FINDINGS ISSUE NO. 1

FINDINGS IS A NEW PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL DEDICATED TO PUBLISHING THE WORK OF EMERGING CREATIVE ARTS ACADEMICS, WITH A FOCUS ON THE AREAS OF FINE ART AND DESIGN.

EXEGESES BY:

SASKIA MORRIS
JULIE MONRO-ALLISON
MATHEW JONES
JEN VALENDER
AMBER MOFFAT
ALIRA CALLAGHAN
CLAUDIA CAPORN
EMMA NIXON
CLARE LONGLEY

ISSN 2981-9431

Published by The Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools

Cover Design: Nina Gibbes

First published 2023

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The editors of Findings acknowledge the Traditional
Custodians of the different lands on which we work,
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Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

https://acuads.com.au/findings/

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Findings

a journal of practise-based exegetical writing by
Australian fine art and design post graduates

issue #1

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About *Findings*

Findings is a new peer-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing the work of emerging creative arts academics, with a focus on the areas of fine art and design. The motivation for establishing *Findings* was the recognition that, each year, numerous excellent research projects are completed by creative practitioners in a tertiary education context, but the written, exegetical portion of their research – unlike the creative output, which may be presented in a gallery – rarely meets the wider public that it deserves. The title of the journal, *Findings*, speaks to the multiple and diverse insights that creative practitioners generate through their research processes.

Hosted by ACUADS, *Findings* was established by a group of academics working across a range of art and design schools in 2022 (including Curtin University, University of New South Wales, Southern Cross University, RMIT University, Queensland University of Technology, and Monash University). These academics have worked individually with the contributing writers to support them through the peer-review process and develop a portion of their recently completed honours, masters, or PhD exegesis for publication.

Findings editorial board comprises Tim Gregory, University of New South Wales; Wes Hill, Southern Cross University; Kathleen Horton, Queensland University of Technology; Helen Hughes, Monash University; Astrid Lorange, University of New South Wales; Tara McDowell, Monash University; and Francis Russell, Curtin University.

Arresting the Echo: Allegories of Printmaking in Voice Recordings and Performing Mourning

Saskia Morris

adapted from BA Hons (Visual Art) exegesis: “Arresting the Echo: Acknowledging Loss in the Disembodied Present.” School of Art & Design; Australian National University 2021.

contact@saskiamorris.com

Abstract

The memory of loss hums through the making of prints—it is key to techniques of pulling images in ink away from wood blocks, etching plates and silkscreens. In this essay, I describe how my time making prints led me to work with audio recordings to address mourning and wider feelings of loss. To do this, I position all recordings of impressions, whether visual or audio, as an echo of a living body by recalling matrixes used for image production. Applying such a framework prepared me to make *Arresting the Echo* (2021), a suite of three performances that use vocalisations to perform mourning rituals within the isolation of pandemic lockdowns. Here, I use examples from those performances alongside the works of both voice and print artists to focus on what I see as three tenets of working with prints and recordings: a composition of individuals or layers; the recorder as an empathy apparatus; and recordings as an echo.

Arresting the Echo: Allegories of Printmaking in Voice Recordings and Performing Mourning

A print is the echo of a loss, an impression of a woodblock, etching plate, silkscreen or stone. It is a copy of an absent body, the memory of a touch—the pressure of being pushed together and then lifted apart. In this essay, I actively draw out the connections between my training in printmaking and my use of the recorded voice to create *Arresting the Echo* (2021), a suite of three performances that use vocalisations to perform mourning rituals within the isolation of the pandemic lockdowns. Here, I use examples from those performances alongside the works of voice and print artists, and theorists, to focus on three underlying allegories of working with prints and recordings. They are: a composition of individuals or layers; the recorder as an empathy apparatus; and recordings as an echo. I position all recordings of impressions, visual or audio, as an echo of a living body by recalling a matrix—meaning something from which another originates. I extend these allegories to recordings of the voice as a material which both broadcasts the original body and which overcome spatial restrictions by being amplified and recorded.

