



Wait it Out

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Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

WAIT IT OUT





Type of output:
Exhibition
(solo exhibition,
performance, public
talk, publication)

by
Sandra Johnston

Cover and Left:
Wait it Out, solo Performance in
the Cube at Project Arts Centre,
August 30 2019, Duration 1hour.

Photo credit: Senija Topcic

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SUMMARY

Wait it Out was commissioned by Project Arts Centre, Dublin and involved a developmental residency at Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). The resulting solo exhibition contextualised and problematised the ongoing tensions of the Northern Irish peace process.

The project investigated traumatic memory and its persistent entrapment within everyday objects. It revisited personal and historical archives to raise questions about how political gestures can be reassessed and reclaimed through forms of reenactment. *Wait It Out* probed the contributions of performance to this area of enquiry by experimenting at the margins of live performance, performance documentation and mediatized performance.

Negotiating ongoing reverberations of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, *Wait it Out* reflected across the history of the Troubles, from the indeterminate early days of 1976, through an intermediate climate of unease up to present-day Anglo/Irish tensions surrounding Brexit. Johnston's research problematised ideas of assiduous archival practices (Blocker 2015) by re-using historical artefacts, symbolic materials and re-editing footage in ways that substantially remade and adjusted social meanings. Shifts in timing and iteration in the work play-off aspects of historical and real time as malleable constructs (as discussed by Lee 2006).

Johnston's performance *Reserved* (Project Arts Centre's 1998) and IMMA residency (1999/2000) laid the foundations for *Wait it Out*. As a practice-based investigation of her own archive of video/film footage from that period, what emerged were questions of retrieval and absence. Through an assemblage of personal acts performed live and to camera, intersected by mediatized fragments, Johnston's autopsy of performance gestures reclaimed actions isolated across time, reconstituting and revisioning them in the constellation of newly configured works.

The research involved two interrelated video installations, a live performance, and was further disseminated through an in-conversation and publication with interview by curator Livia Paldi. The innovation of the project has been recognised through the purchase of the entire exhibition by Arts Council Ireland, and was the basis for Johnston receiving the O'Malley Award for Visual Art 2020. One of the films, *That Apart*, was subsequently exhibited at Gallery CC, Malmo, and Deutscher Künstlerbund, Berlin.

TIMELINE

2018	2019 Jan - Jul	2019 Jul - Dec	2020
<p>5th June, Curator Livia Paldi from Project Arts Centre, Dublin, visits Newcastle upon Tyne to discuss commission.</p> <p>1st August, Paldi further discussions in Belfast.</p>	<p>2nd January, site visit to Project's exhibition, Active Archive – Slow Institution: The Long Goodbye, which included artefacts of Johnston's 1998 performance <i>Reserved</i>.</p> <p>4th February to 2nd March, IMMA production residency.</p> <p>23rd February, present at symposium as part of The Long Goodbye.</p> <p>25th February, public lecture about the project at National College of Art & Design, Dublin.</p> <p>8th March Keynote address at Zürich University of the Arts, Switzerland.</p> <p>11th April Keynote address at Ulster University, Belfast, PhD research festival.</p> <p>12th April, keynote address at Technology University, Dublin, PhD research symposium.</p> <p>13th April, site visit with Paldi at Project.</p> <p>3rd- 8th June, production phase of writing in Dublin.</p> <p>29th June- 8th July, IMMA residency Pt2 Filming phase with Richard Ashrowan.</p>	<p>19th-29th August, production phase in Dublin, complete editing, Install and rehearse at Project.</p> <p>29th August, Exhibition opening.</p> <p>30th August, Live performance in The Cube.</p> <p>17th October, Exhibition closed.</p>	<p>13th March, Arts Council Ireland purchased the entire exhibition.</p> <p>16th October, awarded The O'Malley Visual Arts Award 2020 by The Irish American Cultural Institute.</p> <p>Irish Museum of Modern Art purchasing commission developed in response to the exhibition.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Wait it Out consisted of two video installations in two adjoining spaces, *That Apart* and *Overprint*, which were interconnected by a sculptural construction that altered the habitual use of the gallery spaces. A confrontational divide in spectatorial attention was brought about by bringing the audience uncomfortably close to installed screens, bodily images and an abrasive soundtrack.

A live performance on the first day of the exhibition enabled audiences to observe first-hand an improvisation created from the same set of objects evident in the video works.



