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a life remade

by Mary Reynolds

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Remaking a life

Let us imagine an artist who struggled to complete anything, left near-unintelligible notes and was probably incompetent in the use of materials. This was an artist who found any focus hard to maintain, who seemed to dabble in multiple forms and spread apparently undisciplined attention so thinly across a multitude of whim-driven activities that hardly any project came to fruition. Picture a corpus of surviving works that only just creeps into double figures, some of which are dubiously attributed, while others may have been reworked by other hands. And imagine a signature work so incompetently produced it is literally disintegrating whilst, in that same room on a facing wall, there exists another work, largely unknown, by a different artist, who has remained almost anonymous, despite producing something that is arguably as beautiful and technically superior to its neighbour. If asked to assess, how might contemporary viewers, coming to this body of work for the first time, judge its worth or its creator's achievement?

And how might we judge another artist who has left just one work, which exists only in reproduction as a contemporary photograph, taken in the few moments the work existed? But this artist, we now discover, left a variety of notes, descriptions and indications of materials to be used that are sufficient to reconstruct lost works. Is it not our duty to remake this life's work, to recreate this legacy that might enrich lives, change perceptions and reinterpret experience? This artist is called Eileen McHugh. The previous, unfocused incompetent was called Leonardo da Vinci.

But where might I begin to remake the life and work of

an artist like Eileen? We have no works, no studies or even failed projects awaiting reassembly. We know little of her undocumented life, whose destination remained unknown even to her own mother. But we all leave our own marks on time. Identifying them is the challenge, and then describing them becomes possible. Once reassembled, we might then remake Eileen McHugh's life and reconstruct her works to enrich our collective experience. But where to start?

London, of course, changed everything. She was just eighteen, adult, though not formed, not yet consciously searching for herself, but, despite that, still discovering it anew. The city played its crucial changing part, its immediate and permanent mutability forever challenging, forever creating, forever destroying. Thus, she arrived an adult and gradually learned to recreate the child, consciously and perhaps pretentiously following Picasso's stated example. At least that was her stated aim.

Before art college, her work had dithered between what her teachers demanded and, more originally, what she momentarily and arbitrarily imagined. This was what she had learned to call her art, but she later conceded that she was nothing special in that regard. Occasionally, her style had suggested its maturity, but she would only become aware of that some years later, mere months before that artistic life ended prematurely.

So London is the place to start, her arrival marking a cusp that separated the juvenilia from her own style. I will, during the course of this re-evaluation of her work, place her identity and the events that shaped it at the very centre of my story, because, like her work, her life can now be remade only via these once discarded memories, these near-forgotten trivia. The remaking of Eileen McHugh, however, must reconstruct the individual, the person, because, as

Eileen herself noted, it was e e cummings who wrote that ‘the artist’s only inevitable country is himself’ and, in the case of Eileen McHugh, the words ring completely true after the obligatory change of gender. She was her art and her art was her, personal, personalised, inseparable, utterly individual and yet ultimately effectively anonymous.

After all, from the early nineteenth century onwards, the expression of individuality is what art had progressively become. Before then, she imagined, it had been the paymaster who had called his piper’s tune - church, rulers, feudal barons, bourgeois accumulators, states and corporations - and so style had been essentially dictated by expectation, form by commission, content by intended use. This recent, emergent philosophy that art must be individual expression implied that the first thing an artist should achieve is self-knowledge and self-awareness. That was the difficult part and had to precede the easier activity of producing objects. Once achieved, however, continued originality implied equally continued self-reappraisal, a process that, each time it was repeated, had to confront and overcome the same challenges but finish at a new uniqueness. For Eileen McHugh, this was perhaps the source of her ultimate failure. In a sense, she simply opted out of that essential process. Achieving the unique always remained in her power. Having it seen as such was always the challenge.

Her art, like her artistic life, ended prematurely and, because of her pursuit of impermanence, it obviously no longer exists. In *Eileen McHugh: A Life Remade* I will try to bring back to life both the artist and her work so that they can both occupy their rightful and deserved place at the forefront of our experience. But this goal of the ephemeral makes her œuvre difficult to recreate. The style and concept

are easy and remain accessible today. But the materials she chose were specific to their time, as were many of her inspirations. Imitation is available to us, but it remains mere imitation. And strangely, a recreation of her life shares that same restriction.

