NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

FINE ART

SCULPTURE DEPARTMENT

RE-MEMMORATION

Alanna O'Kelly's work *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave*

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies
in Candidacy for the Degree of B.A.in Fine Art: Sculpture, 1998.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Alanna O'Kelly for her generous co-operation with this project. My appreciation also to my tutor, Niamh O'Sullivan for all the support and encouragement she gave me. My thanks to Anne Hodge and the library staff for their helpful assistance and also to Ruby White and Emma Mahony for their proof-reading. To Maria Mezzetti for her hard work in layout and design. Finally, to Angie Gillett for archival research.

For Mike.

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INTRODUCTION

RE-MEMMORATION [1]

ALANNA O'KELLY'S THE COUNTRY BLOOMS ... A GARDEN AND A GRAVE

"Memory ... is the bridge between space and time." [2]

This dissertation addresses memory in the work of Alanna O'Kelly. It looks at who is being remembered, the manner of that remembrance, and why O'Kelly felt the need for that remembrance to take place. The research included conversations with the artist, and workshop experience of her practice.[3]

The memory-bridge that is under consideration here is that which connects Ireland, physically and psychically, to a particular period of time: the Irish Famine (1845-1848). These complexities of time and space can only be mediated through human experience, which is expressed as memory. The work under discussion is concerned with remembering the Irish Famine; as Melinda Barlow suggests, "Moving through time, marked indelibly by place, we experience our shared history as personal tragedy. Trauma inscribes unique texts in us."[4] O'Kelly's manner of remembrance is done in a unique way. Hers is not just a commemoration, but, more what Toni Morrison's coins *re-memmoration,* a reconnecting "with a painful memory or event that has been suppressed or erased in the past."[5]

Alanna O'Kelly has worked for almost ten years on the theme of the Famine. Hers is an exploration into memory - the pain, fear and hurt of the past - "a journey of discovery and healing."[6] This paper shall also take the form of a journey, one through the early stages of O'Kelly's work, the methods she used in her research and subsequent development of the piece *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave.*

To embark on this journey, it is necessary to source the Oliver Goldsmith's (1728-1774) reference which was the inspiration for the title of the work.

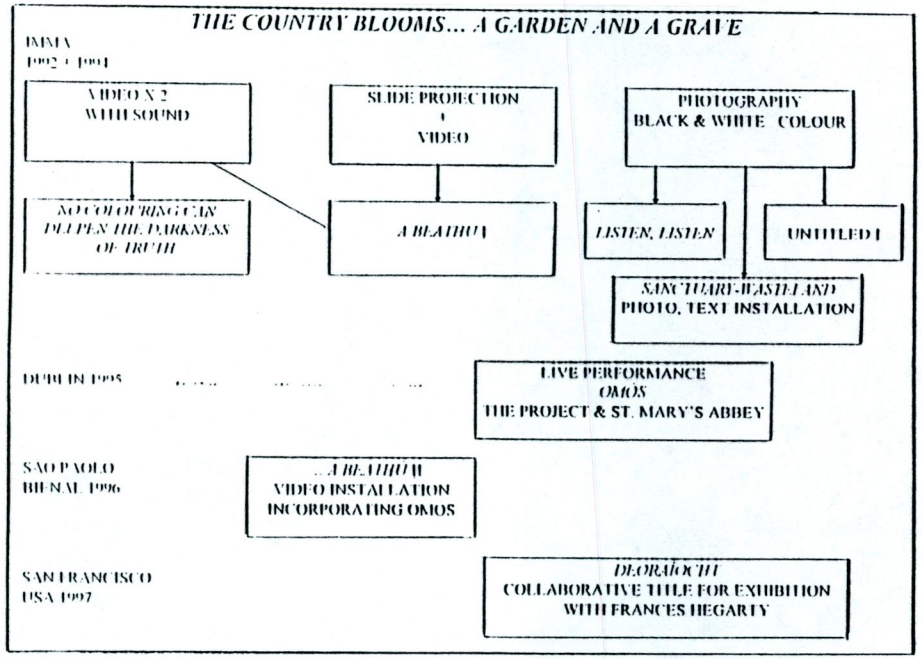
> While, scourged by famine from the smiling land,
> The mournful peasant leads his humble band,
> And while he sinks, without one arm to save,
> The country blooms - a garden and a grave.
>
> Extract from *The Deserted Village*[7]

The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave was first exhibited in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in 1992, returning there for the Glen Dimplex Awards in 1994. Aspects of this piece shall be described in detail anon to reveal the metaphors inherent in it and to elaborate on particular issues raised. One of which is the site-specific nature of the work. The artist remarked on this in a recent lecture on *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave*. She expressed the necessity of experiencing the piece in its completeness, in situ. To view fragmentary components, either video or photography, out of this context, was merely to witness its documentation.[8] The piece is an on-going project, in a continuous state of process, sections of which have been adjusted, renamed or added to during the five years since its emergence.

(Fig. 1)

Hungry world . . . **Alanna O'Kelly** with some of her work from her exhibition at the IMMA

(Fig. 2)



O'Kelly pays particular attention to the naming of her work. The main title encompasses a body of work comprising video, photography, text, sound and installation. Sub-sections within the work have separate titles. Large black and white photographs were called *Listen, Listen* and *The Sanctuary-Wasteland* was the title for the installation section which included photography and text. Videos that form part of the series include *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*[9] and *A Beathú. (Fig 1)*

A second projected video installation called by the same title *A Beathú*[10]-, was first produced for the Sâo Paolo Bienal (1996). The use of the same title was a difficult decision but, for her, the process of change and reworking is integral to the piece. Another reworked section came under the combined title *Deoraíocht/Displacement* (1997). Frances Hegarty and Alanna O'Kelly had a joint exhibition in the San Francisco Art Institute, in which a series from *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave* was shown. Part of the piece involves performance, which is included in the videos, as well as *Omós*[11] (homage), a live performance at The Project Art Centre and the crypt of St Mary's Abbey, Dublin, in 1995. The performance element of *Omós* is contained within the *A Beathú* video. *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave* is based on the theme of the Irish Famine, but the emphasis is on dignity and survival rather than the gruesome images popularly associated with depictions of the mid-nineteenth century famine in Ireland or twentieth-century famine equivalents from Africa or Asia.

The multi-media installation was housed in three rooms and a long corridor in IMMA. The viewer was taken, metaphorically, on a journey past still photographic images of dust-caked hands telling the story of the labourers who toiled on empty stomachs to create roads that went nowhere, to large black and white images of gesturing hands which spoke of begging and giving. A darkened room displayed a triptych of monitors set 'like gems' in the wall. Three narratives ran simultaneously on these monitors, employing. rich, colourful and luscious visuals and accompanied by evocative, powerful and haunting sound tracks. The final room housed a large colour photograph of a mass famine grave called Teampall Dumhach Mhór. This sandy mound on the County Mayo beach was held together by rocks from the early Christian church of St Colman, (650 AD) and by human bones from the catastrophe of the 1840s.

(Fig. 3)

That the Science of Cartography is Limited

(Fig. 4)

- and not simply by the fact that this shading of
forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
the gloom of cypresses
is what I wish to prove.

When you and I were first in love we drove
to the borders of Connacht
and entered a wood there.

Look down you said: this was once a famine road.

I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass
rough-cast stone had
disappeared into as you told me
in the second winter of their ordeal, in

1847, when the crop had failed twice,
Relief Committees gave
the starving Irish such roads to build.

Where they died, there the road ended

and ends still and when I take down
the map of this island, it is never so
I can say here is
the masterful, the apt rendering of

the spherical as flat, nor
an ingenious design which persuades a curve
into a plane,
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,
and finds no horizon

will not be there.

Eavan Boland

The text by Eavan Boland, *That the Science of Cartography is Limited*,[12] in addition to the red burning lantern, created an atmosphere of quiet reflection.

Alanna O'Kelly brings her personal experience of childhood and motherhood into evidence in her visual images and performances, representing an investment of almost ten years. Notwithstanding the time that has gone into researching and developing this work, she remains enthusiastic as she continues to put her energies into the project. She is a contemporary Irish artist for whom performance is an important aspect of her work and, for this reason, that area will be given particular attention. As a multi-media artist, she moves easily from high technology to ritual body work.

A hallmark of O'Kelly's work is her attention to detail. She admits she is difficult to work with because she is very particular in executing her images. While initial footage may be done on second-rate equipment, she spares nothing for the final piece in technology, quality materials or personnel to achieve her aims. She collaborated with Donal Lunny and Mairéad Ní Dhomhnaill on sound, as well as working with technical expert, Paul Brennan (Clannad). She also engaged the skill and sensitivity of fellow artist Frances Hegarty.

Art and life are not separate for O'Kelly. She discovered the sparkling light effect on a letter submerged in a rock pool while she was engaged in a ritual of mourning.[13] Her performances are ritualistic ways of exorcising painful memories of the past. These memories are either personal or social. She uses repetitive movements, sounds and images, indeed, even the process of re-working the project like a meditation, reinforces the concentrated attention to the grieving process.

In this instance, the loss that she grieves for is the million plus of the Irish population who died of starvation and disease during the crop failure between the years 1845-1850 and government mismanagement in the 1840s. Hers is also a grieving and a remembrance for another million who emigrated then, and the continuous exodus since that time.

Her keening ritual is also a grieving of the loss of cultural memory, and with it, the Gaelic language. The lack of remembrance and celebratory rites that were part of a way of life for pre-Famine people, was her stimulus for creating *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave.*

The key element in O'Kelly's work is to bring memory to consciousness. This thesis examines how the artist facilitates this remembrance. It concentrates on her interpretation and intention. For this reason, background information on the Irish Famine is only included where this relates to specific visuals, audio or memory content.

NOTES

1 Katrina Goldstone, *Thanks for the Memory*, THE IRISH TIMES, 21/1/98. Toni Morrison, the black US novelist's own word is an overlapping of commemoration and remembrance

2 Chris Petit, *Insane Memory*. SIGHT AND SOUND. July '94. p.13

3 Frances M Duggan, from conversations with the artist (1997-98)

4 Melinda Barlow, *Personal History, Cultural Memory*. AFTERIMAGE Nov. '93. p. 9

5 Goldstone, op.cit.

6 Alanna O'Kelly, *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave*. Artist's statement '92.

7 Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, p. 37

8 Alanna O'Kelly talks to students in NCAD, Nov '97

9 A fuller description of *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* is given in Chapter Two.

10 Chapter Three gives a more in-depth account of A Beathú

11 Chapter One tells the story of *Omós* in the section on performance

12 Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems*, p 174

13 She used this type of image on the soup receipt in *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*

CHAPTER ONE

Performance as an art medium and as an anti-establishment art practice had its development, and peaked, throughout the 1970s in the United States and Europe. The following decade saw a decline in its use but from the late '80s and '90s, many artists have combined performance with a range of other media such as video, installation work, sound pieces, photographic and site specific work. Alanna O'Kelly has used all of these in her work practice, and, at the present time, performance takes priority as a medium - a point which will be developed later.

