

An Antidote to the Foetal Image? The Role of Creative Performance Counterprotest in Contemporary Abortion Activism

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ABSTRACT

How can pro-choice activists counteract the hegemony of the foetal image which has, for decades, served as a highly effective tool for anti-abortion activists worldwide? Via qualitative interviews and secondary data analysis, this article analyses the work of two Irish 'pro-choice' activist groups, Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice – active in the campaign to repeal the constitutional abortion ban in 2018 – to argue that creative, performance counterprotests serve to counteract the hegemony of the foetal image in three ways. Firstly, by using their bodies to 'block' graphic foetal imagery exhibits, pro-choice activists reclaim political and affective territory and contest the representation of abortion in these images as a 'violent' or 'unnatural' act. Secondly, their use of specific protest objects and costumes – in this case, LGBTQ flags and white angel costumes – offer an alternative visual and moral framing which destigmatises and reconstitutes abortion, in this case, as a cornerstone of sexual freedom and as a 'divine right'. Lastly, this article argues that creative performance counterprotests provide an effective challenge to the foetal image because they focalise a new body-ontology; one which dislodges the 'object-body' of the foetus and prioritises the 'lived' bodily experience of women and abortion-seekers, at the centre of contemporary abortion rights debates.

Keywords: abortion, activism, performance, Ireland

INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF THE VISUAL IMAGE IN (IRISH) ABORTION POLITICS

The use of foetal images in abortion politics can be attributed to the US-based 'Pro-Life' activists who first mobilised such imagery in their campaign against legalised abortion in the 1960s (Johnston Hurst, 2021). It was during this decade, against the background of the burgeoning Women's Health Movement that Swedish photographer Lennart Nilsson published his now infamous sequences of images 'The Drama of Life Before Birth' in *Life Magazine*. Nilsson spent seven years on assignment across five hospitals in Stockholm, photographing embryos, with the goal of creating a visual narrative which would depict 'in colour the stages of human reproduction from fertilization to just before birth' (Rosenfeld, 1965). German social historian Barbara Duden describes how 'The Nilsson Effect' catalysed a 'new kind of seeing', characterised by 'the disappearance of the frontier between visible things that are visibly represented and invisible things to which representation imputes visibility' (Duden, 1993: 16).

Indeed, Nilsson's images were in fact 'a pervasive illusion' (Duden, 1993: 25). The 'Drama of Life Before Birth' exhibition did not depict live, in utero foetuses but rather corpses. At the time of the publication of Nilsson's work, the technology required for fetoscopy – where a small instrument or laparoscope is inserted into the uterus to see the placenta and foetus – was still in development (Duden, 1993: 14). Despite this, the proliferation of the public image of the foetus from the 1960's onwards had the dramatic effect of bolstering the idea of the separateness and autonomy of the foetal 'person' (Pollack Petchesky, 1987). As anthropologist Pollack Petchesky wrote, as the abortion debate moved from the legislative arena into the 'terrain of mass culture and imagery', silhouettes of the foetus began to 'float like spirits through courtrooms...through the hospitals and clinics' (Pollack Petchesky, 1987: 264).

Since the second half of the 20th century then, the anti-abortion movement in various locales has relied heavily on the deployment of images of dead foetuses or 'unborn babies' to denote particular ideas about the 'reality' of intrauterine experience, and to trigger particular emotional responses from the public towards the issue of abortion

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rights (Duden, 1993). As anthropologist Faye Ginsburg documents in her 1998 ethnography of 'Pro-life' and 'Pro-choice' activism in Fargo, North Dakota, 'the idea that knowledge of fetal life, and especially *confrontation with the visual image of the fetus* will "convert" a woman to the pro-life position has been a central theme in both local and national right-to-life activism' (Ginsburg, 1998: 104)¹. Feminist scholar Jeannie Ludlow (2021) argues that the contemporary anti-abortion movement has created 'two subgenres of fetal representation: the dismembered fetal body, and the now-canonical unborn baby' (49). Whilst the latter category tends to focus on depictions of foetal development, the former claims to portray the allegedly violent 'reality' of abortion itself, providing 'close-ups' of bloody foetuses being torn apart by surgical instruments.

Whilst the use of such 'graphic' foetal imagery is associated predominantly with anti-abortion activism in the United States, recent years have seen a "transference" of American styles of protest' to the opposite side of the Atlantic (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 222). In their research on anti-abortion clinic activism in the U.K., Sarah-Jane Page and Pam Lowe describe the use of graphic foetal imagery displays as a 'key mechanism' by which anti-abortion activists attempt to 'alter public opinion on abortion' (2022: 6). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with members of the *Centre for Bioethical Reform UK* (an offshoot of the US-based 'Pro-Life' organisation of the same name), Page and Lowe describe that the 'intended goal' of anti-abortion protestors installing these displays is to 'forge an alignment between the image and their perception of abortion, so that a violent and disturbing image comes to represent the singular (but contested) understanding that *abortion is a form of violence*' (Page and Lowe, 2022: 15).²

As British Geographers Jackson and Valentine (2017) argue in their research on UK-based 'Pro-Life' activism, the use of graphic foetal imagery displays constitutes a novel way of 'performing' anti-abortion politics which brings into question 'who has access, and the right, to public space' (223). In setting up their billboards and banners in particular locations (often outside women's health clinics), anti-abortion protestors perform a 'territorial act', Jackson and Valentine declare, laying claim to and controlling specific physical and 'affective territory' (227). Interestingly, Jackson and Valentine argue that such displays contest ideas of 'decency' and 'acceptability' by challenging ideas of what sorts of images are appropriate for public display (2017: 223). Importantly for this analysis, Jackson and Valentine describe how 'Pro-Choice' activists in Britain have variously attempted to counteract such the use of graphic foetal imagery in public protests by using objects like coloured paper or scarves to 'cover up' the aforementioned posters and signs (Cresswell, 2006 in Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 227).