Arguably, she was the product of a place and a time. Now we are all slaves of time and live to the rhythms it imposes. But in Eileen's case, it is not only era that is intangible, because the place she knew cannot be revisited, probably cannot even be imagined by a contemporary critic, for it has been physically changed by the years, its social fabric unwound and rewoven.

It is today impossible for a contemporary reader to appreciate the unique character of her adolescence. Her experience itself was also unique in its own time and place, and it is now impossible to reconstruct it, almost impossible to describe it, as she would have experienced it. Education is something we have learned to take for granted, an expensive necessity desired by all. But in Eileen's era, it was a rationed good, cheap if you could get it, but available only to an elect few.

In Eileen's case, she did not follow any predicated path. She did stay on at school until sixteen, though there was no requirement. She did seek qualifications, but her route was unconventional, and her achievements hardly recognised. She did, however, obtain the bare minimum of what she needed, albeit a year late, and this passport to further learning opened onto a future of creativity.

But today, neither can we recreate or envisage the environment of the time. Attitudinally, it was as removed from our own era as it is possible to be. Abortion and homosexuality had only just been decriminalised, and the latter only in England and Wales. It was less than a decade

since the last executions and most adults had lived through at least one World War. Possibly it is this era's proximity to our own that erects the greatest barrier to its understanding. We might assume similarity to today, but that would be wrong, especially in its attitudes towards race.

Eileen Mary McHugh was born on August 8, 1952 in Wakefield. It was a town with a major literary and artistic tradition, though hardly anyone living there was aware of it. Writers such as Mercer, Storey, Braine and Bairstow were or had been nearby. Sculptors Moore and Hepworth had matured in the area. Lindsay Anderson would make one of the films of the era in the town, its plot drawn from David Storey's book. It was a time when an accent became acceptable and the experience of a life less than privileged had become an avenue to be explored, no longer seen as simply a dead end.

But the Foundation Course that Eileen McHugh followed in the town's college hardly even acknowledged the contemporary. Tutors presented the learning experience as if it had been drawn from a Renaissance studio, with a stress on technique, life drawing and apprenticeship. It was an experience that was universally criticised by students who dutifully but resentfully followed its demands, before rejecting its values. And Eileen followed this path, faithfully completing all the set tasks, but consciously trying to reject what they were trying to impart. It is no surprise whatsoever that she later destroyed all her work from that period. And this is why London marks a cusp between the juvenile and the mature.

The nineteen-sixties was a decade when British society still rationed education. One still had to be worthy to receive it. Eileen was not among the mere one fifth of the population pre-qualified for exposure to academic study.

Thus branded as an eleven-year-old, it was assumed she would leave school at fifteen, since the raising of the school leaving age, ROSLA, an acronym that sent shivers up the spines and set icicles in the wallets of those who had become used to their right to privilege, was still in the future. It was surely educational experience that formed her as a person, her view of the world and thus her art. Of course, she would not be alone if this were true! In her case, the experience was very much of its time and will perhaps be unfamiliar to many.

If artists must inhabit themselves, Eileen McHugh's clear problem was her inability to decide who she was. Moulded and branded by society via her school and college experience, she fought to find her own voice. Eventually she surely did just that, but it was a state that was only temporarily maintained and soon ceased completely, never to come to life again. Her style and artistic language inevitably mean that we have no enduring evidence of her work. But now we have her notebooks, so some of her genius might be reconstructed and her work reimaged. Hence now is the time to write the official biography of the artist, hence Eileen *McHugh: A Life Remade*.

"Life's greatest moments are the ones that are lost." *Forgotten* is what Eileen McHugh meant to write. But popularity identifies greatness. It uncovers talent's otherwise hidden achievements. Cream floats, says the cliché, but it's only a cliché because we recognise the analogy's recurring truth. The artist must inhabit a private world of inspiration, of course, but she also exports a personality, markets an identity that is no longer the artist's property. And then, possibly, an unpredictable popularity makes that parochial identity universal, confers and creates status, confirms genius that will be remembered.