Right: *Wait it Out*, solo exhibition,
Project Arts Centre, Dublin.

Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh

Right and below:
Wait it Out, solo exhibition,
Project Arts Centre, Dublin.
Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The main concern of this research was to draw forward into public debate focused questions about the ongoing precarity of the Northern Irish peace process by revitalising archival media footage from 1976, bringing historical narratives into proximity with personal biographical sequences of embodied responses. This use of non-verbal, physical communication as counterpoint to historical media content, placed the artist's own subjective identity into an uncomfortable position of visibility and admission in relation to reconciling the trauma of sectarian divisions.

A core aim was to consolidate a number of key gestures and actions that have occurred in previous live performances into a distilled and focused format, that could retain vitality and aspects of chance iteration within a gallery context. The videos were intentionally not synced so that a degree of frictional unpredictability was retained in how actions overlapped.



Right: *That Apart*,
production screen shots.
Photo credit: Sandra Johnston

CONTEXT

This project grew out of conversations between Johnston and curator Livia Paldi about revisiting Johnston's 1998 performance *Reserved*. Johnston's reconstruction of aspects of the earlier performance effectively laid the foundations for *Wait it Out* to be developed from questions of retrieval and absence - what the body remembers, and what technology cannot capture within located live interventions. The project involved an innovative integration of complex personal narratives with archival artefacts in ways that facilitated a timely rethinking of the political tensions existing between Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Great Britain.

The confessional aspects of the installation are comparable to the narrative constructs involving biographical subtexts apparent in Willie Doherty's body of film works. Tactics of revisioning archival footage is comparable with Duncan Campbell and Helen Cammock's explorations that reclaim intersections of history, notably the Irish Civil Rights movement, towards concerns of accountability. Johnston's methods of dislocating mediatized fragments through live actions, in order to represent underlying social anxieties in NI, has been extensively analysed by Blair 2014.

Right: *Folding In*, one-channel video projection digitised from 16mm film.

Photo credit: Richard Ashrowan



The significant adjustment of the meaning of archival objects in *Wait It Out* resonates with Jane Blocker's research on artist's reshaping of charged objects, and the implications of performative responses to trauma and its residues. Creatively the work's process challenged Johnston to seek a liminal gap between performativity and filmmaking conventions that reflects on issues of conveying time. Lee's analysis (2006) of 1960s art experimentation with perceptions of time articulates comparable examples, especially Carolee Schneemann's *Eye Body* (1962-63) but Johnston's *Wait It Out* differs in mobilising strategies of temporal torsion upon a specific region and its troubled history.



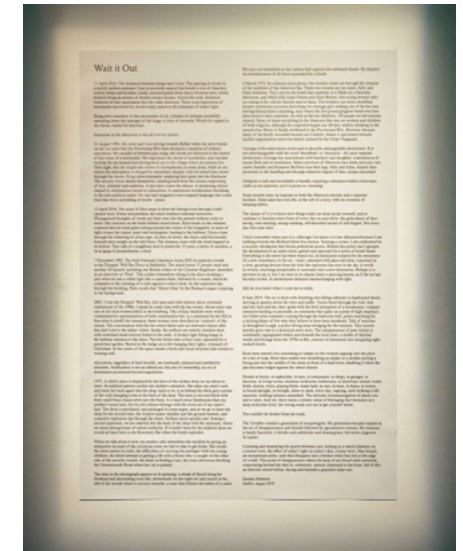
Folding In, one-channel video
projection digitised from 16mm film.

Photo credit: Richard Ashrowan

METHODS AND PROCESSES

The central installation, *That Apart*, was edited from a five-day consecutive filming process in Project's gallery and at IMMA with film maker Richard Ashrowan. Johnston/ Ashrowan approached the work through engaging with the starkness of the gallery environment to produce a taut minimalist focus around the actuality of performative actions. Performing directly for camera rather than for an audience, a new potential emerged through focusing on how the actions could be developed as variations that possess a solitary, exacerbated relationship to the artist's body.

Johnston purchased a number of authentic objects with historical value including a pair of leather gloves formerly used by members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and British Army-issue 1980s combat boots. These symbolically charged objects were used interchangeably with common objects such as plates, breeze blocks and dish cloths to draw out a spectrum of behavioural responses from their haptic qualities, especially apparent in the live performance.