While the project was cocooned in contemporary concerns about lost voices, land, and lives, the fundamental task of the three performances was to practise a methodology of removal and presence. This consideration went through many incarnations, but ultimately my practice became focussed on the capacity of a voice to embody loss and on the gendered implications of using voice and performing mourning. This was influenced by two events. Firstly, the *2021 March 4 Justice*, a coordinated protest across forty cities in Australia that followed the lack of federal government response to the alleged rape of political staffer Brittany Higgins in Parliament House and the historical allegations of rape made against former Attorney General Christian Porter. Here, the alienation experienced by sexual assault victims was disrupted by the collective voice chanting, “We believe.” Secondly, the sudden loss of my grandmother, and my family’s extended efforts to care for her and mourn her loss from across closed state borders. The pandemic, its necessary lockdowns and the impact on all collective rituals were experienced in comparable ways by many families who lost loved ones and were required to find ways to sit with uncertainty—both isolated and together.

The resulting body of work, *Arresting the Echo* (2021), comprises three filmed performances that employ a set of specially devised apparatuses that repeat and transmute a recording. In these works, the main matrix was a conversation my brother had recorded with my grandmother several years before her illness. I did not listen to the recording initially. Instead, I had the recordings transcribed. I selected a story from the transcript where my grandmother recalls how she learned to treat my grandfather's sore throat with a tincture recipe, told to her by another woman looking to soothe her preacher husband. "Here am I, pouring out my heart to this lady," the transcript read, "and she said, well when my husband goes preaching I give him this little bottle of cider vinegar, lemon juice and honey."

In this anecdote, I found an example of medicinal care that was deeply involved in upholding the power structure of *whose* voice is heard/amplified?. In the story, my grandfather holds a speaking role, but my grandmother cannot identify with someone who uses their voice that much. Instead, there appears an underlying camaraderie between women in fortifying the voice of a man. Shortly before she passed, my grandmother lost the use of her voice, which now only exists in recordings. Just as every print implies an absent block, plate or silkscreen they also imply an absent artist making those marks. Similarly, every recording I made implied this original recording and, consequently, the absence of her voice.

A Composition of Individuals or Layers

A printmaker composes by seeing the individual in the crowd. Knowing the power of layer upon layer, they build up an image made of individual components. Understanding the potential impact of one poster on the street, they make an edition. I began my investigation into the recorded voice on 15 March 2021 at the *March 4 Justice*. As I stood on the sloping greens of Federation Mall, facing the flying flag above Australia's parliament and joining the crowd yelling, "We believe." I knew that no one was listening to me individually. Instead, I knew that if anyone were to listen they would hear a sea of voices. I recorded the sound of the crowd and returned with it to the studio. Like the uncovered conversation recording of my brother and grandmother, I began repeatedly working with the recording of the crowd, copying the sound and replaying it to produce new works.

Figure 1: Kiki Smith, *All Souls*, screenprint on handmade Thai paper, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This conflicting sense of holding agency whilst being lost in an assembly recalled the paradox between isolation and kinship I was experiencing in mourning. In *The Contemporary Print*, Susan Tallman discussed a similar reaction to repetition in American artist Kiki Smith's *All Souls* (1988)—a construction of 36 sheets of translucent paper depicting many splotchy screen-printed babies overlayed and ordered across the joined sheets **(fig. 1)**. Tallman writes, "while there is always a temptation to read insistent repetition as a deliberate invocation of automation, Smith's prints hark back to an older, more mystical tradition in which each act of repetition is a new statement of respect and creation" (Tallman 1996, 210–11).

Each layer in Smith's work is an individual child, the combination of which inspires awe of the vastness of the human population and the weirdness of being unique within that. Here, individual agency is not just a layer to be archaeologically revealed. Instead, it shows a print's capacity to mutually reference the individual and the mass simultaneously. By being lost in the mass of the crowd, each individual is at once obscured and highlighted.

