

“My so strange roots”: Performing Archive; Embodying Memory

« *Mes raciness si étranges* » : performer l'archive, incarner la mémoire

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“My so strange roots”: Performing Archive; Embodying Memory*

Abstract: All of my writing whether in autofiction, biography, historical analysis, poetry or theatre is a political act of solidarity in making an archive in which feminism and art intersect as social change. In this essay, I conjure solidarity with contemporary French and Irish feminist artists whose work unmakes the self inside cells and outside the aftermath of exploded lives. Breeze blocks, cages, a small prison cell filled by Alice Maher with a giant ball of thorns, the weight of sound equipment, boxes that are a writer’s life; the archive turns the key on all that cannot be carried lightly or held at all. How can a library contain Hélène Cixous’s archive? Where does performance begin or end in Louise Bourgeois’s art of memory? Why is the neo-liberal patriarchy of Ireland’s banking system looped back in repetitious sound to revolutionary feminist action in Jaki Irvine’s 2016 video and sound installation?

Keywords: archive, performance art, memory, feminism, prison.

Résumé: Tous mes écrits, qu’il s’agisse d’autofiction, de biographie, d’analyse historique, de poésie ou de théâtre, sont un acte politique de solidarité avec des créatrices d’archives pour lesquelles l’art et le féminisme œuvrent au changement social. Dans cet article, j’exprime une solidarité avec des artistes féministes contemporaines françaises et irlandaises dont le travail déconstruit le sujet qui se trouve enfermé à l’intérieur de cellules ou affecté par les répercussions de vies anéanties. Parpaings, cages, une petite cellule de prison dans laquelle Alice Maher place une boule d’épines géante, le poids du matériel de sonorisation, des cartons qui contiennent la vie d’une écrivaine; l’archive ouvre sur tout ce qu’on a du mal à porter, voire à tenir. Comment une bibliothèque peut-elle contenir les archives d’Hélène Cixous? Où commence et où finit la performance dans l’art mémoriel de Louise Bourgeois? Pourquoi le patriarcat et le néolibéralisme, qui sous-tendent le système bancaire irlandais, reviennent-ils en boucle sous forme de sons et finissent par céder le pas à l’action féministe révolutionnaire dans une installation vidéo et sonore de Jaki Irvine?

Mots clés: archive, performance, mémoire, féminisme, prison.

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They have always been there.

I do not look at them. I have never looked at them. I “know” they are there. Their presence. Roots. Mine? My so strange roots...

[...]

To the question: how have these frail objects survived, how have they resisted, will they resist the teeth of time?

[...]

Albums in ruins to be respected. It is memory itself.

Hélène Cixous¹

There is something rebellious about archives that are and are not digital: Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* read within the digital Abbey Theatre Archives² makes the characters even more inter-textual and meta: a digital enquiry into the Abbey’s theatre archive actually using the term *archive* releases voices unheard of together in their isolations. Suddenly we are listening in on the world of characters who have stepped outside of their localised stories as they themselves research the archive for verification of the fictional worlds of multiple storied scripts in which they are trapped. In a 1967 production of *Dearly Beloved Roger*, a character declares: “And ’tis an established fact that my mother never set foot beyond Ireland or England. (Triumphant) Consult the archive.”³ Jon in the 1999 production of *Observatory* confirms: “If something has happened then it has happened. There’s nothing you can do about it. The past is the past. It’s fixed, and it’s finished. You can’t change it”. Rejecting his certainty that the past can be contained, Nicola replies that she can activate change but first: “I need information from the archives. You know the archives better than anyone. I need to know what happened exactly. What led up to it. What was his state of mind. Why did he do it. If I can find out that, if I can understand – then maybe I can change things”.⁴

The archive of their imaginations is a factual-fictional world in which their lives can be verified. In addressing the Board of the National Library of France when artist, playwright and philosopher Hélène Cixous gifted her archive to the library, Jacques Derrida warned:

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1. Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, London – New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 179.
 2. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway.
 3. John O’Donovan, *Dearly Beloved Roger*, Abbey Theatre, 26 April 1967 [prompt script], Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 3970_PS_0002, p19.
 4. Daragh Carville, *Observatory*, Abbey Theatre, 31 March 1999 [prompt script], Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 0404_PS_0001, p25. 2.