This chapter shall deal with the importance of performance *in The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave*. A brief background on performance-art will be provided and the subsequent influences that directed O'Kelly to employ this medium shall be explored. This chapter shall also take on board issues such as famine, social response and sexuality, which are pertinent to the work under discussion. As O'Kelly uses documentation, video and photography, in tandem with performance, the significance of these tools shall be dealt with briefly.

Performance, in this instance, is not a term associated with popular, theatrical entertainment; its audiences are not expected to be passive but are encouraged, challenged and often engaged in the action. The involvement of the witness in the process is sometimes essential to the work. Because of the many uses and combinations of media associated with performance, however, the term itself remains problematic: Live Art, Time-based Art, Happenings, Events, Bodyworks, Concept Art, Political Protest Art, the list goes on. Allan Kaprow coined the term "lifelike art", one of the inventors of Happenings, Kaprow has moved from the idea of spectacle "to more intimate work in which the privileged sensibility of the artist becomes the shared experience of the participants".[1] "Life",

"intimacy" and "shared experience" are words that are continually connected with the kind of performance of which O'Kelly participates. This is not an "acting out" but a live-action that challenges perceptions and patterned ways of being.

Performnce created the "possibility for women to make new meanings, because it is more open, without an overwhelming history, without prescribed materials, or matters of content".[2] In the 1970s, the Feminist Art Movement explored this medium as a vehicle for counteracting the traditional representation of women. Social issues around the treatment of women and their relegation to the private sphere of the home, were addressed. Taboo subjects - women's sexuality, menstruation and birth - previously excluded by a dominantly male elite group, were exposed, confronted and presented through different media but especially through performance.

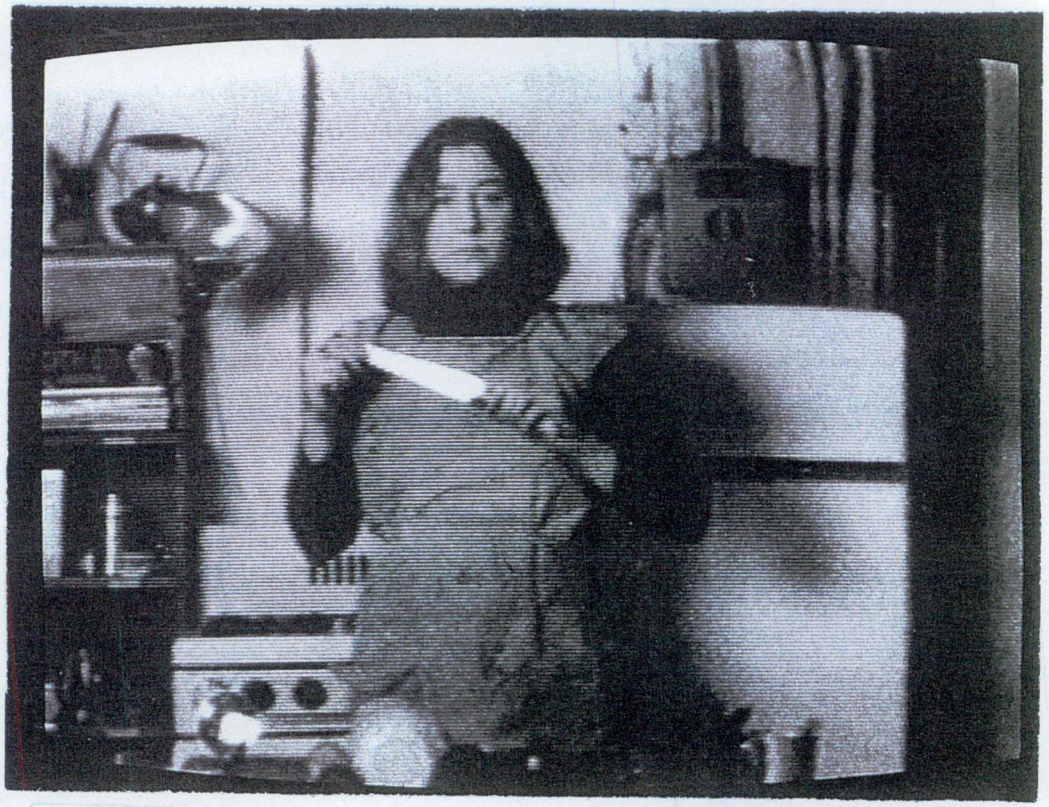
The work of performance artists Carolee Schneemann, (*Interior Scroll, 1975*), Martha Rosler (*Semiotics of the Kitchen,* 1975), Ana Mendieta (*Earth Bodywork*, 1976), Mary Beth Edelson (*See For Yourself*, 1977) and Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz (collaborative work, *Three Weeks in May*, 1977), are well documented. They are listed here to illustrate the range of issues these artists have addressed such as discriminatory practices, around gender in the Art Gallery system, social and political concerns to do with war (Vietnam), racial and religious differences and violence against women.

Motivation to work in performance has many variables. Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago encouraged their students to draw from personal experience in their innovative art teaching methods on the Feminist Art Programme at California Institute For The Arts. According to Alanna O'Kelly, there was very little awareness of this movement during her time as a student in Art College in the late '70s.

At the time, she was involved in land-based sculpture. Nigel Rolfe, a performance artist, had just come to Ireland and was a tutor in the National College of Art and Design. He was influential in widening the scope of art, both as a stimulating tutor and as an

Carolee Schneemann reading from *Interior Scroll*. First performed in New York City, 1975. Photograph by Anthony McCall. While performing, Schneemann read from her text *Cézanne: She was a Great Painter*, recounting the ways in which women were erased from history.

(Fig. 5)



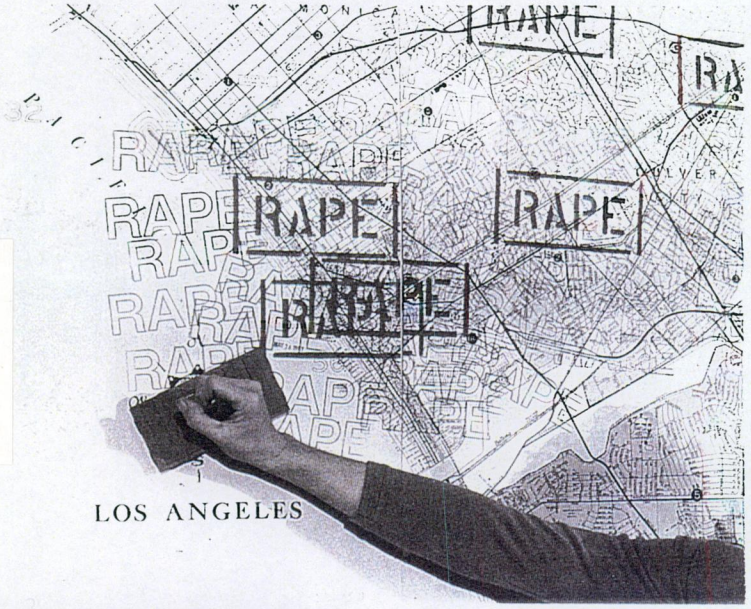
Martha Rosler. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. 1975. Videotape, black and white, 7 minutes. Photograph by artist

(Fig. 6)

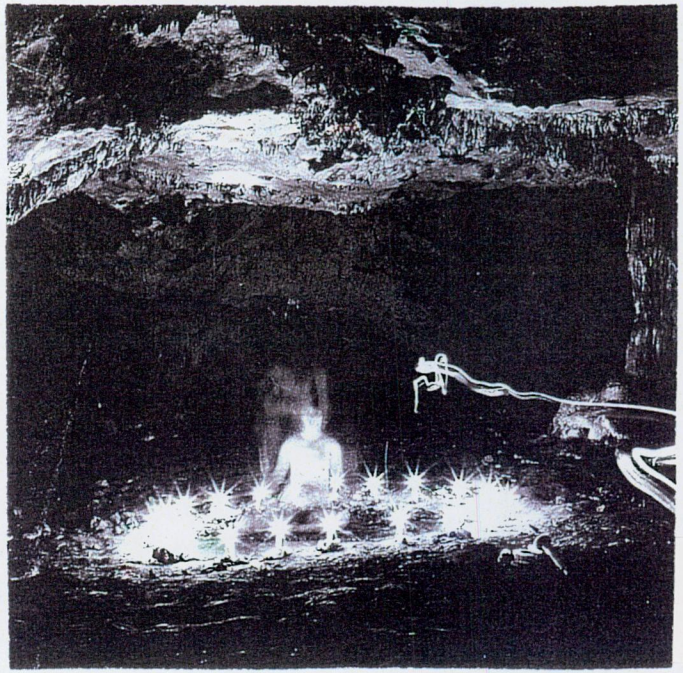
(Fig. 7) **Ana Mendieta.** *Earth Bodywork* (Silueta Series). 1976. Color photograph, 13¼ × 20″. Courtesy Gallery Lelong, New York, © Estate of Ana Mendieta

Ana Mendieta. *Silueta en Fuego*. 1975. Color photograph, 13¼ × 20″. Documentation of earth-work performance with fire, cloth, and earth, in Miami. Courtesy Gallery Lelong, New York, © Estate of Ana Mendieta (Fig. 8)

(Fig. 9)

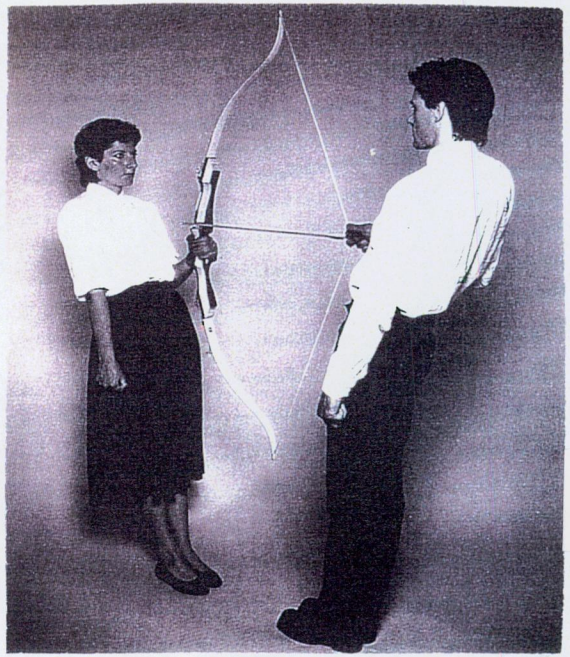


Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz. *Three Weeks in May* (two views). Performance at Los Angeles City Hall, 1977. A media event created to raise public consciousness about sexual violence against women.