I aimed to replicate this paradox in the first *Arresting the Echo* performance, *Empathy Apparatus One: A System for Embodying the Echo* **(fig. 2)**. I returned to the site of the march at Australia's Parliament House and attempted to repeat the exact words of my grandmother's story amongst the

Figure 2: Saskia Morris, *Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus One: A System for Embodying the Echo,* video still, 2021.

crowd recording by using a Talk Box. A Talk Box is a vocal effects instrument traditionally used in funk and hip-hop production. Appearing like a guitar pedal with a two-metre tube coming from it, a Talk Box sends sound into a player's mouth via a tube that acts as an artificial larynx and allows the player to manipulate the incoming noise by shaping their mouth. Peter Frampton described the embodying potential of the tool in this way:

> If someone was singing I could actually have their voice. I'd have their voice mic split and come out of the PA and then come through into the amp through the Talk Box through my mouth. I could affect [their] voice while [they're] singing and it'll be an addition to [their] voice (Tompkins 2010, 134).

In my experimental performance, I could almost form words in the densest areas of crowd response, but the underlying claps and hollers gave my voice a crackly and demonic quality. When the crowd hushed to listen to the single speaker, I could not articulate anything. When I presented a film of the performance to some colleagues, they were reminded of a 'caught' feeling in the throat and how their voice changes when they are anxious to make a point. This empathetic reaction helped me decide that the words I spoke did not need to be understood. Instead, by matching the cries from the crowd

Figure 3: Bushra Mir, Awaaz, 2019, Installation in *Can you hear my voice*, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Photograph: Lucy Foster.

with my attempt to form words, I embodied being an active presence while failing to be heard.

By including my body in a circuit with machines, the work pointed towards a relationship between being in control as an individual and being controlled by a system. To me, the pipe inserted into the throat both references the force-feeding of suffragettes and the feeding tube wilfully refused by my grandmother while she could still communicate. The disintegration of a unified voice is a theme teased out in Kasmiri artist Bushra Mir's video *Awaaz* (2019) **(fig. 3)**. The video samples Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Haider* (2014)—an adaptation of Hamlet set against the Kashmir conflict in mid-1990s Srinagar. Mir captures the protagonist in an anarchic jest, performing a protest to a gathered crowd on the street with a broken noose around his neck. He holds the noose's frayed end to his mouth, and asks, "Hello? Mic testing 1, 2, 3. Hello?" Mir remixes this, by duplicating the clip across a large screen, layering the voice so that it at first echoes itself and then blooms into a towering audio-wall of feedback. As Shaad D'Souza wrote in a review for *Frieze*, "Haider's request to form an alliance with the viewer has been literally overcome by repetition" (D'Souza 2021). Through layering the visual and audio information, each repetition is a new statement of not being heard. The more voices repeat the line, the less intelligible the words are. Yet the visibility

and audibility of these layers retain a focus on individual agency, what it means to be an individual in a conflict or a voice in a crowd.

Arresting the Echo was inspired by the ability of the works by Smith and Mir to maintain individual agency across repetition and layering. This extends to my costume in the performance. After I had selected the story from the transcript, I found that the repetition of the words was the closest I had come to performing a ritualised mourning act. Like a chant, the rhythm of the words made the situation of loss more bodily and real. Across the unsewn dress panels, I repeatedly printed these words in lemon juice—a playful invisible ink that is permanently revealed when heat is applied. As I revealed the text with an iron, I discovered that writing words I couldn't see was unlike writing visibly. The act required me to have confidence that each word would eventually become legible and that my meaning would appear. That merger of trust and frustration became characteristic of the contradiction between control and liberation that I deploy across my performances.

The Recorder as an Empathy Apparatus

The use of recording apparatus to create space for empathy, for propaganda, or resistance, is key in my approach. History is scattered with stories of printing presses being the engines fuelling changes in social empathy. Many printed posters have, for instance, become iconic for their ability to effectively call a nation to arms. Coincidingly, posters, pamphlets and paste-ups are equally known for their association with dissonance and counter-cultural movements. As Sheila Shulman is quoted as saying in *A Darn Good Idea: Feminist Printers and the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain*, "we were convinced that if we were to be heard, if our words were to be published, we would have to control the process of publishing. And for us at the time that meant learning to print" (Baines 2020, 81–82). I saw each instrument I used in my performances as a broadcasting tool, similar to that of a printing press.