The archive’s trustees may find themselves, because of the archive’s devious structure, dispossessed of all power and all authority over it. The archive won’t let itself be pushed around, it seems to resist, make matters difficult, foment a revolution against the very power to which it feigns to hand itself over, to lend and even to give itself.⁵

Sandra Johnston’s 2019 exhibition and performance work *Wait It Out*⁶ is concerned with another form of archive; the story of the destroyed self, fragmented during the Troubles of Northern Ireland and remembered and performed using the materiality of fragments as a new set of Borders emerged in public discourse. This is an archive of destruction and preservation. Archive here presses on her body; a piece of breeze block held on the back of the neck, the still soiled army boots of a British soldier who fought in Northern Ireland sold on eBay are worn on stage by her hands as they crawl through the smell of disinfectant. Extracts from the artist’s diary printed on the wall of the gallery read:

The Troubles created a generation of escapologists. My generation became experts in the art of disappearances and denials followed by ignominious returns. My memory is fatally fractured, it divides and subdivides and disintegrates, but never outgrows its causes.⁷

In the European Live Art Archive Johnston explored the act of making new work from the accumulation of archive: “Everything you need to know is already there. Attrition is the greatest form of creativity that we have.”⁸

Louise Bourgeois’s architectural structures “memory” *Cells*⁹ are a series of nine mesh cages that contain and release the archive of autobiography. The *Cells* are theatrical spaces that hold unravelling versions of the self as performed through staged objects that can be seen from curated angles. They have been described as “sinister tableaux of inner lives and imprisoned memories [...] enclosed spaces in which fragmented images evoke secret histories of pain and desire”.¹⁰ *Cells* contain objects that resonate with her life; telling stories through a montage of remade scenes, evocative still pictures; objects that are archives, documents unified and dislocated from the artist’s life story and stories a viewer imagines in the moments of encounter. “A cell is solitary confinement but it’s also the smallest living unit in the

5. Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius*, Beverley Bie Brahic (trans.), New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 11-12.

6. The Work was performed as art of exhibition at Project Arts Centre in 2019. See <https://projectartscentre.ie/event/sandra-johnston-wait-it-out>.

7. Sandra Johnston, *Wait It Out* poster text, 2019.

8. Sandra Johnston, interview, European Live Art Archive, 21 May 2012, online: <http://www.liveartarchive.eu/archive/artist/sandra-johnston-0>.

9. More information about these works can be found at: <http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-bourgeois-EN/ENS-bourgeois-EN.html>.

10. Jonathan Jones, “The Striking Feminist Art of Louise Bourgeois – in Pictures”, *The Guardian*, 22 September 2017, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2017/sep/22/louise-bourgeois-feminism-art-in-pictures>.

body.”¹¹ The works are performance spaces of life under the microscope; emotion in suspended animation contained and released within large wire mesh cages in which dramatic stages are set for invocations that are actual and metaphorical. Hilary Robinson has suggested that each *Cell* in the series makes manifest the artist’s own psychic space and “[v]iewers are attracted in to the *Cells* but at the same time kept at bay through Bourgeois’s description of this as her symbolic space”.¹² In one *Cell*

[...] pieces of torn tapestry suggest the rich interiors of her childhood. Her father had a gallery that sold tapestries, so fine, colorful antique textiles were the stuff of her earliest experiences. Over this cage of nostalgia presides a spider, spinner of silk and guardian of secrets.¹³

Nancy Spector, curator of the Guggenheim Bourgeois retrospective at Bilbao, observed how the artist’s own archive was essential for her work:

Bourgeois guarded her past through photographs, furniture, letters, clothing, etc., as well as diaries, in which she recorded every one of her daily actions, emotions, and observations. She believed that nostalgia was unproductive [...].¹⁴

If Bourgeois approaches memory not as nostalgia, the reconstructed memory through an archive of documents becomes the active imperative for her art: “Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it and then if you can’t you become a sculptor”.¹⁵ In her diary, Bourgeois wrote in 1993:

Art comes from a need to express – an idea or a concept – cutting, mutilation, self-mutilation. Pruning, control. How to prove to yourself. How to achieve saint-hood, health, star status, self-knowledge. The curative aspect of Art, usefulness.¹⁶

Until the 16th century, “cell” was a word used for a storeroom that denoted a physical space, a place, somewhere to collect and to keep particular objects separate somehow. And so a cell is one in any number of chambers in a building. While that building might house many people, a cell is usually for one person only. A cell

11. Nancy Spector talking in a video at the Guggenheim New York show of Bourgeois’s work (June to September 2008), online: <https://www.alejandradeargos.com/index.php/es/completas/32-artistas/41711-louise-bourgeois-biografia-obras-y-exposiciones>. This video also shows extracts from *Confrontation* (1978) and *A Banquet / A Fashion Show of Body Parts* recorded at the Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art in New York, 21 October 1978.