Right and below:
Wait it Out,
(text work A0 vinyl poster).
Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh



The exhibition also involved an in-depth exploration of Johnston's archives, sifting back through 28 years of audio/video content and digitising key material. This resurfaced several fragmented layers of past enquiries into trauma, reconciliation and commemoration which have consistently formed the basis of Johnston's artistic practice. It was only through the editing process of *That Apart* footage that decisions became possible around the archival elements, and a trajectory of personal reflections on bombings during the Troubles and the implications of the word "peace" emerged – most notably in the final artwork completed, which was the *Wait it Out* poster text.

The recreation of performance acts to camera is notoriously difficult to achieve without gestures becoming mechanical and losing spontaneity. However, this exhibition deliberately stripped-down the use of objects and the relationship to the gallery's specific architecture, in ways that insisted upon retaining evidence of the mutability and 'imperfection' of repetition as a crucial part of the artistic process.



Right:
Overprint,
Alternating two-channel video.
Courtesy UTV archive / PRONI
(The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland).

Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh



Above:
Short Strand, (2000/2019)
part of the constellation of videos
forming *Overprint*.
Photo credit: Sandra Johnston

Left:
Short Strand installation shot.
Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh

Wait it Out, solo performance in
the Cube at Project Arts Centre.
Photo credit: Senija Topcic



DISSEMINATION

The research was disseminated primarily through the *Wait it Out* exhibition which ran for two months in Project Arts Centre (approx. 1,000 audience). Additionally, the *In Conversation* event on the preview night with artists Susan MacWilliam and collaborator Richard Ashrowan attracted a full house audience (60) in the Cube theatre space. The live performance event on the first day of the show was well attended by artists, curators and activists from across Ireland. A publication tracing the research process through an extensive conversation between Johnston and Páldi will be released in February 2021.

Reviews were written by Maisie Linford for *Totally Dublin* (online and printed journal 50,000 copies a month), including an interview with Johnston and Páldi discussing the concept of the exhibition. A review by Don Duncan for *Paper Visual Art* (online and printed journal) was published in December 2019. Artist Fergus Byrne wrote a review for *In:Action Irish Live Art* (online journal).

Johnston was interviewed by: Kate Antosik Parsons for the National Irish Visual Art Library archive; Dominic Thorpe, PhD candidate Ulster University; and Andrea Saemann and Olivia Jacques of ArtasFoundation, a peace organisation based in Switzerland about *Wait It Out*. The project garnered invitations for Johnston to speak about it in keynote addresses at Ulster University PhD research Festival; Technological University Dublin, PhD research Festival; Zurich University of the Arts; and National College of Art & Design, Dublin.

Right:
Preview night *In Conversation* with artists Susan MacWilliam
and Richard Ashrowan, in the Cube at Project Arts Centre.

Photo credit: Senija Topcic





CONFLICT RESOLUTION

PROJECT ARTS CENTRE REISCOVERY OF ITS PAST BRINGS SANDRA JOHNSON BACK TO DUBLIN FOR THE FIRST TIME, A FURTHER REFLECTION OF THE NORTHERN IRISH CONFLICT REGARDING THE LEGACY OF VIOLENCE AND PEACE AS UNFINISHED.

words Maisie Linford



TOTALLY DUBLIN
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Sandra Johnson first exhibited in the Project Arts Centre in 1998, the year the Good Friday Agreement was signed. The artistic piece in the now demitric Circuit Road was an exploration of the previous occupier of her hotel room. The work, at least on the surface, was completely removed from the political context she had come from. Johnson describes herself as an "occupier" having occupied from Northern Ireland and attempting to inconspicuously blend into Dublin. Now, Johnson is proud to call herself a Northern Irish artist, consciously neither Irish or British.

What if Chad negotiates personal and historical narratives in relation to the reformation of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and reflects upon the uncertain early days of the peace process and the climate of unrest which motivated Johnson to relocate in Dublin in 1997. The work is split into two main parts *Cherrytree* and *That A-Jah!*.

Cherrytree builds on material gathered for *Something You May Later Regret On* (2004) which include unedited archival news footage and personal videos connected to the conflict in Northern Ireland with individuals from the peace movement. Specifically the wife of Mairead Corrigan Maguire, who founded The Peace People and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. Johnson argues this prompted an earlier masculine interrogation and parliamentary understanding of the Peace People's objectives. This is combined with footage made by Johnson after she experienced a sectarian attack and was left isolated, angry and agoraphobic, naming the site using the words of Maguire for empowerment.