All the systems I developed aimed to elicit empathy by exercising an emotional state designed to publicly counteract silencing. In the second performance, *Empathy Apparatus Two: A System for Amplifying the Echo*, I recorded myself reciting the story on a tape dictaphone and replayed this excerpt through a crocheted breastplate of wire connected to booming

Figure 4: Saskia Morris, *Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus Two: A System for Amplifying the Echo*, video still, 2021.

speakers in an exhausted quarry **(fig. 4)**. I imagined the wire as another vibrating larynx, knotted in a continual loop until I had shaped it into a tall collar with flared sides. When worn, the collar restricted my throat, but the glinting copper appeared archaic and regal. In this performance, I aimed to emphasise my grandmother's inability to repeat herself, as it were, by getting the system to repeat me. Fittingly, viewers theorised it as an empathy and grief machine, discussing that the first person many of us know to die is a grandparent. This addressed my aim, to explore, through the concept of volume, the difference between my unaided voice and the machine's ability for amplification.

To economist and social theorist Jeremy Rifkin, empathy is an evolutionary response to danger and acts of mourning are the way that warnings of danger are shared across groups. He states, "empathy is grounded in the acknowledgement of death and the celebration of life and rooting for each other to flourish and be" (Rifkin 2010). Today, the historic association of print media with empathetic social change is a kind of aesthetic strategy in its own right. For example, one of Australia's most recognisable artworks of the last few years is Peter Drew's *Aussie* series of 2021 **(fig. 5)**. These screen-printed and hand-coloured posters reproduce archival mugshots of Australian-born people subjected to the White Australia Policy. Only fully eliminated

Figure 5: Peter Drew, *Aussie Posters*, screen printed posters, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

in the 1970s, the White Australia Policy limited non-British immigration and prohibited Australian-born people who were classed as other than Australian, because of their perceived race, from returning home if they left the country. Pasted on city walls nationally, Drew's posters re-emphasised the human individuals affected by decades of racist policy and successfully exposed that history.

Rifkin's evolutionary theory of empathy, however, is embedded in communication technology's paradoxical ability to bring global communities closer together and create greater capacities for the destruction of the environment. Brian Holmes draws on Rifkin in *Empathy Machine: Emergent Organs for the Eco-Body?* Holmes writes:

> [Rifkin's] key idea is that every expansion of the productive apparatus of civilisation necessarily brings new communication techniques, which serve to control and coordinate the new production machines, while simultaneously enlarging and deepening our capacity for empathy (Holmes 2017, 43).

Holmes describes these systems that contradictorily control and incite empathy as "empathy machines" (Holmes 2017). Empathy machines are aesthetic systems that become "the expressive instruments of liberation"