(Fig. 10)

Mary Beth Edelson. "See for Yourself," from *Grapčeva Cave*. 1977. Photograph. Collection the artist



(Fig. 11)

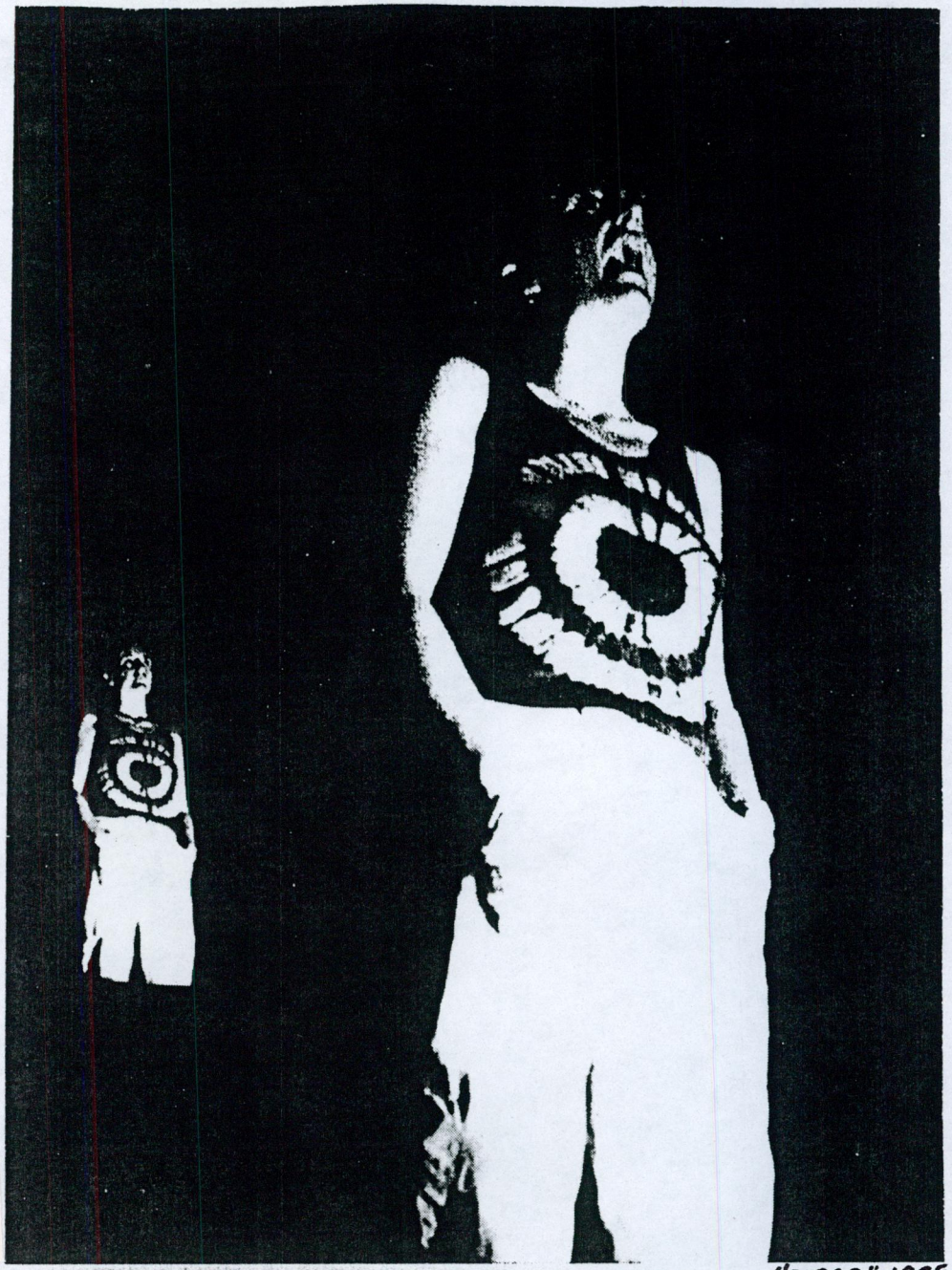
Rest Energy, 1980
collaboration with Ulay
performance
ROSC Festival, Dublin

innovator of performance art in his own right, and in his capacity as director of The Project Theatre. Rolfe stressed the importance of using first-hand experience and information ... "to get away from international trends and fashions which are only book-read and not fully digested, and to come to terms with the wealth of information from local landscape and people".[3]

For some years after college, her work was concerned with her local environment. In the mid '80s her direction changed. She became more interested in performance art, video and film, as a means of exploring her own methods of expression. This brought her to the Slade School of Art in London where key influences included Stuart Brisley and Susan Hiller, both in their roles as tutors and as performance and multi-media artists themselves. Her two years in the college gave her the opportunity to engage with other artists like Tina Keane, Roseleen Kelty and be inspired by the collaborative performances Ulay and Marina Abramovic, among others. While she credits these as being influential in her development, a major event occurred which had an immense impact on her.[4]

> I went to Greenham Common Peace Camp, which was set up in England, by women against nuclear armaments in the mid 80s. I had made a number of visits to the site for various events. One happening was *Sounds around the Base*. I was one of 50,000 women who surrounded the nine-mile perimeter of the base. The stipulation was to make sounds - with the voice, drums or other instruments - on the hour, every hour, for the duration of the event. These women, clutched together and supporting each other, emitted vocals that were way past crying. The sound was very odd, very strange and very powerful. It was keening."[5]

When O'Kelly returned to her studio, she worked through a range of emotions that the occasion had evoked in her. She recorded her angry screams and cries of dis-empowerment on tape. Hearing it the following day, the discharge, although therapeutic, did not adequately communicate her depth of feeling. She repeated the process, this time with more energy focused on her breath and what developed was big volume sounds in a series of calls. The chants, singing and music-making of the women, competing against the heavy machinery of the base, was both a challenge and an encouragement for her to find her voice and use it in her work.



(Fig. 12)

Alanna O'Kelly performing, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork. Photograph by Bill O'Flynn.

"CIRCA" 1985

From 1985 onwards, she used her voice in public performances. Gunther Berkus reviewing O'Kelly's performance in CAN's (Cork Art Now) *Performance Art Now* wrote that it was "simple and to the point". "While playing a pre-recorded tape of the Greenham Common women ... facing the unspeakable ... Alanna is standing behind her audience, motionless, half chanting and half shouting in defiance of (her own?) limitations."[6] He concluded by saying that her main asset was the power of her voice.

The performance *Chant Down Greenham* (1987) was a development from this work and an indication of the artist's practice of re-working and delving deeper into her subject matter. This chanting, performance piece, inspired by the ancient Celtic practice of keening (Caoineadh), was very significant for O'Kelly, and a prelude to *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave* .

The delving deeper reached further than an analytical exploration of her chosen topic. It was a journey into her own psyche, a sounding into the depths of her emotions and personal identity. "Performance is the real-life presence of the artist. She takes no roles but her own," writes Catherine Elwes, and continues ... "She is author, subject, activator, director and designer."[7] This authenticity of the artist's experience was the key to understanding feminist performance, and is in evidence when witnessing O'Kelly's live work.

Her interest in issues concerning feminist art, social concerns and personal relationships, has been shown through the symposiums in which she participated, or organised, and seminars and workshops she facilitated. These included multi-media events with a special focus on audio/voice/performance work. From 1986 to the present (1998) , this work has taken place in varied situations, both within and outside of traditional art spaces; these include her role as panel speaker at Women's Caucus of the Arts, Boston, USA in 1987, and the following year at the Sculpture Symposium on Performance Art in Dublin. She continues to lecture part-time in NCAD, and The Regional College, Galway. She is tutor/facilitator in Community Art Workshops, local and institutional.

> My concerns are about people and place, and relationships often deeply social. I am interested in challenging cultural and traditional norms, that condition and restrict the ease with which we should all be able to relate to each other.[8]

Her quest to understand relationships, to empathise with others, comes across in the work called *Omós (*Dublin 1995). Drawing from personal experience, she takes on the role or persona of one or more individuals. The work is about the story of two visitors during the Famine and their journey, by carriage, in the west of Ireland. A young girl's journey alongside them is re-enacted by O'Kelly. She breathes and runs with this young girl, re-creates the grandmother's supportive voice in a love poem and embodies the professional *Keeners* with her own voice.

Omós took Dublin's Project Theatre as a starting point, from whence the public were taken on a journey across the river to St Mary's Abbey. In the darkness, with the light focused on a small area, the crouched figure of O'Kelly gradually unfurled. She ran, feet rooted in one spot, her breath and pre-recorded sounds engaged the audience on another journey, a journey of recall and remembrance. O'Kelly proclaims that the performance *Omós* was not *hers* but that of the thirteen-year-old's courage and perseverance in triumphing over incredible odds of hunger and discomfort over a four mile trail.[9] For O'Kelly, this is a celebration of this person and the dignity of the people who were victimised by the Famine.

She finds performance energising and intimate, and a way of communicating directly with those who choose to journey with her. In her performance workshops, O'Kelly stresses a sense of timing, a sense of place and a sense of ritual. "The wavelengths of history can be felt in the rhythms of the body, not because the body is an essence, but rather a medium of historical resonance."[10] Vocal expression is one of the areas where wavelengths, rhythms and resonance obtains. O'Kelly believes that, in Ireland, we under-use the capabilities of the voice.

Omós

I am twelve years old
I run, barefoot, dressed in an old coat
I see two gentlemen, travelling in a coach
on the road from Leenane to Westport
I run beside their coach
I don't ask for anything
I keep pace with them
They tell me over and over that they will
give me nothing
I do not ask for anything
I keep my silence
They shake their heads, ignore me, debate
and argue, wonder at my perseverance
I keep pace with their wheels
I do not speak
I do not look at them
They give me a fourpenny piece
I take it
I turn on my hells and run.

(Fig. 13)

She communicates how sound, voice and silence, become significant tools in her work. She uses the subtleties of the voice, to make it sad, to stop people by its call for attention and as a mode of celebration of a people and a place.

The element of place was recognised by early performance artists of the '60s. Claes Oldenburg considered the place to have a determining effect on the work. "Landscape is the link between our outer and our inner selves. Its substance is as much of mind as it is of body, ..."[11]

> I always work in space, with a sense of place, the latter being a more important element. Place has to do with memory, with history, and with the holding of a particular area in collective consciousness.[12]

Although originally from County Wexford, she has spent a lot of time around the west coast of Ireland, where her mother's house was surrounded by water. It was there in 1984 that she mourned her mother's death in a video work called *Dancing with my Shadow* (1990). She brings this same sense of personal loss and grieving to her work on the Irish Famine. Keenly aware of the absolute void left by her mother's absence, her attention focused on her surroundings. Many images from around this area are featured in the famine work - the beached whale, beach and water, the Famine grave and the bog.