In the Irish context, as Side (2021) has discussed, 'visual realignment strategies' have seen a gradual move away from the use of religious imagery - more popular during the 1983 campaign which resulted in the insertion of an amendment to the Irish Constitution enshrining the right to life of the 'unborn' - towards 'fetal-centric visual discourses' favoured by contemporary anti-abortion groups. As Loughnane (2022) has argued in this journal, during the 2018 referendum which saw the constitutional abortion ban overturned, thousands of posters were installed across the country, featuring 2D ultrasound images and photographs of pregnant bellies (Loughnane, 2022: 7). Similarly to the UK, the use of 'graphic' or 'medico-technological' foetal imagery have generally been avoided by the mainstream 'Pro-Life' movement in Ireland (Loughnane, 2022).

A notable exception to this occurred in 2018 when members of the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* (ICBR) demonstrated at university campuses, maternity hospitals, and outside LGBTIQI venues 'using banners and temporary displays of graphic foetal imagery as a form of protest' (Loughnane, 2022: 7).

As feminist theorist Johnston Hurst (2021: 4) argues whilst the public has largely become savvy to the manipulative power of mass media and photography, foetal images 'continue to be understood as capturing the real of bodily interiority and are employed in public and private settings as confirmation of the fetus's personhood'. The question remains then as to how the 'Pro-Choice' movement might respond to or counteract the efficacy and power of the foetal image as it is perpetually wielded and weaponised by anti-abortion activists. As Ludlow (2021: 50) argues, 'to counter anti-abortion images of fetal materiality', the 'pro-choice' movement in the US has so far offered 'almost nothing beyond radical co-optation of anti-abortion imagery'. This sentiment is resonant of arguments made by Argentine feminist scholars Sutton and Vacarezza (2020) who have theorised that, in the Latin American context, abortion activists have responded to the primacy of the foetal image 'with images centred on women's suffering due to unsafe abortion and with the figure of the dead woman' (735). Whilst such images may be politically expedient, they fail to destigmatise abortion and in fact, may reinscribe its illegal and immoral status.

In this article I argue that 'creative activism' and specifically 'performative' activism or counterprotests provide a useful method by which the 'Pro-Choice' movement might contest the hegemony of the foetal image and effectively transform the aesthetic economy of abortion politics. Central to my argument is the study of *embodiment* or of the 'embodied practices' of abortion activists, that is, I am interested in the diverse ways in which activists 'utilise their bodies' in their stand for or against abortion (Page and Lowe, 2021: 22). This argument derives from the analysis of the actions of two 'Pro-Choice' activist groups active during the 2018 abortion rights campaign in

¹ My emphasis.

² My emphasis.

Ireland – the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice – who organised ‘vibrant counterprotests’, assembling in locations where the Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform set up its graphic displays (Loughnane, 2022). It is my argument that creative, performance activism serves as an effective challenge to the foetal image not only by blocking out or covering up graphic foetal imagery displays, but through performing additional symbolic and affective functions which point the way forward for embodied abortion activism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws upon a long history of feminist scholarship on embodiment and political protest. As Argentine sociologist Barbara Sutton argues, at the same time as women’s bodies are targets of political, social, and economic violence, women’s political resistance has historically involved ‘putting the body in action’ to affect social change (2007: 129–130). The concept of ‘*poner el cuerpo*’ or putting the body on the line, as elaborated in Sutton’s (2007) work, as vital to processes of political transformation and as a mechanism through which activists reconstruct their embodied subjectivities is central to this analysis. Similarly influential to my analysis is Nayla Luz Vacarezza’s research on the *pañuelo* or green kerchief – that symbol of hope and democracy for abortion rights activists across Latin America – which as Vacarezza argues ‘mobilises new affective repertoires’ and which, when worn on the body, has given way to a unique ‘performative repertoire of features and uses that merits analysis’ (Vacarezza, 2021a: 63; Vacarezza, 2021b: 81).

Reflecting more specifically on this question of ‘the performative’, feminist theorist Wendy Parkins delineates the historical significance of the ‘corporeal’ and ‘corporeal performance’ as central to women’s self-conceptualisation as political agents (Parkins, 2000: 59). In her research on the British suffrage movement, Parkins outlines how inside of the ‘liberal body politic’ where political agency could be derived only from legal or property rights, women ‘refigured political agency as based on performance rather than entitlement’ (2000: 63). In their quest for enfranchisement, the suffragettes performed ‘daring feats’ of bodily activism which, as Parkins argues, ‘subverted dominant constructions of citizenship as exclusively masculine and primarily deliberative’ and which provided these women ‘a powerful sense of their own bodily capacities’ (Parkins, 2000: 63). Such efforts to wield their bodies as vehicles of protest were particularly subversive in this context, since it was the ‘feminine specificity’ of their bodies which marked the ‘grounds for their political exclusion’ (Parkins, 2000: 72).