In Eileen McHugh's case, however, popularity alone is not enough to locate her vision, identify her achievements, or display her talent. There is much more to this artist than the single work for which she is now so widely known. The time is surely now ripe for an examination of her life and work, because there are surely other gems waiting to be discovered, despite her own wish that none of her art should endure. For her, true greatness was to be achieved only if the work was dismissed, discarded and then effectively ignored. In her view it would, however, be absorbed by its everyday environment and thus paradoxically be given a kind of permanence, becoming a part of what everyone merely took for granted. Her creations were objects of the here and now, ephemera calculatedly conceived to have no lasting consequence, nothing that might aspire to or achieve longevity, let alone permanence. Paradoxically, however, she appeared to appreciate that if left where she put them, they were all potentially, but anonymously eternal.

So what might Eileen McHugh, the artist, have made of her current fame, achieved over thirty years after her creative life came to an end? Marion McHugh, Eileen's mother, at the end of her life enabled me, despite the difficulties of communicating with a memory so disabled by dementia, to build up what I sincerely believe to be an accurate, sympathetic and penetrating portrait of the young Eileen, when she was at the height of her creative activity. And, given that the art becomes the eventual property of those who experience it, rather than those who create it, it may be that we can only reconstruct the artist from others' experience of her.

There is, of course, the inevitable question of what Eileen might have made of a project to promote her name into a permanence she herself always rejected. Indeed, we

must try to envisage how she might have reacted to the fact that one of her works, just one, it has to be said, has achieved such fame. As ever, putting words into the mouth of an historical personality is easy, but rendering them convincing is eternally problematic. One of my purposes in constructing this biography is to create a discussion of Eileen's work, an examination that might reassess its impact and its worth. Obviously, I remain convinced of its originality, individuality and uniqueness, and I intend in these pages to illustrate these qualities, and to reconstruct other examples of her work. This has become possible only because of the journals and letters her mother kept so carefully, sealed, unthumbed, undisturbed in an attic box.

Such a project is rendered doubly problematic when we remember that Eileen McHugh's personal ambition was to be forgotten and to leave no personalised mark. Surely, then, this new fame has placed her memory into an uncomfortable limbo, a state that she herself would not have sought. Surely an enduring celebrity would have been the last thing desired by an artist who strove to achieve the ephemeral, the purely instantaneous anonymity of permanent non-existence. These are serious and important considerations, of course. But I will argue that Eileen's goals were dictated by her concept of what was possible. I will suggest that if she had shared the privilege of a different family environment or birthright, or even a different educational experience, then her attitude to her work may have been transformed. After all, Eileen would not have been the first artist to have pursued the ephemeral, only to find it achieving its own permanence. What do we now think that Duchamp was doing with his Fountain, for example? With our hindsight we know that eventually he reproduced it!

The dilemmas posed by the apparently random interaction between artistic motive and achievement have been repeatedly voiced. Though *Eileen McHugh: A Life Remade* certainly began as a project to reconstruct a life, the inseparability of the artist from her art means that merely relating events leads directly into critical appraisal of her creativity. Ironically, I cannot answer the criticisms that arise, for there is no material evidence for the stance I have now adopted, except for Eileen's own words, here published for the first time. I cannot answer the questions posed, and neither can Eileen McHugh, since her artistic personality ceased to exist decades ago. Eventually history decides and, in Eileen's case, history has bestowed an institutional permanence via popularity of its own accident.

Marion McHugh would surely have had her view but deciphering what this might have been is a route full of wrong turns, cul-de-sacs and, eventually, fantasy. On most days, Marion believed her daughter had been killed in an accident. On other days, she was convinced it was no accident and believed that Eileen had killed herself. In moments of lucidity, she might even admit that she simply did not know what happened. At other times, she bowed to what surely is the truth, but then she never did open those crucial letters, only some of which had actually come from her daughter. My hope is that this work may go some way towards addressing and illuminating Eileen's life, so these points and others will be addressed. But, rest assured, neither life nor art will admit answers, only motives, and these, still disputed, will be forever debatable.