That A-Jah! Johnson describes as a "hybrid collaboration" with moving image artist Richard Ashworth. It is neither performance nor film. Johnson uses her body in the present



come to process her memory, working with Ashworth in film hours of footage that combine new material, whilst revisiting memories from previous performances and materials that felt unfinished. "When working in a camera you have the time to repeat until the movement is exhausted... not just physically exhausted but hectic, until the meaning no longer resonates."

For a performance artist Johnson is unconcerned why "I would love no image of me at all, but it's necessary," she explains, "my body is an encyclopedia of what I've lived and the past." This is presented as a two-screen projection in which the same material is independently edited by both artists. This creates a visual dissonance in how the same material can be recontextualised, rather than, perhaps, the usual authenticity expected of performance art documentation. Documenting performance art is something Johnson feels strongly about, even to the point she feels it could have hurt her career. "I once had the year's worth of work in ephemeral art and thought this could be career suicide."

Johnson regards her work as closer to sculpture than theatre. Her body is just one of the materials she uses, found artefacts or considered objects that have had a life before the work take on new identities in the piece.

For this installation, she has acquired 1980's British Army boots and drumsticks addressing her own family's involvement with the British Army and marching bands that always felt like something that should never be spoken about. The exhibition is unique not just for its subject matter, being given a platform to reflect on Northern Irish identity, particularly from a female with a Protestant background is rare in Dublin – but the investment in the medium.

"This exhibition at the Project is so important, because of the scale," Johnson explains. It's unusual to see this level of trust in a performance artist in the UK and Ireland.

Carolee Livin Páidí explains the commission came out of the 30-year anniversary last year and involves recognising Project Arts Centre as one of Ireland's oldest public institutions through an "active archive" that learns from the talented artists that have developed their careers there. Project remains a significant space in Dublin for performance artists and can claim credit for launching careers such as that of Nigel Kelly, Aislinn MacLiamáin and Sandra Johnson. Páidí explains the significance of learning from the past for the institution to grow. "It makes us rethink the changing conditions of artistic labour and production, the

Opposite top: *88 Feet That A-Jah!*, two-channel HD video projection, 2019, courtesy the artist Sandra Johnson / Richard Ashworth

Opposite below: Commissioned and produced by Project Arts Centre, Dublin with support from the Irish Department of Modern Art Production Residency and Arts Department, New Frontier University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.

The ageist film *Cherrytree* addressing two-channel video projection, colour sound, 2019. Courtesy the artist Sandra Johnson. Two scenes from the *LTV's (later) 'Secretary'* news articles documenting the Peace People organisation through two peace marches that took place across Britain and Ireland in 1976 as the grassroots organisation gained international attention, including two of its leaders Betty Williams and Mairead Maguire being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

agency of artistic and curatorial work in relation to economic, social, and political institutions and power, the status of exhibitors and the role of public institutions."

When she approached Johnson to develop new work last year the original concept was to create documentary material from her time living in the Liberties during the *Celtic Tiger*, yet examining the archival material compelled Johnson to continue her own analysis and feelings of dislocation created by Brexit. The influence of the *Celtic Tiger* on Dublin arts is significant and something Johnson does explore from her approach. Páidí describes her interest in Johnson as being able to "bring together close observation of social and political situations" but also her "reflection on the practice and operation of performance and the liminality of the body, to show how often overlooked gestures become signifiers of complex realities."

Although her piece has moved away from its initial conception as a reflection on the "Celtic Tiger boom", by virtue of her medium, Johnson is highlighting an absence of mainstream platforms for Irish performance artists in Dublin today. This legacy has, according to Johnson, shaped a commercial art culture that favours art as a product to be exchanged. Often when performance artists are included in an exhibition it will be treated as an event or performance at the opening night, which Johnson regards as "disengagement" in her practice and notes the exclamation, "it's like performance artists are treated as entertainment for while people are having a drink."

There will be people in the audience that will be familiar with her work, but also new audiences that will have the opportunity to experience art in a new way. Johnson hopes Dublin audiences connect the active material with the physical performance. "I hope it prompts people to think of the legacy of violence as unfinished and the legacy of peace as unfinished," she explains.