The concept of the ‘performative’ or ‘performativity’ as it relates to political protest is understood here, according to Paavolainen, as embodying ‘a plurality of conflicting meanings’ (2022: 38). On the one hand, the notion of ‘performance’ activism is used to invoke the aesthetic, artistic, or theatrical nature of protest (Paavolainen, 2022). In this sense, the term ‘performance’ activism is closer to the idea of ‘creative activism’, which Tilley (2022) describes as ‘creative works that advance social change’ (4). On the other hand, performativity can also be understood here in the more Butlerian sense as describing ‘both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting’ (Butler, 2015, in Paavolainen, 2022: 38). In *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler argues that when bodies appear ‘on the street’, the ‘persistence of the body in its exposure’ calls the legitimacy of the state into question ‘through a specific performativity of the body’ where ‘action and gesture signify and speak both as action and claim’ (2015: 83). As Paavolainen (2022) puts it ‘if protest is about “doing something” about some perceived injustice, then the performativity of protest concerns the various ways that doing and that something relate’ (39).

In this sense, performance (counter)protest is conceptualised here not only as a ‘site of opposition’ whereby collective actors voice their contraposition of the political status quo but as an ‘act of manifestation’ which ‘conveys the sense of claiming a space in order to bring something (a message, a resistance) into appearance’ (hooks 1995, 201; Lavendar and Peetz, 2022: 5). As Lavendar and Peetz (2022) argue, performance protest is ‘representational’ (5). In other words, activist/performers engage their bodies in ‘specific symbolic actions’, often using protest objects like placards, banners, or costumes, to ‘make new constituencies and create new realities’ (Lavendar and Peetz, 2022: 6). Drawing upon relevant insights from queer studies scholarship, creative activism and performance protest are conceptualised here as providing an opportunity to ‘act out an image of the world in which activists hope to live’ (Shepard, 2010: 1).

The counterprotest actions of the Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice groups can be considered as part of a longer ‘chorus of creative and activist voices’ which have directly challenged Ireland’s abortion ban (Broderick, 2022: 61). These include the London-based feminist performance activist group ‘Speaking of IMELDA (Ireland Making England the Legal Destination for Abortions)’ who ‘knicker-bombed’ the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny at a fundraising dinner in London in 2014; throwing pairs of underwear with feminist pro-choice slogans onto Mr Kenny’s dinner plate (Speaking of Imelda, 2014). More recently, the ‘Say Nope to the Pope’ action in 2018 saw pro-choice activists ‘buy up’ tickets to the Papal Mass in Dublin ‘with the intention of deliberately not attending the event’ (Antosik-Parsons, 2024: 269). Antosik-Parsons theorises this action as ‘part of larger efforts of feminist and queer activists to draw attention to socio-political issues’ including clerical sex

abuse (277). In this article, I conceptualise such creative, performance, protests as integral elements of a broader movement to transform the lived reality of gender politics in Ireland through embodied political activism (O'Shaughnessy, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on the analysis of the activities of two pro-choice direct-actions groups – the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice - who campaigned as part of the movement for abortion rights in Ireland in 2018. These groups were primarily active in the three-month period preceding the national referendum on 25 May 2018, which saw 66% of the voting public elect to repeal Ireland's constitutional abortion ban. In the months preceding the referendum on the 8th amendment, the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* targeted several of Dublin's maternity hospitals, setting up large displays with banner-style pictures of dismembered fetuses. In response to the actions of the Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform, the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice organised counterprotests, to voice their opposition towards the ICRB's graphic foetal imagery displays.

Launched in February 2018, Radical Queers Resist was a direct-action group concerned with a range of social justice issues including LGBTQ rights and sex education (Donohoe, 2018; Grainger, 2018). In a 2018 article in *Gay Community News*, members of the 'Radical Queers' recount the origins of the group in student organising at Maynooth University, where their first counterprotest was staged in response to manifestations by the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* there (Donohoe, 2018). In this first protest, members of the Radical Queers Resist covered up the ICRB's graphic foetal imagery installations using bedsheets and banners. The Radical Queers Resist group became involved more explicitly in the abortion rights campaign once the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* announced their intention to target queer spaces, because of collaboration between LGBTQ and abortion activists during the repeal the 8th campaign (Donohoe, 2018).

Another group of pro-choice activists who organised counterprotests in opposition to the ICRB demonstrations was the performance-activist group 'Angels for Choice' (also known as the 'Repeal Angels', 'Angels for Yes' or 'Angels for Repeal'). The Angels for Choice group was made up of pro-choice activists, many of whom were also actors and singers, based in and around the greater Dublin area. Performing a similar role to their colleagues in the Radical Queers Resist group, the 'Angels' regularly assembled in locations where anti-abortion activists (including members of the ICRB) were demonstrating, with the intention of covering up their graphic visual displays. Members of the Angels for Choice dressed in all-white robes, adorned with feathered wings on their backs, and a red 'Repeal' heart across their chest.

This research follows a two-pronged methodology which includes the analysis of interview data collected between 2019 and 2020 as part of my research on embodied abortion activism in Ireland. My own positionality as an 'insider-outsider' – both in terms of my personal identity, being born and raised in Ireland but now living in the UK; and as academic researcher who has also been involved in abortion activism in Ireland over the past number of years – facilitated my access to research participants via a snowball sampling method (Corbin, Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). The interview data included below relates to interviews conducted with abortion activists who were involved in the Angels for Choice group. Pseudonyms have been given to interview participants and any potentially identifying information has been removed. Since I did not directly interview any members of Radical Queers Resist, I have supplemented this with the analysis of publicly available secondary data relating to this group. Specifically, I conducted a thematic analysis of relevant news media articles and imagery relating to the Radical Queers Resist group which were collected via a Google search in March 2022.

