

## **Institutional Care and the Feminine Aquatic: An Interview with Shona Macnaughton**

By Angeliki Roussou and Shona Macnaughton

*Aquatic Needs*, a performance by the Scottish artist Shona Macnaughton, was commissioned by the Cooper Gallery (Dundee, UK) to take place at the one-day symposium, ‘12-hour Non-State Parade’, that accompanied Jasmina Cibic’s exhibition *The Pleasure of Expense* in November 2019. A panel of speakers was finishing up taking questions from the audience when Macnaughton took the floor from her seat among other symposium attendees: ‘I don’t actually have a question. I never have a question. My heart starts pounding and I want to speak but there’s a gap between how intelligent I think I am and how intelligent I sound. Will you look after me?’<sup>1</sup> Her monologue mourned the ‘values we used to share’ as well as the sacrifice of our ‘individual freedom’. She soon stood up and faced the audience: ‘[w]ill you look after me? The Cooper Gallery has diminished your role. I want to help you help yourselves and others. Watch yourselves closely to see when you’re ready to help. Not me—yourselves’. Macnaughton then revealed her full costume that displayed year dates—1980, 2000 and 2019—which gave cues to her scripts’ textual references. Although these dates alluded to election campaign manifestos of British political parties (Conservative, Labour and SNP) and health literature on post-childbirth incontinence, miscarriage, and toilet training from the UK National Health Service, the exact sources were not decipherable during the performance.

Moving slowly towards the room’s exit, Macnaughton’s words echoed both as responsibility disclaimers and semi-patronising guidance: ‘If you don’t want to sit there that’s fine, I will never force you or restrain you to sit there. We all have the odd accident from time to time, if we’re excited, upset, or absorbed in something else.’ The audience was eventually enticed awkwardly, ambivalently and somewhat comically

---

<sup>1</sup> Macnaughton kindly shared her performance script with me after I attended the symposium.

to follow Macnaughton outside the symposium hall, where she spoke through a megaphone. She kept urging and advising in a similar tone—an odd mix of political campaign speech and health literature—as the performance continued down the stairs and into the ground-floor gallery hall. The final scene took place outside the front of the gallery. Her monologue climaxed as she stood up on a low wall around a planted area and pointed a torch at the audience standing in front of her:

Talent and genius are uniformly distributed. Opportunity is not. This means that you will have trouble controlling yourselves. Part of becoming women is dealing with embarrassing mishaps. We understand the concept of aspiration. It may leak out at any time when you're under pressure when you cough or laugh.

Macnaughton started laughing, flashed a torchlight on her crotch where her costume displayed the year 2020, and urinated on herself. She announced that 'in no other relationship do we place ourselves so unreservedly and wholeheartedly at the disposal of other people'. She ended the performance pleading: '[w]hen it happens stay calm and reassure me'.

By juxtaposing references to institutional care (understood as forms of art-institutional support to art workers) and forms of labour relating to motherhood, *Aquatic Needs* illustrates artistic labour in tandem with gendered facets of what Kathi Weeks has referred to as 'postmodernity's subsumption of life into work' (107). The latter condition denotes subjectification or subject-making as a process that has internalised capitalist work ethics to the point of absolute intimacy, even though this process extends beyond the narrowly defined workplace. Macnaughton's performance evokes a gendered liquid physicality and leakiness associated with the post-childbirth and aging female body. Alongside its allusions to state-public-citizen relations and art-institutional policy, *Aquatic Needs* apprehends and explores entwined aspects of motherhood and artistic labour through often-eschewed correlations of our crises-ridden neoliberal condition: gendered psychosomatic and authorial mishaps; care, confidence, and

obligation within art-institutional structures; and the physical and emotional labour in motherhood-child relations.

I initiated this interview with Macnaughton as a written conversation through emails in early March 2020, after having attended *Aquatic Needs*.



**Fig. 1:** Shona Macnaughton in *Aquatic Needs*. A performance commissioned for 12-Hour Non-State Parade, Cooper Gallery, DJCAD, Dundee, 2019. Photo: Sally Jubb, @sallyjubbphotography

Angeliki Roussou (AR): *Your practice has tended to explore linguistic/discursive crossovers between art-institutional structures and creative labour, as well as themes such as motherhood / childhood care relations and affective labour. How has your performance shifted in terms of the emotional labour you are putting into it?*

Shona Macnaughton (SM): I have shifted primarily into live performance since motherhood. Since becoming a mother, I spent most available emotional labour on caring for others: mopping up waste, cleaning muck off materials, and managing fluids and the emotions of others. This base-ness that came from looking after small children was a fundamental shift from a pre-parenthood condition in which I

spent more time using intellectual capacities. Alongside this was a new sense of time due to my responsibility to a child who needs me to be in the present moment. This sense of the abject and being present has translated well into live performance. Since the focus of my emotional labour has necessarily been about the survival of my child, I have tried to channel the experience of this directly into my work. My observations of the performance of the gendered mother role have incorporated into my work considering my role as an artist within institutional structures. Through reflecting on how the commissioning process works in arts institutions such as galleries, being 'employed' by the institution to make new work, and how that relationship is one of dependency, I have created work that speaks through these juxtapositions. For example, in the work *We Nurture* (2019) for Collective Gallery, I performed a script using that institution's promotional text, which included words of care and inclusivity from the gallery towards its audiences. I performed as myself as the artist/employee/care-worker dispensing advice whilst giving a tour of the institution to a live audience.