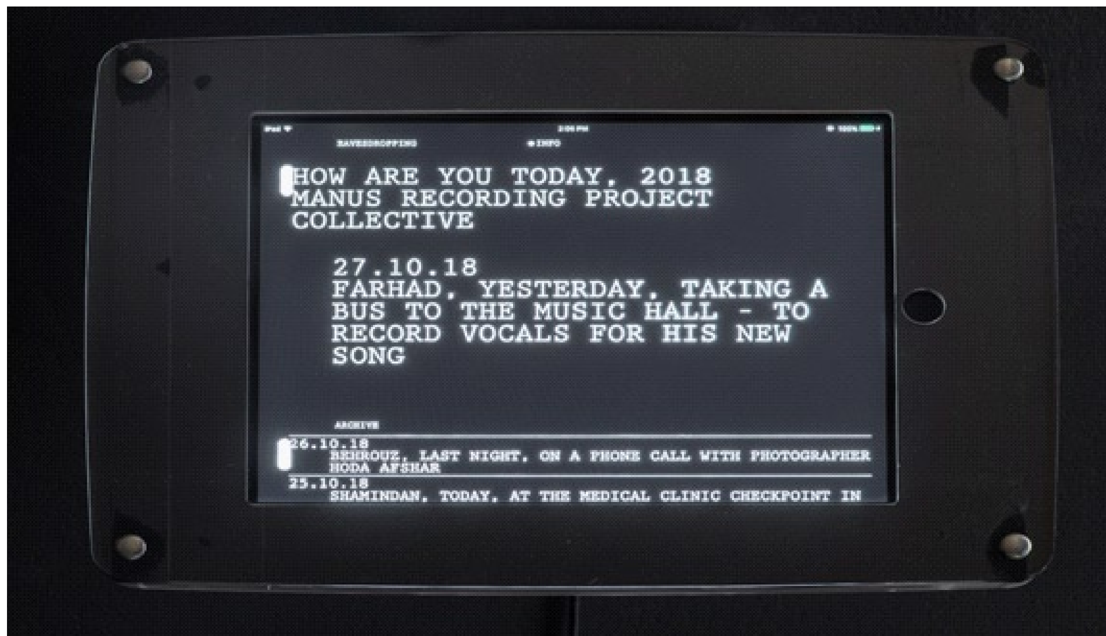

Figure 6: Manus Recording Project Collective, *how are you today*, 2018, Installation in *Eavesdropping*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Photograph: Christian Capurro.

while being employed by the systems of oppression (Holmes 2017, 46). To Holmes, empathy machines dwell in contradiction. Fundamentally, the same technology's ability to bring global communities closer together has the capacity to create greater destruction and silencing.

The Manus Recording Project Collective used voice recordings to undermine one such silencing. In 2018, the collective invited six men detained while seeking asylum on Manus Island by the Australian Government to record their activities, surroundings and thoughts. For the fourteen weeks *how are you today* was exhibited as part of *Eavesdropping* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, one of the men would send a recording 'onshore' to be played in the gallery for the day **(fig. 6)**. In a second iteration of the project that can still be listened to online, *where are you today*, subscribers received a text message with a link to a recording every day for four weeks. The unedited recordings are mundane and heartbreaking direct impressions of the men's time, while some feature spoken reflections from the men, others are simply the noises of cooking or music being played. Project curators James Parker and Joel Stern observed that "ten minutes spent listening reflected ten minutes spent recording. This sharing of time was powerful for the way it also made legible the twenty-three hours and fifty minutes of every day of incarceration that

went unshared” (Parker and Stern 2020, 34). This mode of one-to-one reproduction and the resulting opportunity to listen is as much about resistance as the state’s silencing and removal of people offshore and out of mind is about power.

In each of these works by the Manus Recording Project Collective, the technology used does not intend to force a feeling or a response. Instead, they aim to use broadcasting apparatuses to create space for an audience to sit with another’s experience. As Holmes describes, empathy is “not an endpoint, but the condition of possibility for a response, an engagement, or action, whether directly or at a distance” (Holmes 2017, 42). Guy Cools, the author of *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art,* argues that the work contemporary artists do in expressing, exposing and considering mourning in the public realm allows others to better access their own mourning. Cools was deprived of mourning his father’s sudden loss when the adults in his life decided the funeral was not an appropriate place for a child. Within the experience of both his life and his studies of contemporary art practices, Cools rationalises mourning as related to but distinct from grief. “Grief is the interiorized state,” he writes. “Mourning is the necessary process of exteriorisation. Grief is private, while mourning is public” (Cools 2021, 10). For Cools, if the labour and process of mourning are not duly performed it impacts our ability to absorb and realise the loss. The emphasis is not on a lone ritual but on the ability of artists to publicly share that appeal for empathy. In *Arresting the Echo*, each *Empathy Apparatus* is characterised by a similar limitation. Each performance is a preconceived action where the sole expectation is for me to recite or listen. By repeatedly returning to my transcribed matrix and speaking, recording, repeating and finally listening to these recordings throughout the performances, I aimed to defiantly take up space and hence create a tender environment for mourning inspired by print reproduction.