DISCUSSION

(I) Putting the Body on the Line: Reclaiming Political Territory and Disrupting the 'Pro-Life' Panopticon

Sydney Calkin explains how the history of abortion politics in Ireland can be characterised by a regime of 'manufactured invisibility' (Calkin, 2019: 2). Whilst abortion was initially outlawed by the 1861 *Offences Against the Persons Act*, the 1983 referendum on the 8th amendment which constitutionally enshrined the foetus' 'right to life' allowed the State to cement its 'abortion-free' status and protect its identity as the last remaining stronghold of Catholic morality in Europe (Martin, 2002; Calkin, 2019). Historically-speaking, the 'fiction' of an abortion-free Ireland has been maintained, Calkin describes, through the 'off-shoring' of abortion-seekers; a policy which was preserved in the Constitution in 1992 through the 13th amendment, which inserted the 'right to travel' abroad for abortion care (Calkin, 2019: 17). In Ireland, this state-sanctioned 'exportation' of abortion-seekers has historically been contingent upon an additional spatial dichotomy wherein the public or political sphere is mapped as masculine and the private sphere, or the sphere of the home is mapped as feminine (Carnegie and Roth, 2019).

Against this historical backdrop, Calkin (2019) argues for the important connection between art and women's political agency in the Irish context. Exploring artistic interventions by abortion activists, Calkin explains how these methods have allowed activists to 're-place' abortion and abortion-seekers 'in public space' and to assert their '(geo)political agency' (Calkin, 2019: 5, 3). Following Calkin's argument, the actions of performance activist groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist can be conceptualised as part of a broader effort to utilise creative activism to refocus public attention on abortion rights and as an opportunity for pro-choice activists to reaffirm their political subjectivity through bodily protest. To paraphrase Fintan Walsh, in the case of the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice, the right to perform, the right to protest and even the right to exist 'become blurred' (Walsh, 2013: 105). By reappropriating public space through their protesting bodies, the activists pose a challenge – in corporeal terms – to a political system which has historically sought to marginalise and exclude them based on their gendered and reproductive identities.

Reflecting more specifically on the actions of the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist as 'counterprotests', it becomes clear that these actions serve not only to allow activists to defend their right to public space and reassert their political agency. More specifically, these counterprotest activities provide an opportunity for abortion activists to reclaim political and 'affective territory' from the 'Pro-Life' movement (Jackson and Valentine, 2017). In their research on anti-abortion clinic activism in the UK, Jackson and Valentine (2017: 226) discuss how 'Pro-Life' activists 'operate a specific spatial and territorial strategy', attempting 'to "fill" the space' for 'increased attention' and "'maximum" impact'. Public space becomes a 'stage' upon which the anti-abortion activists attempt to 'promote their message' (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 228). In this context, pro-choice groups must use their bodies to reclaim both literal and affective space, by 'chanting and shouting' or waving 'decorative scarves' (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 226). This becomes a 'game' or 'performance', Jackson and Valentine (2017) contend, as both groups work to 'out manoeuvre' the other so that their signs and banners remain visible (227).

As I have argued elsewhere, the installation of large-scale graphic foetal imagery displays can be conceptualised as producing and solidifying the symbolic and political dominance of the anti-abortion movement (O'Shaughnessy 2024). In constructing my argument, I have drawn here upon the work of Lowe and Hayes (2019) who situate anti-abortion clinic activism 'within broader understandings of gendered harassment' (330). Anti-abortion activity, specifically outside maternity units or abortion clinics, Lowe and Hayes argue, is often experienced by women and abortion-seekers as 'invasive', particularly as it 'subjects them to critical unwanted scrutiny' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 331). Lowe and Hayes borrow here from Goffman's theory of 'focused vs unfocused interaction' and the 'rule of civil inattention', which argues that 'those who are not considered to enjoy equal status are not accorded civil inattention, they can be openly stared at or verbally enjoined' (Goffman, 1963 in Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 335).

In this framework, the failure of anti-abortion activists to extend 'civil inattention' to women and pregnant people entering abortion clinics, or more generally in public space, works as a form of gendered harassment which directly impacts the experiences of these individuals as they attempt to navigate these spaces, often to access reproductive care (Lowe and Hayes, 2019). In their study, Lowe and Hayes report how women and abortion-seekers often feel 'upset, intimidated, uncomfortable, distressed and stressed' at being 'observed or approached' by anti-abortion activists outside of health clinics (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 340-341). Echoing Lowe and Hayes (2019), my own research with Irish activists has illustrated that anti-abortion protest objects, including graphic foetal imagery installations are experienced by women and abortion-seekers as a material manifestation of and as an extension of a culture of violent reproductive coercion and surveillance. Interestingly, activists explain how they experience a type of resonance or sense of 'embodied solidarity' with the pregnant bodies exemplified and objectified in these anti-abortion posters (O'Shaughnessy 2024, 52).

It can be argued then that, through their counterprotest activities, the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice work not only to 're-territorialise' public space but to disrupt the surveillant gaze of the anti-abortion movement which is embodied and sustained by the ICBR protestors and their graphic foetal imagery displays (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 227). In my interview with Cliodhna, she described that the primary aim of the Angels for Choice group was to 'block out' the graphic foetal imagery displays which were being systematically installed at various locations around Dublin city, including outside several of the capital's maternity hospitals. As she explains in the below quotation, the organisation was in fact 'set up' with this primary objective in mind.