Eileen McHugh is one of those rare figures who is well known and unknown at the same time, a brand name not a person, a product not an experience. How many people at breakfast associate the family name on the cereal box with

Malthusian philosophy that demanded the creation of a food with no nutrition in order to reduce sex-drive? And how many of us would dream of vacuuming the floor with a Spangler? Eileen might be known for nothing more than “*He’s on the other line...*”, but there is more to her work than this single, iconic piece. So it is thus time to put the record straight by recreating and then displaying the artist’s life and work, thus permanently and justly associating her name with her achievements.

A biography of an icon, however, must never be a mere event. It must grasp a status demanded by its subject and inhabit that citadel throughout. So, in the case of my efforts on behalf of Eileen McHugh, let me fail from the start, since she has now become so well known, so obviously recognised and widely described that I, from my relative obscurity, could never even aspire to such status. At best, I can be a medium through which Eileen’s work can be revealed.

It is over thirty years since Eileen McHugh last worked. For most of those years, her name would hardly even have registered in the memories of her former neighbours. In some ways, she may even have been labelled as better forgotten. She lived in a pre-internet era, and so never contributed to social media, never owned a mobile phone, never owned a credit card and so left neither a transaction trace nor a download history. She did not even own a camera for most of her life, so pictures of her exist largely in other people’s memories. A life so recent was thus unknown in our times at the dawn of my interest in reimagining her work.

It might be legitimately asked if anything remains to be said about a figure such as Eileen. Received opinion is that she left no work, desired no legacy, despised the very

concept of permanence, rejected longevity and treated life itself with apparent contempt. These assertions, I will argue, remain true, but the reality was considerably more complex, and thus of interest. For me, personally, this reconstruction of Eileen has been a voyage of discovery via the memories of those who knew her, and it is this journey I seek to share. No matter how anonymously we choose to live, our very existence inevitably leaves its imprint in the crushable fabric of life, and forms moulds that can be refilled into recreated form.

Talent, in itself, is already success, and recognition confirms talent. Ideas are in themselves achievements, but when the ideas are born of great talent, it is almost inevitable that they will capture attention and, like floating cream, rise to achieve the prominence and status they deserve. And even when such ideas possess no physical existence or expression, if they be the product of genius, they will prevail and ultimately emerge to demand recognition. Such was the process by which Eileen McHugh became a household name, despite her complete lack of physical legacy to advertise her genius.

And given the prominence of her signature piece, it is now essential that someone attempts to reconstruct the body of her other work. Remaking the products of Eileen's undoubtedly fertile imagination, however, poses greater problems than reassembling the little we know of her creative life. Though she did leave us copious descriptions of some pieces, most had to be re-imagined through the memories of those who saw them, sometimes at the very instant they were created, for in many cases that is as long as they existed. That she destroyed most of what she produced is now common knowledge and, as a reader of this critical biography, you may legitimately ask what now

can be authentic in a corpus of work which only exists in modern reconstruction? My answer will be revealed as the biography proceeds, but at the outset I need to stress the importance in this process of Eileen McHugh's own notebooks, which have come into my possession only since the recent death of her mother.

Never before have we had the privilege of seeing the sculptor's work from the perspective of her own thoughts, her own choices, inspirations and justifications. I discovered the texts, which were never released by Marion McHugh during her lifetime, in a forgotten box of personal effects that had not been touched by anyone since it was lodged with the owners of the care home where she spent the last years of her life. Marion McHugh had not deliberately hidden the notebooks, nor had she destroyed them, so one must conclude that her intention in preserving them had been to share them. Marion's state of mind, her incapacitating dementia and latterly her struggle with Parkinson's Disease probably meant that, by the time I began visiting her, she had merely forgotten the notebooks had ever existed.