The Recordings as an Echo

Just as each print is a reflection of its absent matrix, each voice recording speaks of the absent recording device. In her writing and practice, Deidre Brollo investigates the complications of recalling what is lost as core to ideas of printmaking. She writes, “words such as ‘imprint’ and ‘impression’, [are]

Figure 7: Francis Barraud, *His Master's Voice*, oil on canvas, 1989. Wikipedia Commons.

terms reminiscent of the fundamental language of printmaking, creat[ing] a sense of the past remaining visible in traces left being, of experience literally leaving its mark upon us" (Brollo 2018, 196). To Brollo, this synergy between print media and our conceptualisation of memory captures the anxiety of forgetting, the fear that without a physical trace "no memory is possible" (Brollo 2018, 197). Accordingly, I began to build the idea of a sound recording as a perpetual echo. I imagined the recording mechanically arresting the listener and the recorded speaker in mourning, stuck in a moment of time without letting them move forward. As well as being founded in Brollo's theorisation of print media, this idea was inspired by the story behind one image repeated across the history of sound recording. The instantly recognisable trademark of HMV—a dog sitting attentively at a phonograph—is famously based on a Francis Barraud painting of Nipper the Terrier listening to a recording widely believed to be that of his (recently deceased) master's voice (Lichtman 2000) **(fig. 7)**. The dog is neither sad nor confused, he just sits attentively. This soon became one of the most repeated images in the world, an icon still stamped on technology and recordings a century later. While the story has been disputed, the dog's absorption in the echoing voice of his master resonates through *Arresting the Echo*.

In the final performance, *Empathy Apparatus Three: A System for Responding to the Echo*, I listened to my grandmother's voice for the first

Figure 8: Saskia Morris, *Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus Three: A System for Responding to the Echo* (video still), 2021.

time since it left her and document my response to introduce a generative act **(fig. 8)**. Without listening to it, I had the original conversation recording between my brother and grandmother pressed on a vinyl record. As I listened to the original conversation for the first time, I slowed the silence between sentences by walking my fingers across its surface to create space for me to speak. In the documentation of this performance, my grandmother's voice is audible but mine is not, masked by a rising tone. Instead, the lasting sound heard is the needle of the record caught in its groove, running continuously and highlighting an absence of sound rather than its presence.

By operating on the paradoxical combination of absence and presence, any recording medium represents a tactile crossing of the void between alive and dead—an echo from one state to another. Art historian and theorist Clare Humphries has associated mourning with recording media by reapproaching Walter Benjamin's theorisation of aura, most famously articulated in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Humphries' updated understanding "germinated as [she] handled personal objects passed down from my deceased family and was struck by their potency" (Humphries 2018, 155). Humphries focuses on the aura's ability "to draw our attention to the moment of transition between two technologies," identifying the lingering allure of technologies that are dying or being made

