



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



A Severed Text: Artist Carol Sommer discusses her responses to Iris Murdoch's novels with Frances White

Carol Sommer is an artist based in Darlington, UK with an interest in Process Art. She is engaged in a project using the works of novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch in innovative ways. Her book Cartography for Girls: A-Z of Orientations Identified within the Novels of Iris Murdoch was published by Information as Material in 2016.

The following discussion of the relationship between textual process and subjectivity in her responses to the novels of iris Murdoch arose out of conversations that Carol and I have had over the years, and my deep interest in her philosophy and methodology which are so different from mainline Iris Murdoch scholarship. The interview was conducted by email in April 2017.

Frances: What is your background and training and your current job?

Carol: I did a Fine Art degree at Cleveland College of Art & Design, then an MA in Fine Art Practice at Northumbria University and started a PhD that I am currently studying at Leeds Beckett University in 2013. The aim of my research is to consider what an artist's approach to female experience in the novels of Iris Murdoch might yield. I've worked at Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College in Darlington since 2004, where I teach on the Fine Art and Critical & Contextual Studies in Art & Design courses.

Frances: When did you start reading Iris Murdoch?

Carol: I first read *A Word Child* in about 1987. I loved it partly because it's set in London, which has always been a very magical place for me. I remember it leaving me wondering 'wow! – What was that all about?!' After that I read *The Black Prince* and I was hooked!

Frances: Where did the initial inspiration for your work on her come from?

Carol: My practice is concerned with ideas of classification and the – perhaps always only ever – provisional and illusory nature of systems of classification. During my MA in 2004/5, I discovered *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and was struck by Iris Murdoch's writing about the dangers of imposing form. I love her observation on the first page of that book about the questing mind's abhorrence of vacuums and our desire to transform what we can't understand into something we think we can. These words related strongly to the work I was doing at that time, and so the idea of applying aspects of her philosophy to her novels within an aesthetic context appealed to me immensely. I'm excited by the illuminations and the absurdities that can arise out of applying classification systems to existing bodies of work, and so her work afforded both the means of devising the 'systems' and the material to apply those systems to. That particular observation became for me something that I attempt to both trope and resist in my practice as a whole.

Frances: What is the philosophy of art which underpins your work?

Carol: The philosophy of Process Art has been very important to me – art that emphasises the process and act of making rather than the actual finished work. I like the 'what happens if?' approach, and whereas the work of process artists of the 1960s and 70s revealed the combination of an idea with a physical, bodily process (like Richard Serra's *Hand Throwing Lead* or Eva Hesse's *Addendum*), my own work combines an idea with the (somewhat less physical!) processes of reading, recording, listing, collating, mapping and so on. More recently through my PhD supervisor Simon Morris, my work has been informed by Conceptual Writing, a relatively new movement that (amongst other things), investigates the notion of creativity and originality by appropriating and reframing already existent texts. This way of working affords opportunities to subvert encounters with texts, and for example with *Cartography for Girls*, to be allegorical of Iris Murdoch's philosophical thinking about the dangers of imposing form and the relationship between her fictional descriptions of women and truth.

Frances: What is the nature of the feminist thinking which underpins your work?

Carol: I'm interested in the representation of women in literature, and in the potential of feminist thinkers, such as Luce Irigaray's work on the representation of women in psycho-analytical and philosophical texts, to offer frameworks through which to consider fictional depictions of women. Irigaray's writing on the activity of listening for example, resonates with Murdoch's writing on the concept of attention. Both make similar demands in the perception of individuals; Irigaray speaks of the need for 'not overcoming, not annulling, not killing' – actions not too dissimilar from Murdoch's 'just and loving gaze' which involves 'not taking over, not

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swallowing up, not denying or making unreal'. Unlike Irigaray's, Murdoch's philosophy isn't considered an ethics of gender or sexual difference, yet key to the propositions for ethical life practices of both philosophers is the relation of intersubjectivity between individuals and the potential for change.

Frances: Can you describe the nature of your project?

Carol: I'll try! I'm intrigued to see what an artist's approach, as opposed to an academic's approach, to Iris Murdoch's novelistic depictions of women's experience might yield. So I suppose I'm asking questions such as what methodology might produce an outcome that has the potential to engage with the subject matter and critical readings of it, what kind of aesthetic context or form might serve to express this gendered subjectivity, what can particular outcomes offer to the discourse surrounding the subject matter? My enquiry so far has resulted in outcomes including performative readings, films, installation and a book.

Frances: Exactly how did you develop your methodology?