12. Hilary Robinson, “Louise Bourgeois’s *Cells*: Looking at Bourgeois through Irigaray’s Gesturing Towards the Mother”, *n.paradoxa*, no. 3, May 1997, Katy Deepwell (ed.), p. 25, online: <http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue3.pdf> (January 2010).

13. Jonathan Jones, “The Striking Feminist Art of Louise Bourgeois – in Pictures”.

14. Spector’s insightful comments reflecting on the artist were originally found on the Gallery’s website for the 2016 exhibition “Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells”.

15. Paul Stuart, “Sculptor Louise Bourgeois: A Year of Events Celebrating Her Life and Work”, *World Socialist Web Site*, 14 January 2009, online: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2009/01/bour-j14.html>.

16. Louise Bourgeois, diary note, 20 August 1993, quoted in <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/did-you-know/the-person>.

is also a room in a prison or an asylum. A cell is a place of solitary confinement, imprisonment for punishment by some kind of law or terror. Alice Maher’s 1991 work *Cell* was a ball of thorns made in a prison cell at Kilmainham Jail, the historic location of British colonial imprisonment of Irish Republican political prisoners.¹⁷

Brian Keenan saw this work in situ soon after his release from captivity in Beirut. An ex-hostage encountering the spatial dimensions of his own mind in isolation. I asked him what he remembered about seeing the work:

I remember it quite clearly... I wasn’t long back from “my holidays” as I call them... I went into the cell where the Ball of Thorns was... It struck me immediately... a kind of sense that: “Oh my God, I’m looking at myself. I am looking at a visual representation of all those years I’ve spend locked up.” But particularly the nine months that I was in solitary confinement in a small cell six foot by four foot and a sloping ceiling, so you could only stand up at one end of it... It was pushing the walls back... my walls didn’t move... The meaning of it to me is: I have walked into a poem. The perfect revelation or mirror of a time that I passed through... I just wanted to worship it... it was like affirmation.¹⁸

Cell (Choisy) by Louise Bourgeois was the central opening piece in the Pompidou exhibition in Paris in 2008. A large gleaming marble manor house dwarfed by a guillotine that overshadows the skies above it. Both are contained by a wire cage that is covered in theatrical black silk; a window set into the back of the cage is missing. Rusted steel blade sharpened at its angle, white polished marble and glass. The house is extravagant, an institution; a miniature imagining of the artist’s childhood home in Choisy-le-Roi. The artist reflected in an interview:

All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood. My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama.¹⁹

Tom Jeffreys locates Bourgeois’s work in relation to her fascination with Freud:

Where the surrealists focused on the more fantastic elements of the subconscious, Bourgeois played with his more subtle ideas of the uncanny (the *unheimlich* or un-homely).²⁰

17. Alice Maher remade a version of this work for her retrospective at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2012. The image of this can be seen in my essay as published on the artist’s own website: <http://alicemaher.com/essays/breathing-it-all-in>.

18. I interviewed Brian Keenan about seeing this work on his release. A fuller version of the conversation can be found in my essay published as part of Alice Maher’s 2012 retrospective catalogue published by the Irish Museum of Modern Art. A copy of the article is available at: <https://aboutcatherinemorris.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/alice-maher-retrospective-catalogue-essay-by-cm-october-2012.pdf>.

19. Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997*, Marie-Laure Bernadac, Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), London, Violette Editions, 1998, p. 2.

20. Tom Jeffreys, quoted in Morwenna Ferrier, “Louise Bourgeois – The Reluctant Hero of Feminist Art”, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2016, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/mar/14/louise-bourgeois-feminist-art-sculptor-bilbao-guggenheim-women>.

A cell historically applied to the grave: the guillotine is in this work more than a motif in French revolutionary history for murdering the past. It is a symbolic device that cuts through history and sets the clocks to a new time. It is hard to know if the cell is the miniature marble dwelling with its overcast murderous foreboding of bladed eradication or the actual total space where the house is a cell within a cell; the guillotine denotes the external public execution of the prisoners held within and those who are to come. In one interview Bourgeois said: “people guillotine each other in a family”²¹ and in another conversation she states: “The past is guillotined by the present”.²² These are, then, durational works in which time, memory, autobiography and the restaging of the psyche are given a physical presence that is not a private cell but that is subdivided nine times into a series of private enquiries: the viewer can see into and walk around performance installations that are and are not sculptural. Catherine Crimp examined the “atmospheric evocation of themes” in *Cell (Choisy)*:

The title, as a proper noun, suggests the memory of a place even if we know nothing more. The name, however, is unmistakably French, as is the guillotine. In its original context, representing the United States at the 1993 Venice Biennale, *Choisy* would thus have evoked foreignness, distance, travel, exile. [...] This delicately sculpted house is like a body menaced by the rusty guillotine and trapped inside a cage. [...] Could the containment of and threat towards this now-vulnerable house be conceived as some kind of act of revenge?²³

Nancy Spector suggests that the relationship between the body and architecture that are apparent in *Cells* are also present in *Confrontation*, an installation performance space that was launched in New York in 1978 with a performance *A Banquet / A Fashion Show of Body Parts* directed and choreographed by the artist²⁴. *Confrontation* is an installation and an arena for performance. The outer edges of the work are defined and closed by a series of open upright structures that Bourgeois called “boxes”: these upright and open objects of varying heights resemble architecturally a theatre in the round. “With the rise of feminism and the art world’s new pluralism, her work found a wider audience.”²⁵ There is little footage available from this one-off opening show but Spector gives some insight into what the piece looked like:

21. Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father...*, p. 248.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Catherine Crimp, “Louise Bourgeois and Samuel Beckett: Space and the Materials of Memory”, in *Anamnesia: Private and Public Memory in Modern French Culture*, Peter Collier, Anna Magdalena Elsner, Olga Smith (eds.), London, P. Lang, 2009, p. 113.

24. Chief Curator at the Guggenheim Nancy Spector discusses the video archival footage of the 1978 performance of *Confrontation* at the Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art in New York City; quoted in Caitlin Dover, “Performing Confrontation”, 7 April 2014, online: <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/performing-confrontation>.

25. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/louise-bourgeois>

She choreographed a fashion show with people dressed in semi-transparent costumes made of latex with bulbous forms throughout, and the announcer talked about what they were wearing in a very camp way. It was also about vulnerability, and exposure, and how one is always confronted by being viewed by others.²⁶

When asked about why she had made these huge bulbous flesh coloured costumes that had “sewn-in anatomical forms”²⁷ Bourgeois answered that that was how women felt in public space; that their body parts were scrutinised and seen as objects for consumption and display. Bourgeois’s comment on her own work: “I represent the sexual encounter from the point of view of the woman”²⁸ is similar to Laura Mulvey’s exploration of the female gaze in “Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, an essay published three years before Bourgeois’s performance was staged²⁹. Mulvey has since located this seminal work within a broader feminist movement that looked for its foundations in women artists such as Frida Kahlo who had been erased from visual arts education and exhibition:

[...] the women’s movement made a political point that women were exploited through the body and through images of the female body. [...] Because the female image, for instance, in advertising and in movies, didn’t necessarily refer to actual women, the women of everyday life, but to an image that could be put into circulation as part of commodity culture, and as part of the general commodification of society. But women in everyday life, the woman as consumer and the woman as consumed, had to live these contradictions within the unconscious of the patriarchal capitalism... [...] at the same time these discussions were underpinned and given depth by the rediscovery of women artists of the past.³⁰

People attending the exhibition’s opening were invited to sit and to stand in the boxes at the edge of the space and take their turn in performing or confronting their own anxieties about their body shapes. While the piece had “this confessional tone”,³¹ confrontation is also about how audiences were made to be present and conscious to their own judgements, biases, ways of looking. Asked just before the performance why the work was called *Confrontation*, Bourgeois answered:

Because all these boxes confront each other and all these boxes represent one of us and we have to stop running, take their place in the circle and face themselves in front of the others.³²

26. Nancy Spector quoted in Caitlin Dover, “Performing Confrontation”.

27. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/louise-bourgeois>

28. “I don’t need an interview to clarify my thoughts’: An Interview with Louise Bourgeois”, *Artspace*, 22 August 2017, online: https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/louise-bourgeois-phaidon-folio-54962.

29. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, p. 6-18.