Being an artist and a mother and a worker have seemed like opposing faces on a prism of labour. They are all labour in the sense that they all contribute to the cycle of value in capitalism, whether paid or unpaid. But I'm concerned with their differing affects; or put simply, how different I feel doing these labours in terms of levels of alienation, autonomy, and love. In the past, I made work that tried to reconcile the condition of paid dead-end work propping up the free (or nominally paid) labour of my art. For example, in the video performance work *Adverts for the workplace = 48p* (2010), I perform to camera during my work as a cleaner. In this there was a binary distinction between two forms of labour: artistic and employed.

Since parenthood, I moved on to consider what I think of as a third labour of childcare within my artwork. Such work collapses these modes of labour in on each other in order to point to their interdependences, but also their incompatibility. In the performance *Arms Length Government Body* (2016), I used my emotional labour of caring for my child whilst concurrently trying to maintain an artistic

practice. My tone of speaking to a child was juxtaposed against language from arts institutions and directed to an adult audience during the performance. For example, I would say: 'Right time for a drink then. [*Offer breast to audience*] You don't want it tonight? It is our mission to place the artist, viewer, user, and participant at the heart of all our activities? No? Not tonight?'

Similarly, in *Aquatic Needs*, artistic labour is made proximal to the labour of motherhood through the way the script is written:

What I want for my own children, I want for yours. [...]  
I should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with you. [...] You will leak during forceful activities. I will unleash the potential. You will leak during less strenuous activities like bending over.

The expected role of the audience is conflated with the child, post-childbirth mother, and subject of the state to be nurtured, moulded, and instructed. But the main focus of this work is the by-product of toil: how the female body is affected physically by emotional labour.

*AR: How do the physicality and leakiness in Aquatic Needs or the feminine aquatic quality you seem to perform frame artistic or other forms of labour (emotional or physical)?*

*SM:* When thinking about my own body as the primary material visible within the performance, I had the content and form of the performance reflect that reality. I am a female body reaching middle age. I realised that for someone like me born in 1983, my growth has roughly paralleled the neoliberal state in the UK: the deregulation of the markets; the weakening of labour bargaining; the de-collectivisation of the workplace. These were measures put in place to increase the flow of capital and to raise levels of debt and liquidity. How could the performance and my body (the artist's body) within it, echo a trajectory of neoliberal mucosity? If financial liquidity is about how assets can quickly convert and how speedily something can perform transference, then how could the growing imperative for efficient flow be represented

by the female body? How could the liquid metaphor be brought back to its literal representation within the body?

The framework of the performance aligned to both the chronological development of political manifestos from the 1980s to the impending 2019 elections and concurrently the stages a female body would have gone through over that period in relation to its liquids. So, the text in the first section of the script, which took place in the banked seating area and gallery of the Cooper Gallery, was from Margaret Thatcher's 1979 manifesto which set up the nascent period of financial liquidity of the 1980s. This was combined with text relating to being a child and teenager, as I gave instructions and advice related to toilet training and getting a period. The next section of the performance that took place on the stairwell linked Tony Blair's manifesto from 1997 to text which might relate to a young adult's experience of being female, including informative advice around smear tests, abortion, and pelvic floor exercises. The final section of the performance took place on the ground floor and outside the building, where the script combined 2019 UK election manifestos with text about the aging and/or post childbirth body, including incontinence and miscarriage.

Whilst I was developing this performance, I read Astrida Neimanis' post-human rereading of Luce Irigaray who states:

For Irigaray, feminine bodies are fluid, both figuratively in their non-subsumability into a masculine paradigm and literally in their genital mucosity, their placental interchanges, and their amniotic flows. This leakiness is what makes woman always a woman-to-come. (78)

This interpretation proffers the opposite of the essentialist readings of fixed gender, which are often levelled against Irigaray. In the performance, this sense of fluidity—as a characteristic of the feminine in itself—and the idea of leaking—as the feminine being able to seep through, evading capture—shown in the actions and references to the body is differentiated from a sense of neoliberal fluidity of the circulation of capital and the ideas from political rhetoric in the manifestos. The performance is played out in a gallery—a realm of art—and I perform

as myself—an artist asking a question in a symposium. Myself, the performer and artist, is a conduit joining liquidity as flow and liquidity as leak.