Carol: The chance to present a paper at the *Iris Murdoch and Virtue Ethics: Philosophy and the Novel* conference at Roma Tre University, in 2014 afforded a catalytic opportunity to begin to address the research question! At the time of the call for papers, I'd begun to read each novel and to record extracts of text that related to female experience, including descriptions of women characters. I devised 'headings' based on a variety of prompts including phrases I was drawn to, from both the novels and from critical readings of the novels by academics and reviewers. However, at this stage I had no concrete outcomes and the potential of *performing* a reading of descriptions of women at the conference presented itself as a tempting proposition. I decided to use the parameters of delivering an academic paper (a time limit and reading) as conceptual constraints, and hoped to invite conjecture on language as a barrier to virtue in relation to the descriptions, as these included those of Murdoch as a male narrator, as well as to Murdochian ideas on the imposition of form. The reading consisted of as many descriptions that I'd sourced from the novels at that point, and that I was able to read aloud in fifteen minutes. The title of the paper – *Cartography for Girls in Fifteen Minutes* – came from thinking about mapping and map-making in relation to what I was doing, and metaphorically to Plato's Myth of the Cave and to metaphysical journeying. This experience led me to think about *whose* voice was being heard during the reading and so after the conference, the reading developed into a film, *From One to the Other*. The film consisted of a series of recordings of different readers reciting *Cartography for Girls in Fifteen Minutes* made via *Skype*. Contributors included readers who responded to call-outs for female readers on online classified ad service *Craigslist* from places including Hong Kong, Moscow, Oxford, London, Paris and Glasgow.

At the same time I'd been re-reading *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and came across Iris Murdoch's words 'Loving is an orientation, a direction of energy, not just a state of mind.' I thought 'that's it!' – and set about identifying and collating every 'orientation' by every female character in all of the novels – a mapping of their connections to truth and love. Conceptual

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Writing provided an aesthetic context in which to present and reframe this material in the form of a book, *Cartography for Girls – An A-Z of Orientations identified within the Novels of Iris Murdoch*.

Frances: How do you do the work?

Carol: To put the book together, it took thirteen months to read the novels (excluding the first-person male narrated novels) and to list the 'orientations'. I highlighted each orientation in my copy of each book and then typed them up, paying attention to punctuation etc. and making as sure as possible that each quote was accurate. To a point I was able to copy and paste from Kindle, but there's a limit on the amount of text that can be copied from Kindle books. Selection is a procedural technique associated with Conceptual Writing; often this serves as a distancing device from 'creative' writing and a text's original affect, yet my methodology for deciding which pieces of text to use wasn't entirely un-creative, as I developed and revised a selection criteria in response to factors that presented themselves as the work developed. I did use the computer to organise the 456 pages of quotes alphabetically though.

Frances: How did you choose which pieces of text to use?

Carol: I took the idea that for Iris Murdoch, individual consciousness is truth seeking, and that 'what we attend to, how we attend and whether we attend' is an integral part of moral activity. Because she clarifies that not all states of consciousness are evaluating, or can be evaluated, I listed every thought that I could find that was presented to the reader through the mind of female characters; so I didn't include thoughts presented *about* female characters through the minds of male characters, or Murdoch writing as a male narrator. Material from letters, which feature frequently in the novels, is also omitted – I felt that although letters have the appearance of truth, their neutrality is suspect! However, I did include the physical manifestations of these thoughts that are very much part of cognitive reflection by Murdochian females.

The decision to arrange the quotes alphabetically, and so non-hierarchically (in any way other than in an abecedarian sense) and the inclusion of the physical manifestations of thought, was inspired by both Luce Irigaray's writing on the hierarchical nature of representations of gender in Western philosophy, for example in *Plato's Hystera*, her re-working of Plato's Myth of the Cave, and her challenge to Plato's denial of bodily struggle in the journey to enlightenment.

Frances: What exhibitions and talks have you given on this project?

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*Installation shot, Cartography for Girls, Darlington 2015
(Carol Sommer)*

Carol: I had an exhibition (also titled *Cartography for Girls*) in Darlington, my home town, in November 2015, and then the book, together with an installation which developed out of the work at Darlington were shown as part of a major exhibition, *Reading as Art* at Bury Art Museum and Sculpture Gallery in 2016. The book was published by *information as material* and was officially launched at the exhibition in Bury where I performed a reading at the preview event. I've also taken part in several International Women's Day events, talking about the work and doing readings. It's been a wonderful experience to talk about and show the work in a variety of contexts, and to get feedback from different points of view, so I've had really valuable conversations and discussions at the Iris Murdoch conferences, speaking at artists' groups, Teesside University English Research Seminar Programme, and taking part in feminist exhibitions in Newcastle and Sheffield.

Frances: How have viewers responded to it?

Carol: I've had a really positive reaction to the three different means of showing the work, so, there's been the book itself, and then exhibiting the work in galleries and thirdly as readings. People have responded to these different types of presentation in different ways. At Bury, for example, the books were presented as three suspended volumes. The gallery's curator told me she thought this suggested books in a medieval 'chained' library – as if they contain ideas so precious they need to be protected, yet everybody should read them too. She described them as appearing to float in air as if they were thought itself – agitating the minds of visitors. People told me that they saw the wall installations at both Bury and Darlington as excavations of the novels.