30. Roberta Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 5, September 2011, p. 131-132.

31. Ulf Küster, *Louise Bourgeois*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz (Art to Read), 2011, p. 43.

32. *Ibid.*

She later recalled how she invited a famous male art historian to emcee the event:

In *Banquet / A Fashion Show of Body Parts* (1978) I wanted [to present] an art historian, a critic who was also a man. [...] Most of those sculptures deflate the male psyche as a structure of power.³³

Confrontation is an installation that holds the memory of that one live performance choreographed by Bourgeois herself. With its accompanying performance piece *A Banquet / A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, *Confrontation* is about the objectification of the female body in public space and the performance was perhaps an opportunity to generate a forum in which an invited audience were offered a place to confront the pain of being othered through the image. *Cells*, constructed as they are from salvaged architectural materials and found objects,³⁴ perform psychological re-enactments of memory and encounter; they become physical and emotional spaces open for spectators to peer into while remaining closed:

The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering. [...] The *Cells* represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual. When does the emotional become physical? When does the physical become emotional: it's a circle going around and around. Pain can begin at any point and turn in any direction.³⁵

Louise Bourgeois made manifest her memories stored in her personal archive of objects that she reimagined as art: "I need my memories; they are my documents".³⁶ Looking at the installation of *Confrontation* that remained in all the years following the live performance of *A Banquet / A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, chief curator Nancy Spector commented: "I think the energy of that performance is still embodied in the piece".³⁷ To encounter *Confrontation* without the live interactive performance is to be confronted with memory. What is missing can only be located in the digitally stored recording of what is permanently absent from this installation that is now only always an arena that is empty of its performance. There is something buried in this work that is and is not a constituent part of its identity. Art and archives allow us a kind of time travel; we can access the past in a way that might be a private autobiographical journey or one that is historically weighted in the linguistic patterns of a city or place; the lives of others caught in a moment of revolution or established in the activated isolated solidarities of an uprising.

33. "I don't need an interview to clarify my thoughts": An Interview with Louise Bourgeois".

34. In her online short essay for Tate Britain, Elizabeth Manchester notes: "The *Cells* are typically constructed from a mixture of such salvaged architectural materials as old doors, windows and wire mesh combined with found objects and sculptural fragments" (Elizabeth Manchester, "Louise Bourgeois. *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)*. 1989-93", online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-cell-eyes-and-mirrors-t06899>).

35. Rainer Crone, Petrus Graf Schaesberg, *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells*, Munich, Prestel, 1998, p. 81.

36. <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/did-you-know/the-person>

37. Nancy Spector quoted in Caitlin Dover, "Performing Confrontation".

In his essay “Excavation and Memory” Walter Benjamin writes:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the “matter itself” is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. That is to say, they yield those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights – like torsos in a collector’s gallery.³⁸

Finding the archive and encountering the past is a very labour intensive, physical act but even that is not enough:

[...] the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today’s ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize.³⁹

It is this dialectic that artist Jaki Irvine achieves in her own “long gaze back”⁴⁰ into the sounds and intonations of the revolutionary women who were disappeared from the history that they were fighting for and simultaneously transforming by their activism, their dissident sexualities and dangerous interventions of solidarity. Two artworks come together as Irvine re-imagines 1916 as a captured access point at which the Irish revolutionary past is excavated within the contemporary conditions of the artist as an agent of social change and in making a new archive. *If the Ground Should Open...* is a video and sound installation textured with the feminist historical retrieval of Irvine’s artistic practice. Resurgent in its hurt at the political amnesia the centennial commemoration of Easter 1916 required, the work operated almost as an anti-commemorative piece in its refusal to celebrate the legacy of the Free State and its subsequent historical erasure of women’s human rights. Commissioned by the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), the work was part of the official Decade of Centenaries programme. The Easter Rising of 1916 was the first successful blow to the British Empire and resulted in the founding of the Irish Free State.⁴¹ I recorded in December 2016 a conversation with the artist about

38. Walter Benjamin, “Excavation and Memory”, in *Selected Writings*, vol. II, 1927-1934, Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (eds.), Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 576, found on: <https://folk.uib.no/hlils/TBLR-B/Benjamin-ExcavMem.pdf>.

39. *Ibid.*

40. “the long gaze back” is a phrase used by Maeve Brennan in her novella, *The Visitor* that was written in the years just as the Free State became the Irish Republic in 1949: “Home is a place in the mind. When it is empty, it frets. It is fretful with memory, faces and places and times gone by. Beloved images rise up in disobedience and make a mirror for emptiness. [...] Comical and hopeless, the long gaze back is always turned inward” (Maeve Brennan, *The Visitor*, London, Atlantic, 2001, p. 8).

