

The Impossible Conversation

CONVERSATION 1: ART, INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIETY



NCAD GALLERY AND DUBLIN CITY GALLERY THE HUGH LANE. MARCH 9, 2013

PANEL: ANN LOUISE GILLIGAN, BARBARA DAWSON, DECLAN MCGONAGLE, JONATHAN CUMMINS

ANN LOUISE GILLIGAN

audio recording:

9'32"

I have entitled my piece *The Transformation of Silence into Language* and I begin with a quotation from Audre Lorde. "What", she says, "*is most important must be spoken*". What is most important must be spoken. It seems to me that breaking the silence is very much part of this creative project. Here we have the unveiling of experience usually hidden from view, the allowing of words to escape from behind the bars, words that reveal new understandings, words that reveal new meaning. All of this is clearly exemplified in Jonathan's work, which you will have the privilege of viewing. His work in my opinion is indeed an act of the imagination, an artistic exemplar of the power of imagination. And again as you are all aware imagination, that faculty, is profoundly linked to our ability to create new meaning, new words, above all to create new metaphors. Metaphor again, as I know you know, is that aspect of language that allows two things to come together. We might talk about it as a metaphor brings together the '*is*' and the '*is not*'. And in this situation we have, in part, I don't want to overstate any of this, we have the '*is-ness*' of relative freedom, in so far as any of us have freedom, with the '*is-not-ness*' of no freedom, which is imprisonment. Now the point of metaphor is when you have the '*is*' and the '*is-not*' coming together in that kind of clash and if it is well done, if it is a living metaphor, well then you come to see things differently. And that I think is what Jonathan's work is doing.

12'19"

It is my opinion that not enough attention has been paid to the voice from the inside out. Here we are looking at the institution of prison but of course we can apply this to all the institutions in our state. Recent historic revelations clearly unveil that we have not heard enough of the voices from the inside out. If we had, could things have been altered been sooner? Could things have been changed more radically early on? Here, the silence that we speak about has resulted in a narrative about the life of those in prison. That life that has so often not been articulated from the inside, from the voice of those who it concerns. Now of course I am familiar that we have seen the odd documentary... a few Mondays ago, and I don't speak disparagingly about this, we have had documentaries about prison life, but that's actually not what I'm talking about when I talk about the need to hear the voice from the inside out. And what you'll see in Jonathan's work is a different, deep, artistic engagement with the experience, the analysis and the reflective understanding of these encounters. I think what Jonathan has done is that his work allows a dialogue, a value filled respectful listening that engenders, as I've said, living language, and it is informed by metaphors from inside the walls. This is new in my opinion; it is different.

Breaking the silence in this way, to go back to my earlier quotation, allows us the privilege of eavesdropping, of hearing experiences that are diverse and different and allow or should allow a shift in consciousness, a *conscientisation* that actually jolts us from our normative presumptions. It jolts us from our comfort, our acquiescence and complicity in accepting what is plainly a blinkered, a sheltered state of mind, and here of course I speak for myself. So, we are left with questions in relation to this work.

Does loss of freedom, *ipso facto*, result in loss of voice, in loss of voice to inform the free world view. And if so, if loss of freedom does prohibit, and insist on, loss of voice, who said it should and why? Listening

to the piece that I saw and the voice in the piece, which is called *When I Leave These Landings (2004 - 2009)*, listening to the voice of the prisoner in that piece, I personally felt an amazing unleashing of an energy in myself as the prisoner shared his truth. I found that my own presuppositions were disrupted; my own prejudices were intruded upon, and I found the way I lived up to this pushed me to a new search for words, words that I did not have up to this in my own restricted lexicon of meaning. I heard a man speak of his passion for justice and while many of us might question the intentionality of his passion or indeed his interpretation or his meaning of justice, others like myself would say, don't we all live life out of ideologies? Don't we all have patterns of ideas that shape our understanding of reality so what exactly is reality and who shapes reality and from what lens? It is my opinion that we have had enough of censorship and I love a quotation from Gordon Allport on censorship. He says: "*Our strongest censors should be reserved for those who close all doors but one. The surest way to lose truth is to pretend that one wholly has it.*"

18'22"

If this project has the potential to break the silence and in so doing to open our presuppositions and to call us to a new systematic, systemic, structural analysis of the institutions we both live within and among, and I believe it has, then it is possible because of the values that this artist has brought to this work. And in thanking Jonathan, I would also thank and name the creative leadership that has sponsored this work and supported it. And finally, if we are concerned with individual fulfillment of those who live in this society and the existential requirement for social amelioration then we must promote creative thinking and creative action, the type that brings these kinds of projects in our midst. We will never ever measure the significance for human welfare of this type of creative work. Above all, I thank Jonathan.

20'00"