Cliodhna: Do you remember those ghastly people who used to go around with pictures of foetuses and put them outside the maternity hospital? So, the angels were set up in order to block that out. So, what they would do would be dress up and go where somebody had those pictures and stand in front of them. With angel feathers and these white costumes. So, I joined them and went out with them 5 or 6 times. We went all over the city.

Recounting the logistics of their counterprotest operations, Cliodhna told me how guerrilla counterprotests were organised via WhatsApp groups. Cliodhna explained that the members of the Angels for Choice groups would 'dress up' in 'angel feathers and these white costumes' and go 'stand in front' of the ICBR's graphic foetal imagery



Figure 1. Radical Queers Resist counterprotest on 17 April 2018, Georges Street, Dublin. Source: @puhjajjayjay on X (21 August 2022) – reproduced with permission.

displays. Both the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist activists used their bodies as well as LGBTQ flags to ‘cover up’ or ‘block out’ the graphic foetal images. By positioning themselves *in between* the anti-abortion posters and passers-by, the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist activists *interrupt* the almost panopticon-like gaze of the anti-abortion movement and the broader culture of reproductive surveillance and coercion which these images exemplify and sustain (O’Shaughnessy 2024).

In the case of the Radical Queers Resist counterprotests, the use of the flag, a symbol normally associated with ‘political hierarchy’ and ‘political dominance’, to cover up or block out the graphic foetal imagery is particularly interesting and warrants further analysis (Shanafelt, 2008: 16). In this case, the ‘rainbow’ flag appears to function not only as a mechanism to obscure the graphic foetal imagery displays but as a method to extend the reach of the activist body (to maximise their ‘re-territorialisation’ of public space) (Jackson and Valentine, 2017). In addition, the LGBTQ flag serves here as a symbolic and affective device which evokes the presence of other(ed) queer bodies who gather with abortion activists under the banner of non-normative, stigmatised sexual subjects. The decision to utilise the LGBTQ ‘pride’ flag in this case can be seen, I argue, as emblematic of a broader global effort to ‘queer’ abortion rights, that is to place the battle for abortion rights and LGBTQ rights together inside the frame of sexual liberation and bodily autonomy (Sutton and Borland, 2018).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, in their analysis of graphic foetal imagery, Page and Lowe argue that these images are ‘purposefully crafted’ by anti-abortion activists to ‘forge an alignment between the image and their perception of abortion, so that a violent and disturbing image comes to represent...the understanding that abortion is a form of violence’ (2022: 15). With this in mind, the efforts of the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist activists to ‘block’ out such imagery should be considered, I argue, not only as an effort to ‘shield’ women and abortion-seekers from having to witness what are perceived as ‘upsetting’ imagery but as part of a wider strategy by abortion activists to challenge or refuse this representational economy which constitutes abortion as a ‘violent’ and ‘unnatural’ act and abortion-seekers as ‘failed’ women or maternal subjects (Halpin, 2018; Page and Lowe, 2022). By placing their bodies, flags, or other protest objects in front of the graphic foetal imagery displays, pro-choice activists operate to disrupt this ‘representational system’ which defines abortion as a ‘shameful, guilty secret’ and to make space for an alternative aesthetic economy of abortion within which abortion could be reimagined as part of a positive, non-stigmatising affective regime (Millar, 2017: 65).

(II) A 'Divine' Right? Reconstructing the Moral and Affective Economy of Abortion

In their research on anti-abortion activism in the UK, Lowe and Hayes describe how the presence of anti-abortion activists outside of maternity hospitals and reproductive health clinics functions as a form of 'bearing public witness' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 333). That is, for anti-abortion activists themselves, their presence in such spaces constitutes what they believe to be a religious act, which serves to call attention to the 'unethical' or 'immoral', through 'religious observance and public presence' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 333). 'Bearing witness' relies on a particular politics of visibility. In the case of anti-abortion activism, the objective is to call public attention to abortion, to make abortion increasingly 'visible', so that the act of abortion can be more easily 'named and opposed' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 333). 'Bearing witness' functions as an important element in the repertoire of anti-abortion activists, specifically as it can be conceptualised by anti-abortion activists as 'peaceful' and 'inoffensive' (even when it is not experienced as such by abortion-seekers), and thus facilitates greater 'acceptance of their activities by the broader public' (Page and Lowe, 2022: 30). Interestingly, in my interview with Sinead, a member of the Angels for Choice, she described their counterprotests activities as a way of 'bearing witness' to the actions of anti-abortion groups.

Sinead: We walked slowly, in single-file, one behind each other. And we would stop, for coffee, or stop outside the protest places. And I think the silence really pissed off the anti-choicers, because they'd be taunting us. And we'd be like 'say nothing, say absolutely nothing. We're here bearing witness'.

In religious terms, the act of 'bearing witness' implies a moral responsibility; to take evidence of wrongdoing to establish a charge against someone, to serve the rule of justice, and to be present and be in dialogue with vulnerable subjects.³ Another possible interpretation of the religious act of 'bearing witness' is that its purpose is to 'awaken and draw others to God'.⁴ As the quote from Sinead above illustrates, for the Angels for Choice activists, their activities took on a quasi-religious function – in this case, the Angels use their performative counterdemonstrations to 'bear witness' to the (graphic) foetal imagery displays, to call attention to what they consider as the immorality of the actions of the anti-abortion groups and what they perceive to be offensive and traumatising visual imagery displays.