41. An introduction to the work can be seen in this recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAWhg7Qojno>.

her encounters with archive in making the work. I will quote extensively from this conversation throughout this article because it offers a unique insight into Irvine's feminist practice in research and the way in which she describes the process of making art as she confronted the meaning of the centennial commemoration of the founding of the Irish State:

We passed through a lot. Northern Ireland... I didn't want an easy transition from 1916 to 2016 as though we beamed ourselves here magically. I wanted difficulty and the difficulty of this last ten years to be held onto.⁴²

Irvine was invited by IMMA not least because her work had already engaged deeply with the events of 1916: her novella *Days of Surrender* had been commissioned by the artist collective Copy Press in 2013 under their "Common Intellectual" series; the front cover of which featured the original image of surrender that included Elizabeth O'Farrell before her visual attrition by the British Press from this rare and devastating photograph in Ireland's revolutionary history.⁴³ In prose fiction, conceived as a series of simultaneous diary entries, Irvine writes a form of memory focused on a political activism in which women were "using femininity and domesticity as a disguise" in their participation in 1916 as feminist revolutionaries, as lesbian, bi-sexual and heterosexual lovers who are friends, comrades, messengers, medics and fighters. Irvine discovered that the few contemporary official accounts that did include reference to the women revolutionaries left out something else. To understand the events from the point of view of the women who fought, Irvine went back to the witness statements at the Bureau of Military History⁴⁴ that were part of a process through which activists in 1916 could gain pensions almost thirty years after the event:

What was missing [from official contemporary published interpretations of women's role in the Easter Rising] was a tone of voice [...] when you go to the archives you hear language and a turn of phrase that is not official language. [...] These were witness statements, but they are not statements that have been turned into an official document. [...] You've got men's relationships and sexuality being taken seriously enough to the point of death and women's being treated as ornamentation. [...] The book wasn't reviewed in Ireland [...].

It is in the unofficial archive of how the women remember herstory that Irvine's intervention finds its energies:

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42. Catherine Morris in conversation with Jaki Irvine, Temple Bar Studios, December 2016. All quotations throughout this part of the essay that do not have footnotes derive from this recording.
 43. Copy Press is an independent publishing company; the Common Intellectual names a series of 100-page paperbacks, "each title provid[ing] a proposition for living, thinking and enjoyment" ([https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/activities/copy-press-launch\(be75b98a-2ed5-43db-b632-e4fc47c7d8a3\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/activities/copy-press-launch(be75b98a-2ed5-43db-b632-e4fc47c7d8a3).html)).
 44. All the witness statements are now fully digitally searchable and accessible: <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/about-us>.

I wanted to write it [*Days of Surrender*] with a kind of simultaneity. [...] I imagined myself into the head space of these women: what were they thinking? how were they imagining the world they lived in? [...] So many of them were actors. [...] This gesture is an actor symbolically raising the flag. [...] One of the first shots fired was by Helena Maloney. [...] A lot of the women didn't wear uniforms.

Viewing the archive through their witness statements, Dublin becomes sonic in the memory of stolen instruments heard and remembered:

In the witness statements the women refer over and over to sounds: there are these references to hearing something go off somewhere in the city and trying to figure out what they could be hearing; or they talk about hearing buildings being blown up or hearing soldiers pummel their way through one small room after another. The women try to navigate the city through what they hear because they can't see. There was talk of hearing a piano – people were looting in Arnott's and Cleary's so people were robbing musical instruments as well and pushing a piano down the street [...].

The city streets are durational in the constant late arrival of hand-written and typed notes about changed plans that are simultaneously communicated and rendered meaningless:

So many things were happening at the same time. There was no overview. That's what I mean about confusion. [...] By the time they got to the other side of the city through barricades, the situation had changed [...] everyone rooted in one body. Their own one body. Now we have this sense of collective imagination and almost simultaneous information, simultaneous knowledge. [...] It is obvious from all their witness statements that you could have prepared for it for years and miss the whole thing which is what happened with some of them. [...] That's what fascinated me. That one person can go up one street rather than another and miss one another or end up in the middle of something almost by fluke. [...] The three women who found themselves in the Headquarters on Moore Street were not there by fluke at all. They had made themselves available for ten or fifteen years for this moment in time. Chances are they would have been there.

Women name each other as multiples in the witness statements:

You've got this double naming and sometimes triple naming with nick names. [...] I wasn't sure if this was one woman or two women.

Female sexuality is performed in code that is understood and acknowledged by some of the male revolutionaries (i.e. by James Connolly alone) only to be hidden in the official histories that followed the victors into their patriarchal Catholic Republican Free State:

They were very close to Connolly and maybe to Pearse. [...] Connolly definitely recognised the relationship between Julia and Elizabeth [...].