My artistic labour is instructive as a cipher between these two conditions. Marina Vishmidt describes the exception of artistic labour when deployed in a way to obfuscate the nature of work in (late) capitalism. '[T]he valorisation of creativity is a mode of producing subjectivity that aligns the interests of workers with the speculative nature of capital, a way of installing speculation at the most intimate levels of subjective existence' whereas the classic wage relation can be separated from the individual (26). The subjective crux which binds individuals to work readiness—called 'generalised creativity' (Vishmidt 20)—is the character background for playing the 'artist' role within *Aquatic Needs*. In the final scene of the performance, the climax of these conditions seen in the 2019 manifestos—the imperative for 'aspiration'—leaks out. I inform the audience:

Talent and genius are uniformly distributed. Opportunity is not. Part of becoming women is dealing with embarrassing mishaps. We understand the concept of aspiration. It may leak out any time when you're under pressure, when you cough or laugh [*peeing, torch down*]. In no other relationship do we place ourselves so unreservedly and wholeheartedly at the disposal of other people. When it happens stay calm and reassure me.

The literal physical leakiness is framed as a by-product of the emotional labour involved in creating the very performance work in hand. I'm laughing. I release urine. It visibly seeps through. It is a relief but the act also holds a general disgust, which then returns the relationship between audience and performer to one of necessary care.

*AR: How does Aquatic Needs understand care (collective or individual) and care labour in art and motherhood in relation to the nature of work in late capitalism and, in particular, the condition of 'generalised creativity' and work readiness?*

SM: At this point in late capitalism, the neoliberal economy has been able to co-opt our care for one another into its value circulation. But alongside this very process, aspects of care will evade capture into neoliberal values. The form of *Aquatic Needs* is essentially a re-framing of the co-optations of care.

‘Will you take care of me?’ The initial question seems to be from a member of the audience who then becomes the performer. It addresses first of all the institution, then the panel and the wider audience. This question and my transitioning role intentionally instigate an unstable relationship to the paternal institution, introduces the performer as dependent, and undermines the performance in performance. If we continue the previous analogy: these are the holes in the performance that make a leak.

I become further vulnerable—dependent and on my own—when the audience doesn’t follow my instructions. The instructional text comes from the public health advice and takes an authoritative tone. But it also translates into actions I perform, allowing the bodily text to refer to my body and the bodies within the audience which undermines that authority:

On a breath out, pull up and in and squeeze. [*Squeeze the banister*] Sharing values and purpose, where merit comes before privilege—Trying to hold on increases the amount you can cope with—squeeze. This will help any swelling, bruising or tears—squeeze. The vision is one of renewal, an audience with drive, purpose and energy.

My instruction to the audience and my demonstration of squeezing the staircase banister combine with the declamatory style of the political rhetoric. Through this, I attempt to transform these (in this case) Blairite ideas of classless individual aspiration into a personal mantra made intersubjective and physical. This, in turn, points to a collectivity of self-care as distinct yet embroiled within the neoliberal exploitation of the term (i.e. self-care) in which ‘me time’ is distinct from, yet akin to, self-care in the black feminist sense of self-preservation in an environment hostile to your identity.

AR: *Could you elaborate on how the sense of the abject you've mentioned relates to the aforementioned conditions and forms of labour?*

SM: The feminine aquatic is a different kind of flow to the circulative. It is an abject non-productive flow, like the leak of aspiration in the performance. For instance, when looking at artistic-political discussions about how the state has de-collectivised our psychology (neoliberal political rhetoric) through theories of the feminine and gendered institutional language (female public health), we should speak about something beyond the biopolitical stoppages which burden the clean flow of capital. The leak here is not only waste; it doesn't just seep away. Rather, it seeps into and alters the next material it comes into contact with. The feminine aquatic is a questioning mode: I ask what is altered by my leak of artistic aspiration?

The performance attempts to think through existing conditions—general neoliberal labour practices, artistic labour, and the labour of motherhood—whilst theorising that the performance part of this artistic labour is perhaps more potent. Earlier, we linked the performance to motherhood, present-ness, survival, and care. This, perhaps, is where we can challenge forms of labour in late capitalism: opposing the need to perform one's creative subjectivity in the workplace and the de-collectivisation of those performances. This can also be seen in the contradictory instructions I give to the audience:

If you get the idea and manage to leave with me, now, that's great. But I will never push you to perform. This is the way to restore that self-reliance and self-confidence which are the basis of personal responsibility and performance success.

This part of the script coerces the audience out of their seats towards the exit and down the stairs. 'Performance' is used in the double sense, referring both to that which is occurring in the present moment (itself) and also to the general condition of successfully performing oneself within neoliberal capitalism. This instruction is performed in a tone of kindness and understanding. These words, used by the 1980s

Conservative government to conjure an optic of the individual who succeeds independently of the state, are re-contextualised against the first sentences which are taken from advice on toilet training a child. The audience is concurrently framed as child and self-reliant autonomous individual. The jarring nature of these two concepts alongside the self-referential process of the performance artwork highlight contradictions between collectivity, artistic subjectivity, and care.

The labour relations in progress are made visible through a performed care relation towards the audience, a gesture towards an intimacy or a collectivity which is not quite there, but just out of grasp. Then the 'performance' within artistic labour—as a part restoration and potential confrontation of the collective encounter—can circumvent the co-optation and the exploitation of emotional affects by re-performing a need to perform. *Aquatic Needs* both reveals a poverty of collectivity and points to an ideal scenario of collective care.

### **Works Cited**

- Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- Vishmidt, Marina. *Speculation as a Mode of Production*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018
- Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.