Scholarship on 'witness bearing art', however, which is defined by Bacharach (2023) as 'activist art which is strategically placed in the street' defines its function as 'to transmit knowledge about certain unjust and harmful events' (153). Bacharach argues that 'witness bearing art' works to 'testify visually to certain events which might not be (sufficiently) publicly acknowledged'. Reflecting on witness bearing as a form of creative activism, Bacharach maintains that such actions function to acknowledge and 'work through' collective trauma (2023: 154). Particularly relevant to this analysis, Bacharach contends that witness-bearing art serves to 'go beyond the facts' to validate and disseminate the 'lived and embodied experiences' those who have been 'marginalised' or 'silenced' by 'dominant narratives' (Bacharach, 2023: 154, 160). Importantly, Bacharach posits, witness bearing art allows the artist/activist to 'construct new narratives about past events and how they have impacted different groups' (160).

Returning to Sinead's testimony, by 'bearing witness' to anti-abortion activity, the Angels for Choice activists serve to call attention to what they consider as immoral, invasive, and distressing graphic foetal imagery displays. In addition to this however, by dressing in all-white Angel costumes with feathered wings, the activists deliver an *iconoclastic performance* which both brings into focus and contests the powerful monopoly that the Catholic Church in Ireland has traditionally held in defining the moral parameters of sexuality and reproduction. Ecclesiastically-speaking, abortion has been regarded – alongside euthanasia, terrorism and genocide – as one of the great 'evils' of modern society. In 1983, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign which lobbied for the insertion of the 8th amendment was backed directly by the Irish Catholic Church. The fervent historical 'protection' of foetal rights by Irish religious organisations has functioned as the keystone around which the country has sought to prove its 'superior' Catholic morality, specifically in contrast to an increasingly secular and liberal European Union (Martin, 2002).

As Rich and Bartholomew describe (2023), iconoclastic movements – which involve the reappropriate and subversion of 'sacred imagery' (in this case, guardian angels) – 'address the problem of historicity' (194). That is, iconoclastic movements do not attempt to 'undo the past' but instead, they 'gesture toward the distinction between the past on one hand and history on the other'. In light of this history, the subversive appropriation of religious dress and Catholic iconography by the Angels for Choice activists is particularly significant and can be considered as part of a broader effort by Irish feminist activists in the abortion rights campaign to highlight the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church who, whilst advocating for sanctity of motherhood and the protection of 'the unborn',

³ *Bearing witness in religion* | *Global Strategies & Solutions* | *The Encyclopedia of World Problems* (no date). Available at: <http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/strategy/200518>. (Accessed 6 September 2022).

⁴ Witness, Christian. Available at: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/witness-christian>. (Accessed 1 April 2024).

oversaw the incarceration and institutional abuse of thousands of unmarried mothers and pregnant people inside of its network of Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes up until the end of the 20th century (Antosik-Parsons, 2024).

As Pollack Petchesky argues, moral discourse around abortion is not 'static and given' but 'socially constructed' (Petchesky, 1980: 332). Through their creative, performance activism, the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist serve not only to call attention to the invasive and intrusive nature of the graphic foetal imagery displays, but to reconstruct the moral and affective economy of abortion, in a broader sense. Here, we come back to the idea of performance protest as an 'act of manifestation' which creates new visions of society and the world (Lavendar and Peetz, 2022). In the case of the Angels for Choice, the symbolism of their 'angel' costumes requires further analysis. In theology, the function of angels is to serve and praise God, to work as messengers between the spiritual and corporeal worlds, to give strength and comfort to religious 'believers', and most importantly, to operate as 'guardians' who shepherd human beings through the world, *protecting* them from evil forces (Catholic Straight Answers, n.d.).

Returning to Sinead's description of the Angels for Choice counterprotests as a form of 'bearing witness', I want to highlight an additional interpretation of this term. In her research on 'bearing witness' in the nursing profession, Maria Arman writes that 'bearing witness' entails a constant 'dialogue between closeness and respect' (2007: 85). Bearing witness, Arman explains in her article, requires not only 'facing' the other in his 'vulnerability' but putting oneself 'at the disposal of the other'. The 'unconditional presence' of the witness operates as a form of 'protection for the other's dignity' (Arman, 2007: 86). In the interviews I conducted with Angels for Choice activists, as well as in interviews given to local media, by members of Radical Queers Resist, both groups spoke about their objective to *protect* women and pregnant people from graphic foetal imagery displays; with protection understood here in terms of safeguarding individuals from physical intimidation as well as from the emotional harm that these images might cause. This is exemplified in the passage from my interview with Sinead below:

Sinead: We just got incensed seeing these outside maternity clinics. People coming out of maternity clinics after facing God knows what and they were horrible, horrible images. Really really cold-hearted people. So, it was like 'How do we counteract that?'. ...So, you'd walk up to outside the Dail where the protests were, or outside the maternity hospitals and you just walked in silence and stood silently, protecting...it was so powerful. Really moving, really moving.