In the work *If the Ground Should Open...* commissioned by IMMA for the commemoration in 2016, Irvine draws on the names of the women who were

active participants in the revolutionary movement as “the ground” of a score for nine female musicians: in this work “everyone’s name is a melody [...] their names are already music, it’s just that nobody’s ever heard them”. Curator Sarah Glennie explained how

[t]he eleven tracks were composed by Irvine using the *canntaireachd* system – originally developed as an oral scoring system for Scottish Highland pipes. The basic musical motif in classical piping (*piobaireachd*) is called “the ground” of the piece, which is then built upon with additional notes and melodies. In *If the Ground Should Open...* the names of women involved in the 1916 Rising, form the ground. In this way they are performed and remembered, becoming part of the ground we walk on in 2016.⁴⁵

All of the screens in the gallery rested on flight cases pointing to the difficult conditions faced by artists who were forced to emigrate during the economic crash that started in 2008. Irvine talked about the plight of those who, like herself and her wife, were trying to stay or return but were faced with unaffordable housing and limited access to studio space in the Republic:

There is something about the transitional and this fact of moving. They are all on flight cases and they know they are going to get packed away and shipped off.

Irvine rejected the idea of making a monument in public space for the same reasons:

Just a fact of it. A monument. I find it hard to believe in somehow. Everything seems so transient still... You test the water again and no, now the rents have gone through the roof it’s impossible. The notion of making something that would be phenomenally permanent seems bizarre because nothing else seems to be. And so, if you are going to commemorate something: music, video, sound, song – they all have the reputation of being transient. They are the time-based art forms. And yet it seems to me that music is one of the most permanent art forms.

Walter Benjamin writes about the urgency of understanding the contemporary moment of making and of finding resonance in the archive. Terry Eagleton suggests that the German philosopher

[...] had the curious notion that we could change the past. [...] What Benjamin meant was that how we act in the present can change the meaning of the past. The past may not literally exist (any more than the future does), but it lives on in its consequences, which are a vital part of it. Benjamin also thought this about works of art. In his view, the meaning of a work of art is something that evolves over time. Great poems and novels are like slow-burning fuses. As they enter into new, unpredictable situations, they begin to release new meanings [...]. For Benjamin, it is as though there are meanings secreted in works of art that only come to light in what one might call its future.⁴⁶

45. <https://imma.ie/whats-on/jaki-irvine-if-the-ground-should-open>

46. Terry Eagleton, “Waking the Dead”, *The New Statesman*, 12 November 2009.

Irvine’s sound and video installation were developed not just from the private state commissioned witness documents required to release pension funds to those who fought in 1916, but also from Anglo Irish bankers who defiled people’s pensions and whose corrupt practices were caught on tapes that were leaked to the press in 2013 in the aftermath of Ireland’s economic crash.

The Irish government bailout of Anglo Irish Bank cost the Irish and European tax payer €30bn in 2008. When the tapes were finally leaked to the press in 2013, *The Guardian* newspaper reported:

A banker is heard on tape joking and singing the first lines of the Deutschlandlied – not used since the Nazis made the first stanza their anthem – as the bank’s then chief executive, David Drumm, urges his executives to “get the fucking money in”. The recording was made in September 2008, when the Irish state stepped in to rescue a bank brought low by a property lending spree. [...] Dublin intervened in September 2008 with a guarantee of the bank’s deposits to keep it afloat [...]. In one conversation, two days after the fateful bank guarantee [...] Bowe was recorded boasting that he had picked as the cost of the state rescuing them a random figure, of €7bn (£5.9bn), “out of my arse”.⁴⁷

Irvine samples the tapes and intercuts her compositions with extracts from the leaked recordings: a counterpoint in which the harmonies of names and words from the archives of women revolutionaries applying for pension claims for those who fought to establish the Irish Republic are somehow resultant in the evidenced neo-liberal practices and cynicism of what the fought-for Republic allowed itself to become.

Irvine recalls the shock that she felt on hearing the tapes for the first time:

I remember sitting listening to those tapes at the kitchen table with my wife, my sister and my mother. [...] We’ve talked about the tone of voice in the witness statements and the tone of voice in those tapes is also remarkable and memorable. So, when they are saying: “Give me the mula” it’s so specific. [...]. it’s the same language, we know it. We know what this is. We know that when they go “yeah yeah yeah yeah”. You know exactly what they’re saying: it’s the tone of voice that does it all. [...] you can nearly touch something in those voices, that tone, the ease [...].