> My passionate attachment to a place, a life, a history is a way of exploring and linking into wider concerns.[13]

Her travels outside the country sharpened her focus on her local environment.[14]

Separated from the County Mayo countryside where the dormant Famine potato fields still carry their ridged scars, she was affronted by the "wilful ignorance" of her English friends in London. An experience she found disabling. This period, during the 1980s, was a

(Fig. 14)

time of great brutality in Northern Ireland. She was constantly questioned about "The Troubles". The frustration of being unable to develop informed conversations about Irish history made her resolve to examine her own identity, history and place of origin.

> For a long time, I've known of a need to look at the Great Famine of 1846-1848 .... The changes wrought on our language, our culture, our psyche, continue to impact on us as contemporary realities.[15]

Her stay in London made her aware of the many Irish who had emigrated, especially during the Famine years

When she returned to Ireland, she worked with Don Mullins who was involved with AFRI (an organisation which sent personnel and funding to famine areas in Africa). While the Irish were to the fore in supporting famine-stricken areas, O'Kelly was concerned that the Irish Famine was something that was not adequately acknowledged in our culture. She set about reading its history and collecting "several notebooks of stories" of the period.

> The issues of the Great Famine are alive, monumental and devastating. Here are areas of immense sadness, anger, humiliation, confusion, dignity and healing.[16]

For her, many patterns of behaviour operating in the Irish psyche to-day stem from this time. She gives as examples, low self-esteem, pervasive drinking, dis-ease in sexuality as well as generosity in contributing to the Third World.

She chose photography as one medium to reflect these characteristics. Large black and white photographic images of hand gestures to illustrate the ambivalences of victim and donor. She was very particular about the way she wanted the images shot. Her concern was that the images of the hands would reflect what she called *the holding* aspect. She wanted the gestures to give a sense of holding

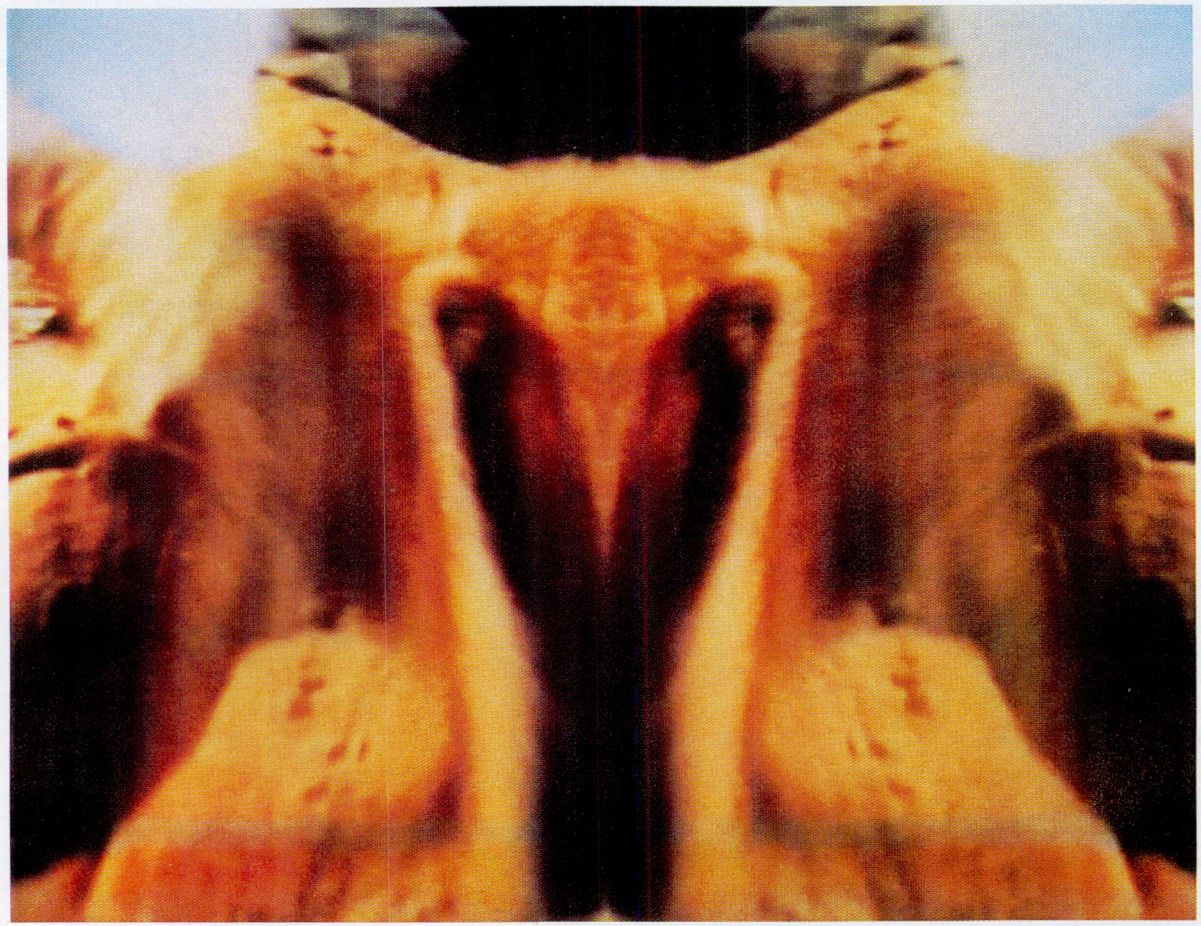
(Fig. 15)

unto life. "They resemble a *Tai Chi* movement or perhaps the holding of a baby. Through them, questions are raised about fullness and emptiness" she says. The still quality of the photographic image was appropriate and important to the reading of the work.

For much of her exploratory work, she uses the video camera which she says is like a notebook. The intimacy of the video camera is important to her as it can facilitate when "live" performance cannot create the desired effect. She instances the work of Frances Hegarty in "*Gold*" (1991). The section referenced is where Hegarty uses reverse action in an emotive ritual. Another example might include the recent work of Bill Viola such as "*The Messenger*" where editing manipulation of "real" time is essential to the reading of the piece.

Though aware of the specific history of video and its marginalised position in established art institutions, Alanna O'Kelly's interest is mainly concerned with the use of video technology as a communicative tool. She makes it clear that for her technology is secondary to her intuitive way of working and a means to an end.

Alanna O'Kelly is concerned with showing the dignity of the people even in such a horrific time as experienced in the Irish Famine. By displaying a full nurturing breast in this context, she goes some way towards counteracting the prevalent dried-up breast image used by mass media to depict famine "victims" today.



Frances Hegarty. Video still from *Gold*. 1994

(Fig. 16)

NOTES

1 Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain.* pp 247-248

2 Susan Croft and Claire MacDonald, *Performing Postures*, Women's Art - Magazine, No 57 Mar/Apr '94 p 10

3 Nigel Rolfe, Essay for *Barriers*, May 1981

4 Thousands of women protested against the American Missile Base in Greenham Common over a long period during the '80s.

5 It was traditional Celtic practice to bring in professional Keeners to wake the dead. This was the custom in pre-Famine Ireland. The women Keeners made loud lamentations and told stories of the deceased to assist the mourners and to celebrate death. Alanna O'Kelly calls were based on her archival research on keening.

6 Gunther Berkus, *Performance Art Now*, Circa, No 24 Sept/Oct '85. p 14-15

7 Croft and MacDonald, op.cit., p 10

8 Berkus, op.cit., p 14

9 A further description of this story is given in Chapter Three.

10 Jeff Kelley, Essay in catalogue Deoraíocht, 1997, p 5

11 Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking on an Empty House*, p 253

12 Alanna O'Kelly, Statement from *The Country Blooms ... a Garden and A Grave*, 1992

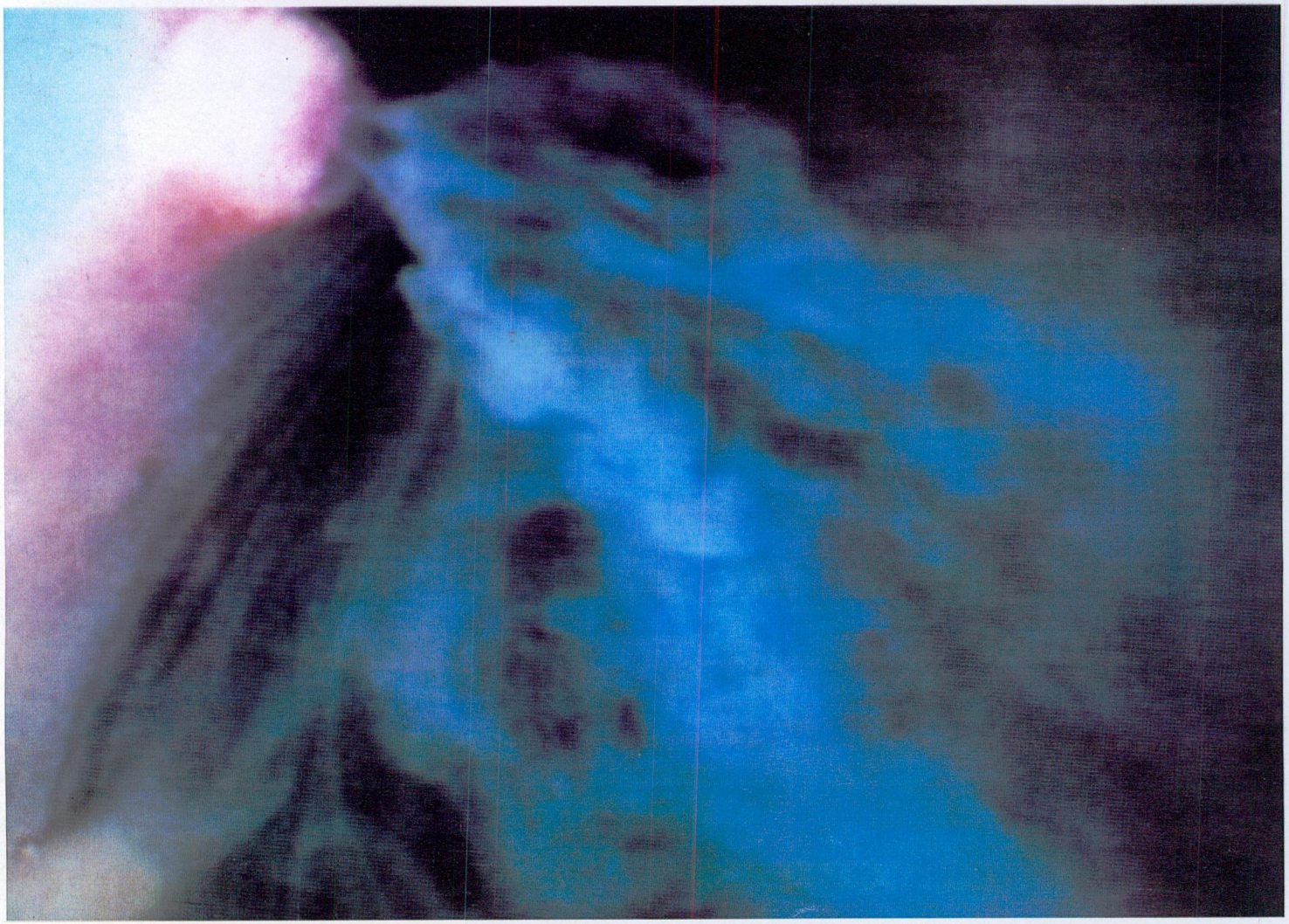
13 Ibid

14 Alanna O'Kelly .. spent Christmas in Nigeria, winter in Finland and Lapland then journeyed on a trawler from the Baltic Sea to the Aran Islands. Barriers, 1981

