm".(1) This enthusiastic zeal apparent in her work resonates with Muldoon's intentions to create performances that generate empathy and co-connection.

Muldoon, like Chetwynd works with a range of matter and processes that are emphatically low-fi; paper maché, glue, tape, fake fur, plastics, cardboard. There is a joyful democracy to this strategy, the assertion is that anyone could make this art, it is accessible to all. Also, these substances will perish quickly but we live in a time where images can last forever, so long as we have technologies to view them. This allegory of short material life span to infinite virtual existence operates boldly for both artists. Chetwynd and Muldoon share other comparisons, both play freely with incisive humour and the capacity to create strange creatures that confound and bewilder while drawing the viewer in to a close alluring relationship. They both aim to effect change in the viewers perception or actions.

The London based Disabled Avant Garde (DAG), is an art duo created by disability artists Katherine Araniello and Aaron Williamson whose methodology parallels Muldoon's and offers further insight into radical practices. The concern of their video and performance works is to audaciously cause confusion and inspire debate through humorously distorting or subverting traditional stereotyping of disability. Their humour being both pitch-black and self-knowing allows viewers to re-set deep seated attitudes to those 'othered' by society due to disability and non-normative ways of being in the world. Muldoon similarly invokes a dark humour to subvert and confront social attitudes and to compel us to engage in new ways with each other, including places and objects.

Muldoon enthral with her performative situations in new ways, precisely because of her methods and inventive novel aesthetic. Like the DaDaists of the early 20th Century, she roots her work in a subversion of corporeality in such a way that makes the seditious approachable to a general audience. She is making strong social and environmental statements in the case of Kurnugia NOW! and the urgent imperative for us all to respond to the climate crises is the context for her playful provocation that allows the viewer to accept her startling versions of reality and social interaction.

Irish artistic context

Irish artist Aoibheann Greenan explores these tactics with similar results. Greenan's works in performance, installation and moving image also renegotiates relationship between bodies and images, with immediacy and mediation. I attended her public site-specific performance event *The Life of Riley* staged during Tulca 2018 in Galway City. A multi-part performance that represented an historical chronicle, it involved a marching band, elaborately costumed participants and a giant effigy of a severed foot which was carried through the city while local buskers, performed verses from a fictional ballad.

Greenan and Muldoon share parallel aims to generate alternative narratives, original world-building and utopian visions. They both aspire to create empathy and connection with audiences. The participatory aspect is central to both and the meaning of their works lie in the reception and engagement of audiences. Clare Bishop in her 2006 Whitechapel publication *Participation* articulates what both artists successfully achieve "the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning."⁽²⁾

A second contemporary Irish artist whose work is synchronous with Muldoon is Siobhan McGibbon. Her recent major work *The Xenophon Project* is a world building, cross disciplinary programme with intersections between science and art. *Xenophon* gives a glimpse into a near future that, whilst fictional, is founded on current scientific research and McGibbon explores concepts of trans-humanism, longevity studies and the mythology of immortality. Central to the work is an underlying questioning of what it means to be human and the inherent boundaries, dilemmas and processes to be encountered in becoming something other than human.

Muldoon's work confronts these issues too. In *Kurnugia NOW!* she also questions human identity, especially the behavioural limits of our engagement with the world. In her positioning of other-than-human creatures in direct relation to us all-too-human beings in time and space, she provides us with the opportunity to explore the possibility of a unity and bond with what is 'othered'. In *Kurnugia*

NOW! this 'other' is the environment, the world of living and non living things around us that we importantly need to become more sensitive to, respect, empathise with and love. Her performative works aim to guide us in this direction.

The rich collaborations with Rhonda McGovern and Clare Kelly have rooted the project in scientific and historical authenticity, allowing Muldoon to imaginatively spring from solid foundations. Kelly's insights into the collective experience of narrative provides Muldoon's performance with added potential. Kelly shows how sharing the same interpretation of a story or a particular emotion evoked by a story, synchronises our brains. The potential for narrative to temporarily make our brains more similar becomes another useful tactic for Muldoon to employ in her fabulations and performative stories to impact behavioural change.

A new materialist

The global social theory of new materialism helps to clarify Muldoon's intentions to bring us into connection with others and our world. New materialism ascribes a range of contemporary perspectives in the arts, humanities and social sciences to our relations with matter and the material world, including living and non living things. Karen Barard, one of the establishing theorists of this ideology asserts an ethics of natural and cultural entanglements and intra-actions of space, time and matter.(3) It strikes me that these ideas are pivotal in helping us to evolve and mature a more beneficial relationship with our environment and planet. Muldoon and the artists I have cited here all show us ways to model and perform - in real life - these hopeful new relations and interactions.

Celina Muldoon's work attempts to bring us into empathy and connection with the creatures, figures and stories she animates and creates. In previous work and in Kurnugia NOW! these characters are allegorical stand-ins for the ideas and concepts she wants to urgently address. In her compelling art, Muldoon performs ethical behavioural and inter-subjective, inter-species bonding. She also generates new relationships between humans and material objects. Her assemblages of animate and inanimate things produce new understanding, showing us our interdependent relations with objects, space and place are crucial to effective ways of being and sustaining this world.

Notes:

1. Monster Chetwynd
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/monster-chetwynd-12108> [accessed 15/ 08/ 2022]
https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/spartacus_chetwynd [accessed 15/ 08/ 2022]
2. Clare Bishop, Documents of Contemporary Art. Participation, Whitechapel 2006, p.12
3. Karen Barard, Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning, Duke University Press 2017