Recalling the concerns with patriarchal objectification of women in Louise Bourgeois’s *Confrontation* and *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, Irvine was acutely aware of institutional culture of misogyny that was articulated at the highest levels of the Republic of Ireland’s financial powerhouses:

[...] the aggressive way in which women are spoken about in those tapes. I want to hold on to that. That’s where power resides. That’s where power is undone: in the casual sexism. “Bitch features” is how they refer to a woman who was helping them.

47. Henry McDonald, “Anglo Irish Bank Tapes: Executives Mock Germans amid Bailout”, *The Guardian*, 25 June 2013, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/jun/25/anglo-irish-bank-tapes-bailout>.

This woman was actually on their side and this is how they are speaking about her. They use the word pregnant: “you’re pregnant with that”. The way they use women’s bodies, faces, everything is so available to be picked up to be used and abused in their own game of power between one another. The women around them, supporting them, very often they’ll be picking up the phone and it’s a woman putting him through to one or other of the other characters. [...] I just wanted to hold it.

Like Bourgeois’s *Fashion Show* that accompanied *Confrontation* at the opening of the exhibition for just one performance, *If the Ground Should Open...* included in December 2016 a one-off live performance of the entire eleven tracks performed by the project’s musicians and artists. Both performances reside in the real time memories of those present and in the digital encounter with whatever recording was made and can be accessed. What is the encounter with the archive and the creative process of making and performing new works of art? The archive is about memory; the performance of memory. Artists often make a performance as part of a show that is performed once at an opening or as an event; such live performances almost immediately become a ghost, a memory, another part of the archive that is a reminder of a moment when another dimension to the work was enacted. The performance carries with it a sense of its own duration; a life that if it exists afterwards will be experienced as or through a digital recording. Laura Mulvey again:

[...] that holding of one past moment of time, a now which was then, which is also linked to the now of the later spectator. [...]. With digital technology [...] I’m suggesting that this ability to pause, slow-down, return and repeat brings the variable nature of time to consciousness but still assisted by the spatial dimension that the long take depends on.⁴⁸

And how do we remember? How do we hold onto the digital recording, the witness statement, the taped conversation, the mesh wire cages that contain such emotion? The impetus for the UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme came from “a growing awareness of the parlous state of preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage in various parts of the world”.⁴⁹ A project to preserve culture for future generations began as an obituary listing millions of thousands of libraries, books, artworks, archives destroyed by wars, cultural revolutions, fires, mismanagement, ecological disasters, materiality that destroys sound, image, film.⁵⁰ From such devastating lists of destroyed libraries grew the UNESCO Memory of the World project that aims to preserve the cultural memory of the future, providing a set of keys for future generations to find their way back through history: Britain and Jamaica co-selected the only musical score of a slave

48. Roberta Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey...”, p. 137.

49. <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow>

50. UNESCO, “Memory of the World. Lost Memory: Libraries and Archives Destroyed in the Twentieth Century”, March 1996, online: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000105557>.

chant (1772);⁵¹ Ireland put forward folklore collected by children one hundred years after the Famine.⁵²

In an interview for *Artspace* Louise Bourgeois said:

Without compassion there is no work, there is no life, there is nothing. That is it. But at the same time art has nothing to do with love, it is rather the absence of love. To create is an act of liberation and every day this need for liberation comes back to me.⁵³

The archive of destroyed libraries, the project to protect world memory is not just about holding onto the artworks of previous generations for future generations; it is about finding a language that can signal danger hidden in unknown landscapes and asks difficult questions about how we speak to the future and who gets to be heard:

[...] a message like: “keep out, radiation zone”, put on top of underground nuclear waste belts? What kind of “sign” will be understood 5,000, 25,000 or 50,000 years from now, as a warning not to drill in the ground because of the danger of radiation? What material should one choose for preserving any sign for such a long period: paper, wood-blocks, parchment, microfilm, clay-tablets, palm leaves, solid rock, computer-tape or diskettes, acoustic systems? Will there be any institution keeping records as over 50,000 years old? Will records of that age be more likely to be kept in museums, as happens nowadays with records of 5,000 years ago? What equipment will people have by then to decipher messages – computers, or only brains and reading glasses? Such questions are not easily answered. As a native Australian proverb goes, “rocks vanish, words remain”.⁵⁴

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51. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-1/an-african-song-or-chant-from-barbados>
 52. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/access-by-region-and-country/ie>
 53. “I don’t need an interview to clarify my thoughts’: An Interview with Louise Bourgeois”.
 54. UNESCO, “Memory of the World...”, p. 20-21.