15 O'Kelly, op.cit.

16 Ibid

17 Frances M Duggan, from a discussion with Alanna O'Kelly, November 1997



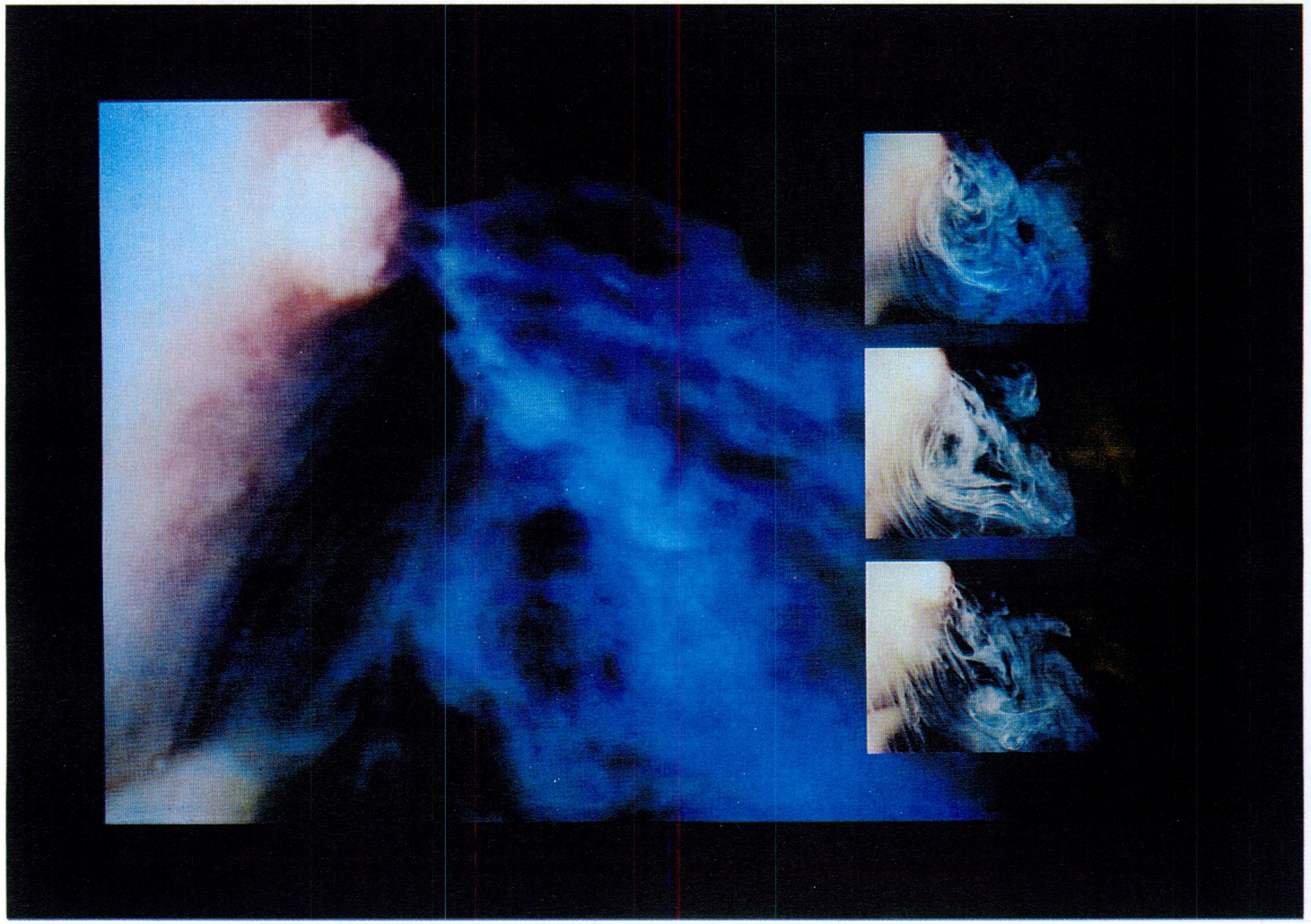
(Fig. 17)

CHAPTER TWO

This chapter shall deal with the contents and the issues that arise from the videos in the series of work *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave.* These include sexuality and the significance of the female presence, coupled with remembrance and ritual. Absence is a theme which runs throughout, not only the absence of memory but the absence of a male reference. Finally, the accessibility of the work shall be noted and addressed.

In No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth, the image begins with a close-up side-view of a woman's breast. The spherical shape emits jets of milk into the water which surrounds the body part. Pink and white shapes are starkly revealed against a black background. The milk first jets, then swirls, making abstract designs which have confused some viewers into thinking it was smoke. Images dissolve, one into another, until resting onto a similar mound-shape. This is a volcanic-like structure, but the rumblings and destructive power come from without, not from within. Alanna O'Kelly emphasises that the piece "is really about a mass Famine grave, in County Mayo, that I came across. It is situated at the edge of an estuary and was being washed away at the time I was photographing it." [1] The power of the Atlantic sea deconstructs it, as it reclaims the land.

During the fifteen minutes of the *A Beathú* piece, and the twelve minutes of *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, fragmentary images dissolve, one into the other. At times, in *A Beathú.* the bright translucent effect of the video image is dulled to darkness, allowing for momentary reflection. Whereas in the latter video, colourful dissolving images from the landscape bring the viewer to a human form, caked in stone dust. The closed eyelids slowly begin to raise their cover, like awakening consciousness. Just as the viewer and awakened image come eye-to-eye the continuity is broken and another dissolve takes place.



Alanna O'Kelly. Video still from *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, from the series *"The Country Blooms...A Garden and a Grave."* 1992–1995

(Fig. 18)

Reference to the shortage of food is shown by the only visible text featured in the video. This takes the form of a soup receipt, a relic of inadequate intervention by the government. In popular memory, particularly within Catholicism, references to soup and souperism are associated with proselytisation.[2] The receipt appears to be burning, although it is submerged in a stony stream. This effect is achieved by light reflecting off the stones in the water. In doing this, O'Kelly exploits the way memory burns deeply into the subconscious.

Metaphor is again used in the images of the bog. "This is the place where memory is held"[3] O'Kelly says. The deep scars in the crusted bogland appear like hieroglyphs. These are decipherable only to those who are willing to understand a different language and the lifestyle of a neglected people. The artist's intention in this work is to create a space from whence this remembrance can take place.

While remembrance is a key issue in *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, other themes are apparent, such as the representation of the feminine, and the notion of woman as nature. In *A Beathu*, much of the imagery and audio is about womanhood. It is a celebration of a pubescent girl, an abundant provident, a self-sufficient mother and a poetic grandmother, three archetypes: the virgin, the mother and the crone. Recurring images of a single breast brings the beholder back to the source of nourishment and creates a certain anxiety when it is absent. It also deals with famine representation and its relevance to social concerns of to-day. Sacred places and ritual rites associated with spiritual reflection also have an underlying significance especially in *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth.* Absent from the piece, however, is the male presence. This omission, apart from gender exclusiveness, raises the need for an inquiry into absence and loss. Although it was not the artist's intention to be exclusory of the male, I consider this omission to be problematic. Furthermore, the link between woman and nature - shown by the connection of the images of the artist's breast with an earth mound - creates difficulties, given the patriarchal stance of the male as conqueror of nature. These issues will be addressed sequentially.

In both *A Beathú* and *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, Alanna O'Kelly presents a strong, independent, self-sufficient presence of the feminine. The young girl in *Omós* and *A Beathú,* is at the virginal stage - independent of the male - she is focused on her own path. Speaking of her, O'Kelly says "she never once looked at them (the men in the carriage). She didn't take their eyes into her psyche."[4] *A Beathú* also presents the older woman - the crone or wise one - in the role of storyteller in her native song

In *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, the artist concentrates on the mother image. "I'm wary of putting women into the role of nourisher, but we do have within ourselves the possibility to nourish each other,"[5] she says. On this issue of universaling the stereotype, O'Kelly insists that "the work comes from a real need. Indeed, that need was so strong that even if someone from anywhere in the art world said 'this is ideologically incorrect', I would have said Yes! yes! and gone ahead and done it."[6] She explains that a number of circumstances brought her to that decision - her research into the Irish Famine, her connection with Don Mullins and the politics around famine in Africa.[7] In addition, she was breast-feeding her son at the time and was struck by her own abundance of milk, in contrast to the dried-up breast imagery relayed through the media. Margaret Kelleher looks at the significance of the media footage; from ancient times to the present, famine is described as female, as savage beast and also as helpless victim.

O'Kelly may portray femininity as universal woman - virgin icon, mother/nurturer, and symbol of wisdom - but she also celebrates the individual, through claiming her own iconography, her personal experience becomes political statement. This somewhat abstracted breast image is far from popular culture's objectification of the breast as sexual symbol. For her, there is a discomfort in Irish society around the body. She is surprised by some people's reactions to these images; the milk flowing from the breast looks to them like smoke. O'Kelly puts this down to a cultural reading. "We are so far removed from our bodies, that they would think of smoke first."[9] These images are, however, sensuous and beautiful, displaying the feminine as one who delights in experiencing her

own body. This is the artist's nursing breast shown expressing her own milk. The person is in charge of her own bodily functions, and thus rejects the sanitised, clinical control by authorities other than her own.

Female representation in this image is intimate though not voyeuristic. O'Kelly's breast imagery is a challenge to popular famine iconography. Shown in the context of famine, its abundance and, as she says, "wastefulness" is an ambiguous signifier. "The mother's milk and body suddenly find a new meaning in Celtic mythology of the view of woman being the spirit of earth and lakes."[10] This remark by James Concagh can feed into either patriarchal ideology of woman as nature, or into the re-emergent culture of the Goddess. O'Kelly's linkage of the breast image with that of the burial mound assists either interpretation, but is more akin to the Goddess art movement of the 1980s, which reclaimed the feminine by ritualistic performances.