It was just a few years ago that Eileen McHugh's legacy changed my own life. By chance, after contact with Marion's carers during her final months in the care home, I was presented with that box of memorabilia. Inside I stumbled across what I then believed was the only item of Eileen's work still in existence. For some unknown, unconscious reason, I decided not to throw it and the other contents of that private box into the plastic bin liners that were rapidly filling with Marion's few, but unwanted possessions. And so "*He's on the other line...*" came to the world's attention. This work, alongside assembled memories from the single shoebox that Marion had brought

from the house she vacated, the house that had been sold to fund her care, were passed to me as the only possessions she retained. And when I took that now fabled object in my hand, its contents struck a previously un-played chord and thus demanded their own preservation. Perhaps it was the immediate sense of genius, an implicit but vivid recognition of genuine talent that immediately imprinted on my consciousness. I decided to keep it for whatever frivolous reason and the rest is now mere history. As a result of keeping this apparently trivial object, Eileen McHugh's name just a year later had become pure currency, exchangeable anywhere. It is my sincere belief that my reconstructions of work from the notebooks will also remake the future, assuring her legacy and confirming her genius.

But given that Eileen McHugh's personal ambition was to be forgotten and to leave no mark, surely, then, this new fame has placed her memory into an uncomfortable limbo, a state that she herself would not have sought. But here, in *Eileen McHugh: A Life Remade*, this re-examination and reconstruction of her work, let me assert my belief that any art must become the property of its audience once the creator has given it an existence. It is the artworks themselves that are communicated via the artist's ideas, and then these concepts, which now have lives of their own, enter a form of independent public ownership, so they can be legitimately examined, repeated and even remade. Once created, they own their existence and retain their right to that life, their internal meaning remaining their own property.

Eileen McHugh was forever burdened by meaning, her short burst of creativity stacked with experience, her imagination emotional and vivid. If fame had come earlier,

during her short creative lifetime, her story would now surely be altogether different. Inescapable and irreversible is the fact of her cessation of activity, aged just twenty-four, having received no recognition, fame, wealth or, arguably, even contentment. But like all great artists, it falls to her followers, her devotees, her survivors, whose lives have been enriched by the power of her vision, to ponder what might have been and to raise her legacy to the stature it deserves

Who knows what she might have produced had she not achieved her apparent goal of becoming unknown? What might Schubert have composed if he had lived as long as Brahms? How might Raphael have represented the world had he survived into Mannerism? And what would Owen have written about had he outlived Armistice Day? In the case of Eileen McHugh, it could be argued that she achieved the anonymity she desired. But here I intend to question this view, to demonstrate that the young artist's vision was coloured by the deprivations of her environment and that her creativity did conceive of the permanence that it has since achieved. After inheriting her notes, sketchbooks and journal, I can shed new light on what she might have achieved and, indeed, they have illuminated the manuscript of an artistic life story as yet untold. It is not often that a household name belongs to a person unknown and I hope to put flesh onto these unclaimed bones and answer the question of where her work might have travelled if she had attained a longer creative life, one that might even have reached middle-age.

This and other questions have been at the core of my work. Through forensic and painstaking research, I have reassembled detail of the artist's life and have reconstructed many of her lost works, a catalogue of which is in

preparation and will be published alongside this biography. The work's very nature, of course, means that none of it can be described as *original*, in the sense that it comes to us directly from the artist's own hand. We can have no problem with this, however, especially when we cannot be sure whose brushstrokes painted a canvas from the studio of an old master, or which particular printer was responsible for etching a plate, or even which unrecorded editor created that now famous line. Art is in the communicated idea and its formulation, and these can be appreciated in the work of Eileen McHugh as completely as they might be for any artist, alive or dead, private or public. It is the art that lives on, not the artist. Music lingers while its composers decompose.

But also, by its very nature, Eileen McHugh's work challenges our very understanding of what is original, since from the outset she sought to redefine our perception and experience when we view a work of art. In a sense, she became the ultimate denouement of the arts, Dadaist by achievement as well as ideology, in that she wanted all of us to become participants in the process of creation, to remake the object itself. In her version of reality, it is not the product of the artistic process that matters, but the process by which our attention comes to rest on a form, on an object we are invited to see. It is not the object itself which forms her art, but the experience of attention diverted and focused, however momentarily or ephemerally. It was that moment, when perception is possibly changed, that she explored. Objects we would have normally not even noticed thus become, by virtue of the artist's vision, objects of our concentration, perhaps interest, perhaps not. But our lives have been changed by the encounter, and that cannot be denied. I hope here to lead the reader along the pathways of

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