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David Briers in his review of the show at Bury for *Art Monthly* described the effect of reading the pages at random as mystifyingly cogent and certainly poetic. The work had very positive write-ups in reviews – I think scale was a factor – at Bury there were over 400 pages pinned to a very long wall. One reviewer described it as a delicate landscape of paper and a quietly powerful study of human experience. At the readings I've done from the book, the rhythm and repetition set up through the alphabetical ordering of it was described as persistent and powerful – one guy said that for him the words became totemic, that the phrases took root and the ideas became solid objects.

Frances: How do you hope they will respond to it?

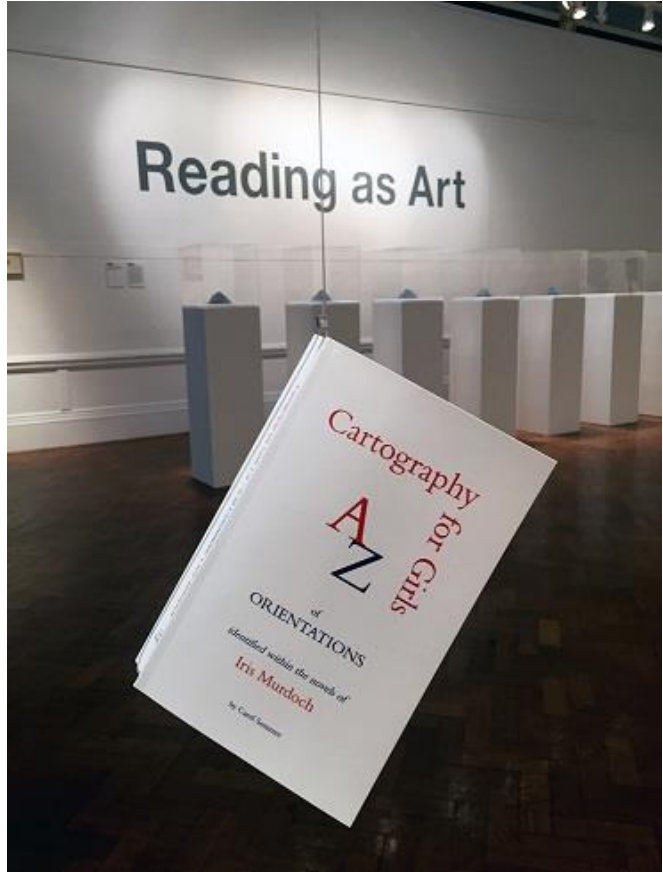
Carol: I hope that viewers and readers will respond on their own terms. I like the sense of space created through the wall

installations and the sense of weight generated by the book. It strikes me that both these methods – and reading the work as performance – have a power of subjective affect – people have told me that (like myself) they've been drawn to particular phrases. My sister told me that her friend began to cry when she read the book in the gallery at Bury and bought a copy to give to *her* sister for Christmas. I also hope that both the accumulation of female-centred phrases and the poetic alliteration and repetition that occurs in the work generates conjecture on Iris Murdoch's depiction of women. For me as an artist exploring frameworks through which to read the work, I'm drawn to feminist ideas about the subject position of women in language and I hope that *Cartography for Girls* makes some connection with those ideas. And lots of people have said that the work has made them want to read Iris Murdoch.

Frances: Why did you choose to make a book?

Carol: It felt right to keep the work rooted in the aesthetic of literary endeavour.

Frances: How do you imagine readers will tackle the book?



Installation shot, 'Reading for Art' Exhibition, Bury 2016
(Carol Sommer)

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Carol: When the book was very much a work in progress I showed it to Alistair Robinson the curator of the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art and he said he thought the book had a beautiful simplicity that opened out onto ideas of bibliomania, bibliomancy, religious practice, reading tarot and so on. He said that he thought the book seemed like a pure condensation – leaving something hard and shiny. I love these ideas that suggest all kinds of possibilities to me as to how readers might engage with the book.

Frances: Have you had much response to the book so far? and if so, what are readers making of it?

Carol: I've mainly had responses from the Conceptual Writing community and the Iris Murdoch community as well as people who saw the work at Bury. Some responses pick up on the formal qualities of the book, and it's been interesting that this hasn't come solely from the Conceptual Writers. For example, Maria Antonaccio observed that she thought it related in formal terms to Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and that it made her confront the issue of form, including our expectations of what a book is and what the act of reading is. Frances White wrote an amazing essay review in which she generated further taxonomies from the book's alphabetised content in response to (and amongst other aspects) the agency of female characters. Other readers have told me that they enjoy the contingent juxtaposition of content and I like the potential that this proposes as a response to ideas from both Iris Murdoch's philosophy and feminist thought, and their relationship to language and the act of reading itself.

Frances: Is this leading to future work on Iris Murdoch?

Carol: I very much hope so!

*Frances White is Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Chichester, Deputy Director of the Iris Murdoch Research Centre, editor of the Iris Murdoch Review, and Writer in Residence at Kingston University Writing School. She has published widely on Iris Murdoch; her *Becoming Iris Murdoch* (2014) won the Kingston University Press Short Biography Competition. She is currently writing the sequel *Unbecoming Iris Murdoch*.*

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