How does an art practitioner, like O'Kelly, represent the female body against the weight of its colonisation? This has occurred through language, through the male gaze, through economic, social and religious domination. Representation of the female form remains a debatable issue among various feminist groups. Radical feminists shun any form of female representation given centuries of oppression, while moderate feminists maintain it is a way of retelling their own histories.

The problem is partly resolved by the power of the sound track and the way in which the images are shot. The artist makes the feminine visible and audible by strong images and vocals.

> In our use of the female as sign, in text and in image, we need to generate a philosophy of possibilities, not reaction... That broadening can come only through the creative energy of imaginative empathy, to draw us into the subject of a figure, make us feel inside the body on whose exterior we have until now scribbled the meanings we wanted.
>
> Marina Warner.[11]

This 'imaginative empathy' is very much part of Alanna O'Kelly's approach to the work. It is quite noticeable in the sound track where she addresses misrepresentation of the women of the Famine time. The vocals - keening, love song and murmurings - do not reiterate the feminine as weak, passive victims, but dignified, strong and self-possessed. Her research into pre-Famine culture brought the realisation of the richness of the oral tradition of women. As this was in the Gaelic language, so, too, is her emphasis.[12] Cormac Ó Gráda maintains that the most authentic record of the period is to be found in songs and literature in the Irish language. The Gaelic language, a casualty of an imperial system, is reclaimed in song and speech by O'Kelly.

O'Kelly reclaims the dignity of the sufferers of famine with remembrance of the traditional keening used in pre-Famine Ireland. Traditionally, women keeners were brought in to celebrate death and assist the grieving community. The incorporation of keening is not a nostalgic hankering back to an idealised past but a celebration of values that were held around life and death. O'Kelly's own voice on the sound track moves between whispers, barely audible, to resounding, prolonged wailing calls.

> The sound O'Kelly produced was not a scream, wail, call, howl or ululation. It was all these and more. It rose through her womb, lungs and throat to reach infinity ... We heard the voice of Gorgon calling to us through time."[13]

Her keening mourns the loss of a culture which O'Kelly attributes to the Famine; historians and cultural theorists see changes in Irish society as much more complex in their origins, including political factors, industrialisation and urbanisation.. Her ritual keening is a grieving for the loss of a people, their language, and their values. She also uses ritual as a mode of empowerment, and as a presence of authorship, intensified by the use of repetition. The viewer is brought back, again and again, to the one image. This acts like a mantra; focusing for a period of time on a single image runs counter to the modern emphasis on the new and on change, concentrating on recurring images, on the other hand, reinforces the sense of continuity between us and the Famine. She brings us to

the burial site which in pre-Famine times was a sacred place of early Christian worship. The camera focuses on skeletal remains, befittingly on a pelvis, the human cradle. Birth and death are once more signified and ritualised. Celtic and Christian rituals co-existed in pre-Famine Ireland. The second half of that century saw the revival of Catholicism. With the proliferation of new churches, and the puritanical and penitential rigors which followed, a way of life was transformed. Churches became the centres where ritual was appropriated by a clergy taken from middle-class survivors of the Famine. Here O'Kelly has taken ritual back from a patriarchal institution. The combination of ritual with technology separates us from identifying with the past, and opens possibilities for movement and transformation.

Along with Catholicism, the rise of nationalism was a key element in cultural changes after the Famine. Interestingly, on the hundredth anniversary of the Famine, celebrations focused on the death of Thomas Davis (1845) the Young Irelander, and on the birth of the nation. Pictorial depictions of the male peasantry in Famine times showed him destitute, engaged in rebellion,[14] or in the process of emigration. *Punch*-like caricatures de-natured him as animalistic, crude and inferior. In fact, many who could have emigrated did so, while others travelled long distances to find work. Sidney Golophin Osborne, writing in the 1850s, remarked on the rarity of finding any males at the desolate eviction scenes,

> I fear they (males) desert their families, go to seek work at a distance, perhaps in England; very often they start for America as soon as they find they are to be ejected. A very large proportion of the families in the workhouses are deserted families.[15]

The persons Osborne refers to are the peasantry, and his conclusion that they deserted their families, seems unfair. There was, however, a reduction in the male presence, indeed, absentee landlords were also a significant feature of the time. The latter made a major contribution to the impoverished conditions of many of these people. All this is significant to the absence of a male presence in the work.[16] The stone dust-clad figure in *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* refers to the work of road and wall

building programmes on which many were engaged. The image is, however, female and not male, whereas the majority of labourers on the Public Works Scheme, were men and boys. When asked about the omission of the masculine in male imagery or vocals, however, O'Kelly said she did not set out to be exclusive.[17]

The omission does, nonetheless, reflect upon famine history. In the contemporary documentary and even the fictional descriptions of the time, more focus was placed on its effect on women than men: she might be shown as a heroic and self-sacrificing mother who dies to protect her offspring, or as a ministering angel like Asenath Nicholson[18] or, if from the 'big house', as involved in relief work.[19] Conversely, some women were depicted as gross beasts - who acted against their *nature* as nourishers and protectors - for being driven by self-preservation.

Ownership, self-sufficiency and reliance on the feminine come across in *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave*. The work at the time of its creation reflected O'Kelly's position and role as artist and mother. As the series progresses she maintains that she will consider the inclusion of the masculine, particularly through the element of sound.

There is the possibility that by using her own body throughout, the artist, on a subconscious level, touches on androgyny. Volcanoes were claimed as masculine symbols and the breast spewing its milk has subliminal connections with semen emission. The single breast image also has connections with the mythological Amazonian female warrior who had the right breast removed to facilitate the use of the bow, a myth which may have arisen from Asian nomads men who were clean-shaven. Interestingly, the use of the Amazonian figure featured in the work of another contemporary Irish artist, Dorothy Cross. (*Fig. 19.*)

..... Amazon, 1992, for example, a mutant mannequin or dressmaker's dummy covered in cow skin, has a single breast and a phallic nipple; while it clearly suggests the mythological female warrior of its name, its swollen mammary also evokes associations of pregnancy and motherhood.[20]

(Fig. 19)

Alanna O'Kelly has expended considerable time and work in creating these images. A list of her exhibitions and performances is included in the Appendix. Although she is not interested in commercial galleries, she would like her work to be more accessible. Before she accepted the invitation to exhibit in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, she did her own research on the kind of audience/viewer the gallery attracted. She was very impressed by the Museum's educational programme and the involvement with local community groups. The site - a hospital for retired soldiers - was significant and important for her.

She enjoys hearing a reaction to the work, and she instanced two memorable occasions: one was when the work was shown in the Såo Paolo Bienal '96 when a group of people joined in with the keening; the other came from one of the prisoners she was working with in Portlaoise, he was moved and likened the imagery to a birthing.

NOTES

1 Frances M Duggan, from discussions with Alanna O'Kelly about her work, '97/98

2 Gerard Brokie, Raymond Walsh, *The 19th Century in Focus*. A small minority of Church of Ireland clergymen, offered food to starving Catholics, on condition that they became Protestants. The activities of these groups, known as Soupers, left a legacy of bitterness for a long time afterwards. p 211

3 Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*. The Society of Friends (Quakers) were among the first in the field to distribute aid and publicise the plight of the people. They believed that "when famine stares you in the face, political economy should be forgotten". As early as 1846, the first soup kitchens were established by the Quaker Central Relief Committee in Dublin. By January of 1847, they had proved that soup kitchens gave the most immediate relief, and they lobbied the government to implement a similar more widespread scheme. Begun in January of that same year, the soup kitchens, established by the government, were gradually introduced, but for some they came too late - as in Skibbereen, one of the worst affected areas, they were merely put into effect in mid June - and were phased out by September of that year. Despite their effectiveness in saving lives, they were not re-introduced due to mismanagement of the Public Works Programme, rioting over the parsimonious distribution and the exaggerated accounts of these 'riots' in the British Press. p 54

4 Duggan, op.cit.

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 Ibid. Alanna O'Kelly "didn't set out to make any statements about developing countries, and how Nestles do their job, or how things are undone for people ... The idea that women can feed their babies up to any age and with such control ... without asking for anything from multi-millionaire companies - goes straight to my heart. ... I'll never forget hearing on the radio of the Kurdish woman, in the mid '90s say, 'Look, I have nothing to say. You go tell the world, I hold my dead baby in my arms, because my breasts have dried up'".

8 Ibid

9 James Concagh, *When Irish Eyes are Running. ABEI. NEWSLETTER* p. 17

10 Margaret Kelleher, *Feminisation of the Famine*. p. 222

11 Gray, op.cit. The Irish language was one of the foremost victims of the Famine. Use of English grew steadily from the 18th century, but in 1845 up to four million people still spoke Irish. Those who died or emigrated were disproportionately Irish-speaking, and by 1851 the number of speakers had halved. p 122

12 Louis Marcus, *Famine*, RTE Documentary '95 Part 1

13 M Duffy, Adam and Eve Productions, *Critical Reviews*. Women Artists News, NY, June 1987

14 Gray, op.cit. The Young Ireland rebellion, in Tipperary in 1848, was a shambles, but due to the British media's exaggerated accounts, it swayed public opinion away from charitable donations, and virtually stopped the flow of aid from Britain. p 77

15 Kelleher, op.cit..p.39

16 The baby is the artist's son, but his gender is not revealed in the video

17 Duggan, op.cit.

18 Kelleher, op.cit. p.64

19 Kelleher, op.cit. Kelleher also points to the way the media portrays the donor element, the ministering angel attitude that obscures the underlying injustices and responsibilities of first world powers.

20 John Hutchinson, *Cross' Purposes*, Artforum International, May '93, p 98

CHAPTER THREE

The Irish Famine, as remembered through folk memory, documentary and fictional writings, as well as historical accounts, formed the background research for *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave*. This chapter shall examine folk memory and its mode of transmission and reception, the *storyteller* and the *listener.* It shall also explore juxtapositions between traditional folk memory and the recordings of history. The work is not an historical commemoration of the Irish Famine, as Alanna O'Kelly does not claim to render a history of that time. "To commemorate the Famine as Event, to raise it as monument," Jean Fisher says, "is to mythologise the past and deny its ambivalences and contradictions, distancing it from the realities of the present."[1] Elements of denial, silence and suppression of cultural memory are addressed. The focus in this chapter is on her interest in bringing these memories to consciousness and finally, O'Kelly's 'journey of discovery' is reviewed for the possibilities of healing the work creates.

"Memory is a map, a gyroscope, which locates personal identity,"[2] It emanates from the lived experience of individuals in their social settings, and, thus, shapes subjectivity. Collective memory is that which comes from the shared experiences of a society. It is concerned with place and time and not with global occurrences unless these impact on the local social group. Memory is the re-invention of those experiences and as such both draws on representation and is a form of representation in itself. In *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth,* O'Kelly brings her personal memories and experiences of her up-bringing in the West of Ireland and associates them with collective memories of places - Famine graves and roads, the bog and the untouched field. The fragmentary representations of places, along with audio's dropping of place names recalls memories associated with the Famine. Indeed, partial and fragmentary sounds and images are what constitutes memory itself.