Dressed in their white robes and feathered wings, standing silently in front of the foetal imagery displays, the 'Angels for Choice' serve as '*guardian* angels' whose role is to safeguard women's access to reproductive healthcare – as they did when they performed several counterprotests opposing the ICBR's graphic foetal imagery displays at several Dublin maternity hospitals in 2018. It is my argument that the Angels for Choice counterprotests serve not only to 'guide' or 'herald' abortion-seekers outside of abortion clinics but that the aesthetics and symbolism of their *performance* worked to reconstitute access to abortion itself as a 'divine right'. Taking a more critical lens towards the Angels for Choice protests, this discourse which constitutes abortion-seekers as in need of 'protection' from graphic foetal imagery displays should not go unscrutinised. Whilst on the one hand, this discourse might be considered as subversive of the common 'Pro-Life' rhetoric which constitutes the 'unborn' as being in need of 'protection' from irrational and irresponsible women and pregnant people themselves, such paternalistic language could potentially be appropriated by patriarchal political and medical systems and utilised to advance their interventionist agendas, thereby further jeopardising the bodily autonomy and sexual freedom of women and abortion-seekers themselves (Millar, 2017).

What is clear is that the somewhat controversial aesthetic adopted by the Angels for Choice activists evokes powerful emotions and symbolic meanings. Borrowing from Sutton and Vacarezza, through their creative, performance counterprotests, these activists provide us with an alternative 'visual frame' for abortion rights which works to 'advance the movement's discursive repertoires' (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 733). In the case of the Angels for Choice, the reshaping of the affective economy of abortion is achieved using specific clothing or dress. In relation to the aesthetic created by the Angels for Choice, the decision to adorn themselves in white angel costumes has additional affective significance, outside of subverting religious iconography. The decision to don the colour white can be conceived, I argue, as a rebuttal of misogynistic ideas which constitute abortion-seekers and sexually active women as 'impure' or 'unclean' and as part of broader efforts to 'stick' new affective charges to abortion, including peacefulness, cleanliness, wisdom and healing (all connotations which the colour white evokes) (Ahmed, 2014).

In this sense, the work of activist groups like the Angels for Choice can be located inside of wider contemporary actions in reproductive rights organising which prioritises consciousness-raising and destigmatising work through alternative visual and affective representations of abortion. In 2021, Northern Irish abortion campaigners, Alliance for Choice in Belfast, launched their 'Abortion is Normal' billboard campaign, in a direct response to the activities of anti-abortion protestors who gathered outside clinics across Northern Ireland with 'traumatising images and



Figure 2. Angels for Choice demonstration, 9 May 2018, The National Maternity Hospital Holles Street, Dublin. Source: Raymond Keane (12 November 2024) – reproduced with permission.

misinformation⁵. In response graphic foetal image displays by anti-abortion groups, Alliance for Choice installed their own large billboards across Northern Ireland which featured drawings of different types of women and abortion-seekers, in bright colours, with captions including ‘Strong’, ‘Abortion is Normal’ and ‘All Sort of People Need Abortions’.

In many ways then, the work of both the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist can be conceptualised as part of a broader global movement by abortion activists to take a ‘diametrically opposed’ path to conservative ‘pro-life’ campaigners, when it comes to the visual economy of abortion politics (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 753). In their analysis of key visual symbols of the *‘marea verde’* in Latin America, Sutton and Vacarezza argue that the use of the orange voting hand, the green *‘pañuelo’* and the LGBT ‘rainbow colours’ by groups including the *Lesbianas y Feministas por la Descriminalización del Aborto* in Argentina, demonstrate a systematic attempt by ‘pro-choice’ activists in this area to avoid ‘limiting visual meaning that might be interpreted as stigmatising or victimising’ (2020: 753). Instead of responding with images of women’s suffering as a result of unsafe abortion, these strategies shift the goalposts altogether, advancing ‘openly destigmatising meanings’ and celebrating ‘diverse bodies in relation to gender and sexuality (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 753–754).

In the same vein, the use of the LGBTQ colours and pride flag by the Radical Queers Resist group can be considered as part of this effort to destigmatise abortion in the Irish context. As Sutton and Vacarezza have argued, popular images of abortion often use ‘dark’ colours to imply the ‘sinister’ nature of the abortion experience, such that the attachment of ‘joyful and lively’ colours to abortion becomes a radical act (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 745). In this same vein, the use of the LGBTQ flag by the Radical Queers Resist activists can be seen as doubly effective, as it creates the idea of abortion as a prideful, rather than a shameful object; and works to ‘disrupt essentialised and heteronormative notions’ about who needs access to abortion rights (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 744). In this Irish context, the LGBTQ rainbow flag provides a point of connection for queer and aborting bodies – all of whom have faced pathologisation, social exclusion and even institutionalisation inside the cisheteronormative, pro-natalist state.

(III) An Alternative Body-Ontology in the Abortion Debate: Validating the ‘Lived Body’ and the ‘Non-Reproductive’

What is increasingly clear then is that, not only do activist groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist pose a direct challenge to the efforts of anti-abortion groups to visually-frame abortion exclusively through bloody, graphic foetal imagery; but through their performative, counter-protest activities, they offer an alternative aesthetic of abortion politics, which has radical, subversive potential for abortion activists in Ireland and beyond. As Pollack Petchesky has argued, it appears that feminists have indeed too easily ‘ceded the visual terrain’ to the anti-abortion lobby (Petchesky, 1987: 265 in Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 734). The work of groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist offers important clues as to how to reclaim visual territory for pro-choice campaigners, and how to recast abortion in ‘positive’ visual and affective terms. Moreover, I argue that through their protest activities, groups like the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist not only transgress and refute the dominant conceptualisations of pregnant embodiment exemplified in these graphic foetal imagery

⁵ Alliance for Choice, 2021. Available at: <https://www.alliance4choice.com/billboard-campaign>. (Accessed 1 April 2024).