The increasing commodification of the art world exists not only in the financial exchange but the way audiences consume art through social media. As Johnson outlines, "It doesn't matter how big a sign you have saying no photography, just by virtue of having a smartphone there are some people that have held a camera in front of me and recorded a live stream." This approach to using art as a way of promoting themselves as edgy or creative, according to Johnson, violates the contract between the artist and the audience. "The biggest compliment someone has given me is to say thank you for the performance, I really wanted to photograph you but didn't," because that shows they respect not only the artist but also understand the complexity of what they are part of and the part they play as witness. Johnson adds, "at its best performance art is a contemplative art work. It's not experimental theatre or pushing yourself to the edge of life, which is how a lot of people view it, it's about re-examining human institutions."

TOTALLY DUBLIN
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Above:
Review by Maisie Linford for *Totally Dublin journal*,
September issue 2019.

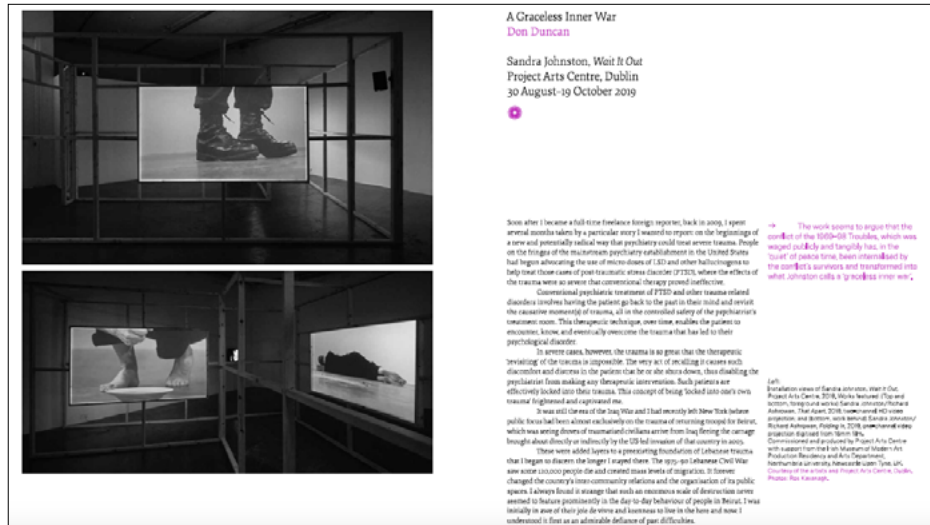
That Apart was reconstructed and exhibited in two exhibitions:

Healing Paths (7-30 August 2020) curated by Maria Norrman, at Galleri CC, Malmo, Sweden.

<https://visualartists.ie/events/healing-paths-sandra-johnston-francis-fay-at-galleri-cc-malmo-sweden/>

The Border, (11 Sep-13 Nov 2020), curated by Albert Weis, Deutscher Künstlerbund, Berlin.

<https://www.kuenstlerbund.de/english/projects/projects-since-2011/2020-border.html?home=true&anc=2646#anc2646>



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Paper Visual Art review by Don Duncan Vol. 11, (December 2019).

<http://papervisualart.com/hardcopy-journal/>

In:Action Irish Live Art Review.

<https://inaction.ie/2019/09/29/sandra-johnston-wait-it-out-at-project-arts-centre/>

Totally Dublin, September 2019 edition pages 70-71.

<https://www.totallydublin.ie>

Arts Council Ireland purchased all the video components of the *Wait it Out* Exhibition in April 2020.

Recipient of The O'Malley Visual Arts Award 2020, awarded by The Irish American Institute.

<https://visualartistsireland.com/sandra-johnston-announced-as-recipient-of-the-omalley-visual-arts-award-2020>

Johnston is in discussions with the Irish museum of Modern Art about purchasing work in recognition of the social/historical relevance of *Wait it Out*.

Left:

Review by Don Duncan for *Paper Visual Art*, published in December 2019.

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Willie Doherty, (1993), *The Only Good One is a Dead One*.

Alanna O’Kelly, (1994), *The Country Blooms, a Garden and a Grave*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Irish Museum of Modern Art, <https://imma.ie/artists/sandra-johnston/>

Richard Ashrowan, <https://ashrowan.com>

Susan MacWilliam, <https://susanmacwilliam.com>

Right: *Wait it Out* Poster.

Photo credit: Senija Topcic