(Fig. 20)

Alanna O'Kelly's passionate sense of place connects her to intuitive rather than structured ways of memory recording. She is grounded in traditional folklore, rather than in scientific historical facts, this makes the work no more and or less authentic, as is discussed later. The sense of place and the memories that are attached to it evoked in O'Kelly questions about identity - personal and collective - both as a woman and as an Irish person. This led her to explore the evolving implications of that identity on the Irish psyche.

Starvation and emigration are identified by Alanna O'Kelly as "the two on-going themes that gnaw at Ireland's national psyche and body politic".[3] Both are so embedded in Irish cultural identity that to focus on them opens up memories of sadness, pain and humiliation heretofore avoided or denied. Jeff Kelley maintains that the Famine remains unsettled because it has been forgotten in places like Britain, or repressed among the Irish.[4] As the poor labourers and cottiers were the ones who suffered the greatest losses in the famines of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century, there is an undercurrent legacy of shame and guilt on the part of those who survived. O'Kelly is of the opinion that troubled collective memories are evidenced by persistent patterns of behaviour - pervasive drinking, familial violence, land-based disputes and on-going emigration. Suppressing these memories, she considers, is problematic for the Irish people.

"The collective cannot deal with the memory of the unspeakable," Ronit Lentin remarked. "These are elements of our own humanity that we cannot bear to hear."[5]. Turning a deaf ear, or as Peter Gray says "wilful forgetting"[6] does not eradicate the pain and hurt of the past. Margaret Kelleher remarked upon this forgetfulness when she said " ... one of the striking aspects of the Famine in terms of its memory is the resounding silence".[7] She continues to list three elements in which silence obscures the events of the 1840s: popular memory, Irish history and literature. For the guilt-ridden, shamed survivor Kelleher recognised that it was "a necessary repression of the past in order to move forward."[8]

The move from the past to the present was blocked for O'Kelly during her sojourn in London. She saw the need to break that silence. For her, there is evidence everywhere of painful memories not only in the lazy potato beds and unmarked graves, but also in unspoken hurts and fears that remain untold in family histories. This denial and rejection of the past, Peter Gray suggests, has to do with the most humiliating experiences of any people in nineteenth-century Europe

This silence has pertained in historical debate until recently. Historians in their efforts to be scientific in their research analysed and theorised over the questions raised by the Famine. One example is *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*[9] where scientific methods shunned popular memory. The void that was left was filled by popular novelist Cecil Woodham Smith's novel *The Great Hunger* in 1962. Both have value but are flawed by the imbalances of history versus traditional memory. Kevin Whelan asserts that "The tradition in Ireland up until recently was to conceive of memory as somehow getting in the way of history."[10] and so it encouraged this opposition between memory and history. Traditional folk-memory was transmitted through storytelling or song and had a strongly emotive/intuitive base. History, on the other hand, avoided the emotional content, relied on logic and used analytical research methods. Luke Gibbons maintains that "When passions and emotions are involved, it is very difficult for a people to be scientific."[11] His statement underlines the dominance of the scientific over the emotional. In his treatise on cultural memory, Pierre Nora too differentiates between memory and history, he does not consider them synonymous but as opposites. His argument is that the analytical role of historians is to demolish spontaneous memory and to repress it. Collective memory, because it forms itself from groups that weld together, is by nature multiple yet specific.

Conversely, history has a universal role, it can belong to anyone. Like Whelan, Nora says that "Memory is always suspect in the eyes of history.."[12] Yet, history itself is selective, choices have to be made on what to include or exclude and so its interpretation equally deserves a measure of scepticism. Evidence of this was shown in the 1945 centennial commemorations of the Famine, where for

example, the emphasis was placed on glorifying a political hero (Thomas Davis) and denying the gross realities of the Famine. Kevin Whelan is passionate about the need "to re-establish in the public discourse and in the public memory an event that was so hugely significant but which had for specific reasons been deliberately erased or submerged."[13]

Alanna O'Kelly pre-empted the renewed interest in the Famine by historians in recent years. By adopting the role of the storyteller, she gave "a testimony to the individuals, both colonised and coloniser, who witnessed the events of the past: the little histories that tended to be forgotten or despised."[14] She appropriated the story by Sidney Godolphin Osborne, a poignant, contemporary account of a young girl's attempt at survival.

> A girl of about twelve years of age, of course barefooted; dressed in an old man's coat, closely buttoned; ran beside our car, going at times very fast; for a distance, quite surprising: she did not ask for anything but with hands crossed, kept an even pace ... we as a rule, refused all professional mendicants; we told her, again and again, that we would give her nothing; she never asked for anything: ... He (Osborne's travelling companion) was firm, astonished at her powers, not so irritated as I was, by her silent, wearying importunity; ... the naked spokes of those naked legs, still seemed to turn in some mysterious harmony, with our wheels; on and on she went, ever by our side, using her eyes only to pick her way, never speaking, not even looking at us; she won the day ....
>
> Sidney Godolphin Osborne [15]

This is the story behind *A Beathú* and *Omós*. It is one that has been told, and retold, in the way that folk memory is transmitted. By her intuitive storytelling technique, O'Kelly allows space for other memories to interact with the work. As Margaret Kelleher said of the poet Eavan Boland, Alanna O'Kelly "seeks to re-embody the past, to physically 'inscribe' it into the present".[16] This she does through the media of performance and video. But hers is no mere re-enactment; it is a celebratory ritual of the dignity of life; a way of exposing and then purging the past of guilt and shame, at having survived the all-defining Irish catastrophe.

A Bheathú - nourishment from within - begins out of the darkness. The sound and image of bare feet running on a fixed spot is mesmerising. The rhythmic sound of feet and breath gets faster while the screen fades to blackness, and then another image emerges, that of a sleeping infant's closed eye which, in turn fades to blackness. The recurrence of this motif as both a technique and a metaphor is repeated throughout the subsequent imagery. From the sleeping infant, the luscious image of the lactating breast is enhanced by its submergence in water, allowing the milk seemingly to billow out profusely, giving a swirling, foggy effect. Following the dissolution from breast to dreaming child, the viewer is lulled into the quiet land of memory-sorting aided by the soft whispers in Gaelic that crept into the soundtrack. Suddenly we are roused with the pounding feet and a keening that is less a mourning, and more a calling to attention from the drifting state which is sometimes associated with hunger. The pace gets faster, and the breath escapes in gasps. The rotation of images continues, from breast to eye, and from eye to umbilicus, denoting connectedness.. A voice (O'Kelly suggests the girl's grandmother) whispers terms of endearment " ... my sweetest one, my brave one, my strong one ..."[17] This time the words accompany the movement of the child's hand and foot in a bath of water, signifying an awakening and a journeying through the field of the emotions. The piece ends after a series of dissolving images of the breast accompanied by loud keening to the base rhythm of the breath and running feet. The flow of milk ceases as the image and sound fade out to blackness.

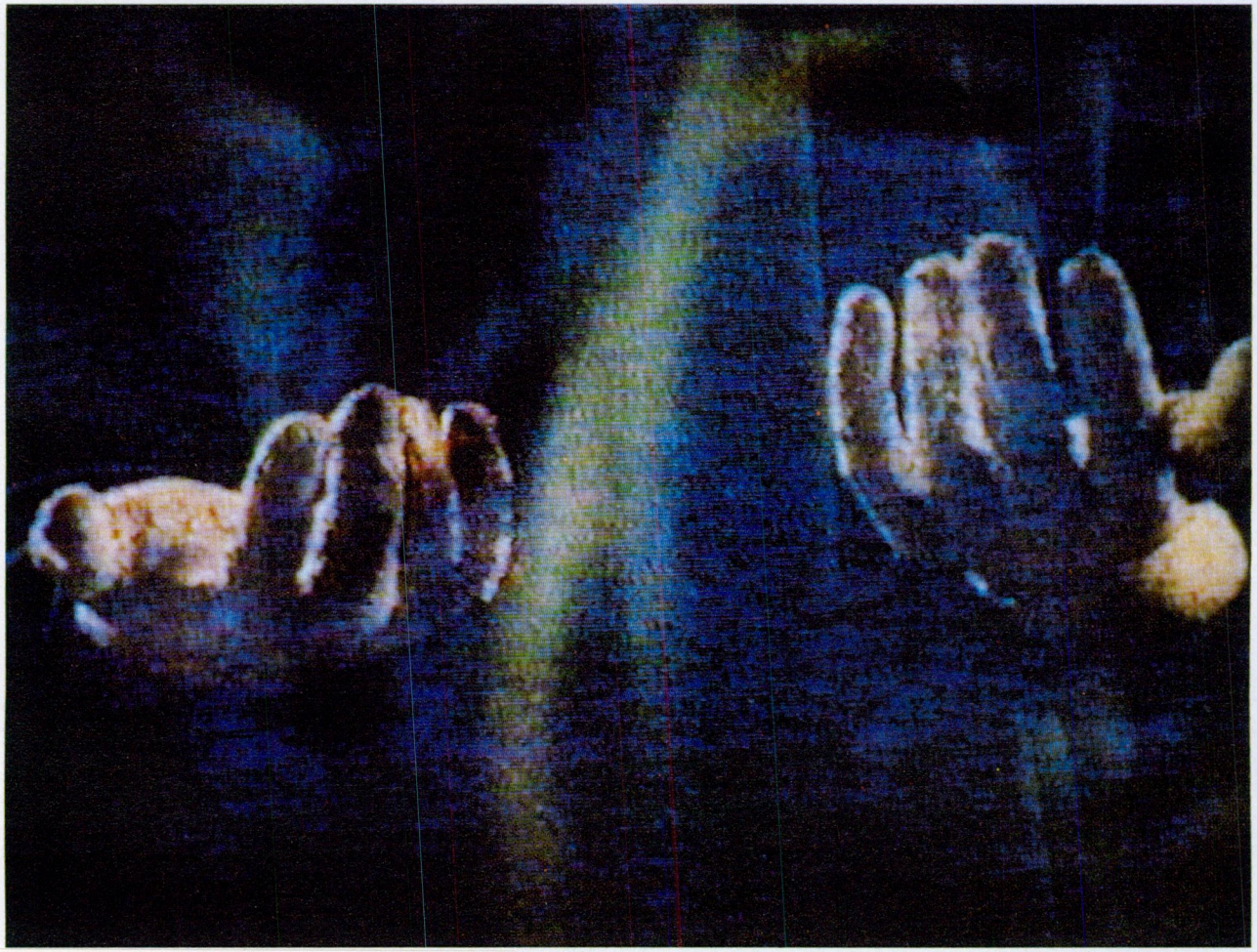
Literary writers, during and after the 1840s, struggled to express the conditions that affected the Irish people particularly the peasantry or labourers of that time. Margaret Kelleher draws comparisons between the Bengal Famine of 1943 and 1944 and the Irish Famine a hundred years earlier. She refers to the proclaimed inadequacies of language to give accounts of famine narratives. She does so, by quoting the then Irish President's response during her visit to famine-stricken Somalia:

> However much I felt the grief of what was happening, however stricken to wordlessness I felt at certain times .... I am as sure now as I was then that grief and silence are luxuries that we in the West cannot indulge if men and women and children are to survive. They need our action, not our tears; our practical, downright, problem-solving help and not our wordless horror.
>
> Mary Robinson 18

The quotation points to unjust systems, and attitudes that fail in their responsibilities to the Third World. Ireland as a result of colonisation belonged to this category up to the early twentieth-century. It was this issue around the contemporary injustices which cause famine, that rekindled in Alanna O'Kelly the memory of her own country's history. She sees her role as artist/storyteller to be and bearer of meaning. Her narratives differ from those of the observer or visitor in her empathy with the characters of the story. The latter tend to distance themselves by objectifying, mythologising or de-humanising the individuals so stricken. Her work as storyteller takes cognisance of the audience, the listener and invites participation in remembrance. Kevin Whelan puts the fundamental purpose for commemorating the Famine thus;

> The lesson of the Famine is, surely, that only a sense of justice ..
> that only an equitable distribution of resources...
> that only a political system, which doesn't have structural road blocks to the incorporation of huge sections of the population, would form a fitting memorial to the millions who died.[19]

Alanna O'Kelly sees her work as having a role in bringing these issues to light. Remembrance for her is going back to the source, and grieving the loss, but also celebrating those who suffered and died and the dignity of their humanness.



Alanna O'Kelly. Video still from *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, from the series *"The Country Blooms...A Garden and a Grave."* 1992–1995

(Fig. 21)

NOTES

1 Jean Fisher catalogue essay for Arte Irlandesa, 1996

2 David Lusted, *Cultural Memory Conference*. Screen 37: 2 Summer '96. p. 206

3 Jeff Kelley, *Remember, Re-member* Artforum, May '93. p. 93

4 Jeff Kelley, *Deoraíocht*, 1997, p 11

5 Katrina Goldstone, *Thanks for the Memory*, The Irish Times, 21 January 1998

6 Louis Marcus, *Famine,* RTE Documentary. '95 Part 1

7 Ibid

8 Margaret Kelleher, *Feminization of the Famine*. p. 4

9 Peter Gray , R Dudley Edwards and T Desmond Williams (eds) *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52,* 1956. p 180-181

10 Goldstone, op.cit. Kevin Whelan, the Irish historian was on the Commemoration Committee set up by the government for the 150th anniversary of the Famine.

11 Marcus, op.cit. Luke Gibbons

12 Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*. p.3

13 Goldstone, op.cit.

14 Fisher, op.cit.

15 Kelleher, op.cit. p 28 Sidney Godolphin Osborne was a clergyman and a philanthropist who wrote about his visits to Ireland in the latter famine period of '49 and '50. This excerpt is taken from his book *Gleanings in the West of Ireland* .(pp 91-92)

16 Ibid. p 111

17 Alanna O'Kelly, *A Bheathú*. Video. '96

18 Kelleher, op.cit p. 222

19 Marcus, op.cit. Part 4

CONCLUSION

The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave features a journey back to a time and a place in order to explore contemporary social relationships and ideas of identity. I have examined the work, emphasising individual and collective aspects of memory. These elements merge, overlap, dissolve one into the other and allow for many interpretations. The journey backward in time was to facilitate a movement forward. Alanna O'Kelly's concern was with the suspension of memory, the freezing of a time-frame, where no resolution could take place. The work itself is not a finished statement, but more a developmental process which of necessity involves change.

Irish cultural identity was one of the features of the piece. The issue was not a fixed notion, but concentrated on a common heritage that she considered needed to be brought to the fore in order for a healing to take place. She made an interesting connection between high technology and a spiritual form of ritual. She used the properties of video not only as a tool and metaphor but as a form of ritual itself. The viewer was invited to remain with the continuous image as she had done in *Dancing with my Shadow*. For her this paying of attention is part of the grieving process. She emphasises the healing potential in the decision to let go.

Memory of the injustices meted out to the Irish by centuries of colonialism still continues to impact on contemporary society. Alanna O'Kelly argues strongly about the economic factors that contribute to famine on a global scale. This includes the lower status of women and their subsequent dependency on patriarchal systems. *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave* expresses her passion and defiance of that system.

The ambiguous representation of the feminine - as instanced by aligning woman as nature, and stereotyping woman as nurturer - needs clarification. O'Kelly uses woman as symbol for the way we can nourish each other. Notwithstanding the artist's intention to open up possibilities for healing the exclusion of a male presence perpetuates the notion of gender difference. For a full healing to occur, all areas need to be addressed or acknowledged. O'Kelly does call out for "re-memmoration". She points to sources - place, literature, poetry, Gaelic language and other archival material - where those who wish to journey can find directions. The call stops short of a full celebration of the Famine people by its focus on the feminine. The Country Blooms ... and A Grave is a monumental work, rich in imagery, sound and symbolism.

> A scattered people, we share with others this despised experience.
> Similar conditions continue to write new history to-day.
> A common story we can begin to recognise, a common ground to meet.
>
> Alanna O'Kelly, 1992

(Fig. 22)

ALANNA O'KELLY

Born in Gorey, County Wexford, Ireland on 9 December 1955.
Honours diploma, Fine Art, National College of Art & Design, Dublin, 1078.
Post-Graduate scholarship work, Helsinki, Finland, 1979
Research Assistant, Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London, 1985-87
Lives in Kilcooley Abbey, County Tipperary, Ireland

Alanna O'Kelly has worked throughout Europe and North America. A visiting artist and lecturer at numerous institutions, she has also organised exhibitions, given seminars and facilitated workshops on continued media - especially audio and performance work - in and out of traditional art spaces.

WORK EXPERIENCE

1985-87	Organising Committee of The Irish Exhibition of Living Art.
1986	Assistant Organiser *Eye To Eye*, Irish Women Artists Festival, London.
1986	Research Assistant at the Slade School of Art, University of London.
1987	Panel speaker at *Women's Caucus Of The Arts*, Boston, USA.
1988	Panel speaker at the *Sculpture Symposium On Performance Art*, in Dublin.
1986-92	Facilitated seminars/workshops in Combined Media in Audio/Voice/Performance work.
March 92	CAFE. Tutor/Facilitator at workshops for Community Art Workers.
1980-98	Visiting Artist/Part-time Lecturer at colleges throughout Ireland, England and the USA including NCAD Dublin, School of Art Limerick, Cork, Regional College, Galway, Belfast. Combined media at Sheffield Polytech. Visiting Lecturer in Canada and USA.
1990-92	Part-time Lecturer in Media Studies, Communications Department, Rathmines.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1981	Project Arts Centre, Dublin. *Barriers*. I
1983	County Dublin. *St John's Night Fire Paths*. P.LE
1983	Dublin. *Echoes* and *The Belly Breathing*. Mixed-media slide and sound documentation, in collaboration with Trish Haugh. P
1986	Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London. *Still Behond the Pale*. In collaboration with John Byrne. P
1987	*Chant Down Greenham*. Travelled to New York, Toronto, Boston. P
1992	Irish Museum of Modern Art. *The Country Blooms ... A Garden and A Grave* I

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1980	ICA Gallery, London. *Without the Walls*. I
1980	*Hibernian Inspace*. Travelled to Scotland. I
1982	Inner City Festival, Dublin. *In City Images*. LE
1984	Seen Apart, A Women's Festival, Art and Research Exchange, Belfast. *Realignment*. Mixed-media, in collaboration with Mary Duffy, P
1985-87	Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind: Some New Irish Art. Travelled to United States an Canada. P, V
1985-86	*Chant Down Greenham*. Travelled to United States and Canada. P
1985	Saint Francis Xavier Hall (SFX), Dublin. *Audio Arts*. P
1985	Cork Art Now (CAN) P

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS (Continued)

1986 Irish Women Artists' Festival, London. *Eye to Eye*. P
1986 *Guinness Peat Aviation Show for Emerging Artists.* Royal Hospital, Dublin. P
1986 AVE Festival, Arnhem, Netherlands. *Forbidden Heroines*. In collaboration with Anne Tallentire. P, VI
1986 London Film Makers Co-op, London. *London Video Artists, Channel 6*. In collaboration with Anne Tallentire. P
1987 Pentonville Gallery, London. 4 Performance Artist. VI, MM
1987 Boston. *Women's Caucus for the Arts*. P
1987 Kassel, Germany. *Documenta 8*. P.
1988 Riverside Studios, London and Arnolfini, Bristol. *A Sense of Ireland.* VI
1988 Helsinki, Finland. *Some New Irish Art*. VS
1988 Film and Video Festival, Köln, Germany. *Feminalle*. V
1988 Chisenhale Gallery, London. *Off the Map*. P, VI
1988 Projects, UK, Newcastle, England. *Sound Moves*. S
1990 Cork Film Festival. *Dancing with my Shadow*. V
1990 Royal Hibernian Academy Gallery, Dublin. *Irish Art - the European Dimension*. W
1990 Dublin Film Festival. *Dancing with my Shadow*. V
1991 Orchard Gallery, Derry. *Available Resources*.S
1991 *The Fifth Province.* Travelled to Alberta and Quebec. P
1993 Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. *Moviola - Video Positive*
1994 Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin. IMMA - Glen Dimplex V, P, S
1994 Centre National d'Art et Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris. Hors Limites, SI
1995 *Poetic Land, Political Territory*. Travelled to Scotland, Wales, England. VI
1995 Project Arts Centre and crypt of St Mary's Abbey, Dublin. *Omós*. P
1996 Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris. L'Imaginaire *Irlandais*. VI
1996 Såo Paolo Bienal. VI

SELECTED AWARDS

1994 Irish Museum of Modern Art/Glen Dimplex Award
1992 Film and Video Bursary, Irish Arts Council
1990 Film and Video Bursary, Irish Arts Council
1989 Visual Arts Bursary, Irish Arts Council
1986 Guinness peat Aviation Award for Emerging Artists
1983 Guinness Peat Aviation Show
1982 Travel Bursary to New York, Irish Arts Council
1981 Travel Bursary to Milan, Irish Arts Council
1980 Materials Grant, Irish Arts Council
1979 Northern Ireland Arts Council

KEY: I = Installation, **LE** = Live Event, **MM** = Mixed Media, **P** = Performance, **S** = Sound, **V** = Video, **VI** = Video Installation

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Remember, v.t. to bear or keep in mind, not to forget, to know by heart: to recall to mind, to recollect: to keep in mind with gratitude, reverence or respect ... to commemorate. Cassel's Concise English Dictionary, 1993.