Figure 3. Angels for Choice demonstration, 18 May 2018, Grafton Street, Dublin. Source: Raymond Keane (12 November 2024) – reproduced with permission.

displays; they contribute and validate alternative notions of gendered and sexual embodiment which have radical potential to transform contemporary reproductive rights debates.

In direct defiance of the silence (or rather silenced), passive and objectified pregnant body exemplified in foetal imagery displays, the performance protests of the Radical Queers Resist, and the Angels for Choice portray and validate an active and acting gendered subject-body. In other words, by situating themselves and their performing, activist bodies in opposition to the passive, objectified pregnant bodies exemplified as part of the anti-abortion foetal imagery displays, members of the Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice groups refocus the primacy and necessity of a phenomenological approach to the reproductive body and to reproductive politics, more broadly. Such acts operate then to remind us that unlike foetal images which exist only as ‘second order’ expression of bodily experience, the active, performing bodies of these mostly feminine and queer activists remain the ‘absolute source’ of experience ‘without which the symbols of science would be meaningless’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: ix).

In addition, through their creative, performative counterdemonstrations, members of the Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice activist groups put forward an alternative aesthetic of reproduction where ‘the main character’ is no longer ‘the embryonic man’ but the active, agentic, feminine and queer body (Phelan, 1993: 132). Inside of a pre-existing, hegemonic representational system which valorises pregnancy and ‘disembodied wombs’ as exemplifying the ‘truth’ of bodily reproduction, these creative activists’ performances recentre and revalue the idea of women and abortion-seekers as autonomous, agentic “embodied political subjects” (Calkin, 2019: 12; Hyndman, 2007 in Calkin, 2019: 13). The alternative abortion aesthetic put forward by the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice activists is especially transformative I argue because – due to its nature as *performance* – it resists ontological reification (Phelan, 1993).

As feminist theorist Peggy Phelan has argued, it is ‘the pregnant woman’s very visibility’, the ability of medical science and photography to capture and reify her bodily image, that has allowed the pregnant body to become the object of legal control (Phelan, 1993: 140). Phelan maintains that ‘the connection between reproduction and representation is intractable. To control one is to control the other’. Phelan writes that performance ‘in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive’ and in fact ‘clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation’ (Phelan, 1993: 148). Phelan contrasts photography, which she says is ‘vulnerable to charges of counterfeiting and copying’ with live performance which ‘eludes regulation and control’. Unlike photography, Phelan maintains, performance is difficult to ‘capture’ (Phelan, 1993: 148).

In a visually oriented society, wherein we seek to perpetually seek to reproduce ourselves in our own image, these performances cannot be replicated. Each performance or counterdemonstration is an entirely new act; one which exists only in a specific space and time.

Phelan characterises performance itself as ‘an attempt to value that which is nonreproductive’ (Phelan, 1993: 152). Moreover, Phelan (1993: 148) explains, ‘performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies’. The ‘referent’, Phelan explains, is the ‘agonizingly relevant body of the performance’ (Phelan, 1993: 150). Perhaps then, what the activists from the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist groups achieve here is not simply that they point the way towards an alternative visual framework for abortion politics; but that they point us towards a way out of reductive visibility politics. As Phelan (1993) argues, there are ‘disadvantages in staking too much on visibility as a means of achieving representational power’ (140). Perhaps, the great potential of creative performance protests, like those of the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice, is that in the face of a foetocentric visual culture, their work reaffirms the inherent value of the present, transient, fleshly bodies of the mostly feminine and queer activist performers.

CONCLUSION

As has been well-documented by scholars analysing contemporary abortion politics, the anti-abortion movement across various transnational contexts has proven itself to be extraordinarily successful in deploying visual imagery to support its political aims (Duden, 1993; Ludlow, 2021). Feminist artists and activists have responded to the hegemony of the foetal image through aesthetic interventions which aim to reconstruct the visual economy of abortion and specifically to refocus the lived experience and political agency of women and pregnant people (Phelan, 1993; Calkin, 2019). In this article and responding to the turn towards increasingly ‘graphic’ foetal imagery amongst anti-abortion campaigners in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, I have explored the potential of creative, performative counter-protests to challenge the political efficacy and emotional connotations of the foetal image and to indicate future avenues for embodied abortion activism which shift the focus of campaigning beyond the narrow confines of a dichotomous visibility politics.

Exploring the case of counterdemonstrations by the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist activist groups during the Irish abortion rights referendum in 2018, this research has argued that creative, performance counterprotests provide an important symbolic challenge to the foetal image as well as performing additional affective and political functions including; reclaiming public space and political territory for the abortion rights movement through the unruly performing body, interrupting the surveillant panopticon-like gaze of ‘Pro-Life’ protestors as it emanates with and through graphic foetal imagery displays, and reconstituting the affective and moral economy of abortion. In the Irish context, the Angels for Choice deliver an iconoclastic performance which subversively reconstitutes abortion as a ‘divine right’, whilst the Radical Queers Resist attach lively and prideful colours to a practice traditionally perceived as sinister or impure.

To conclude, in the face of the hegemony of the foetal image, the performing activist body refocuses the primacy of the lived experience of the reproductive body and refuses ontological reification. The work of groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist have significant potential then as it replaces at the centre of contemporary abortion politics the active, agentic, fleshly bodies of women, gestating people, and abortion-seekers, who retake their place as the central characters in the story of abortion rights.

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