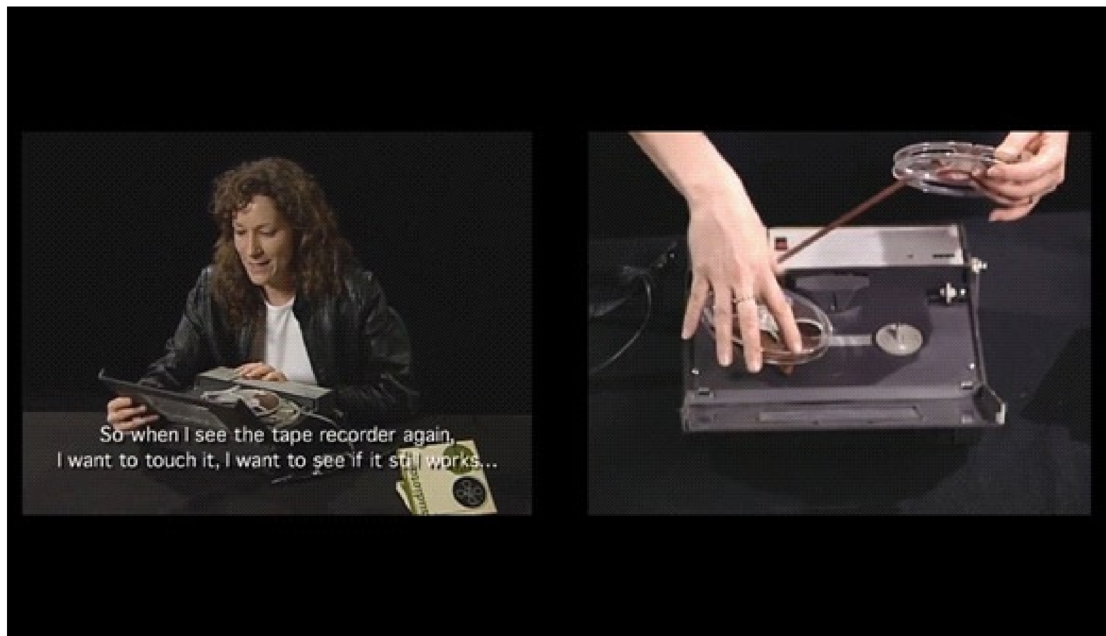

Figure 9: Atom Egoyan, Hors d’usage: le récit de Marie-France Marcil, Ego Film Arts, Collection of Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2002.

redundant and recognising this allure as a quality that is traded down through declining media (Humphries 2018, 157). While Benjamin considered that the aura is made redundant by photomechanical reproduction, new at the time in 1935, we have since seen a related sense of nostalgia thrive in association with many more technologies of reproduction. As Humphries says, it is “associated with a desire for something that is on the verge of loss or appears unrecoverable” like “vinyl records, letterpress printing and the Polaroid photograph” (Humphries 2018, 158). The imprinted object, whether it be a photograph, a mark made or a recorded voice, enacts the anxiety of the possibility of forgetting and draws “attention to absence” rather than attempting to recreate something lost (Brollo 2018, 203). By revisiting these obsolete media we can at once reference the liveliness of the echo they capture and acknowledge their anachronisms.

At first, I imagined lingering in mourning as claustrophobic, a recorded sound repeating and unable to fade out. However, after deciding that I needed to create space for empathy, I shed the feeling of being trapped and reframed active engagement with the echoing voice of the deceased as an act of memory—staying with the loss. This reframes me as taking action, acknowledging that the recorded voice is both present and past—an impression of an original voice spoken that recognises that the speaker is

absent. Director Atom Egoyan drew upon a similar notion of aura when he asked Montrealers who owned reel-to-reel recorders to share their stories. The resulting two-channel installation, *Hors d'usage* (2002), is a collection of stories about lost voices, absent operators and recordees **(fig. 9)**. In one testimony, a woman sits with her mother's recorder in front of her and recalls memories of it from childhood while reenacting the ritual of loading the tape reel as she remembered her mother did. These shared memories expose the aura that Humphries identifies, the reel-to-reel recorders hold the same "semiotic structure of reproductive representation [that] engages an interchange between presence and absence" (Humphries 2018, 159). Consequently, print media and recording technologies pay attention to erasure in a way that is not defiant but lucid.

Conclusion: a locked groove

As these three performances developed, print histories, practices and methodologies slowly emerged as their underlying influence. The soft paradoxes that print presents as both a new occurrence and the echo of an absence prepared me to expand this thought to other recording technologies. By grounding my thinking in print media in order to consider how to represent an individual and mass simultaneously, and explore how to work with the power of broadcasting technology to both liberate and oppress, and, finally, to experiment with catching and holding loss in isolation, my work aims to reject closure and conclusive responses that address how to mourn or how to use your voice.

This construction of machine and memory does not suggest that the impression's goal is to create a true copy of the moment with no malleability. That is as impossible as something dead returning. Instead, these machines make copies because they act in full knowledge of an original matrix's eventual loss. Each of the *Arresting the Echo* performances are framed by what is absent: the crowd at the *2021 March 4 Justice*, the land in the quarry, my grandmother.

In accepting the potential of oblivion, recording mediums stand with and against forgetting. In creative and generative attempts, my artworks both preserve the past and highlight the unavoidable impact we have on our own

memories. In *Arresting the Echo,* the artworks are an attempt to stay with the discomfort of loss, not erase its potential. In a profoundly material way, both a print and a recorded voice hold a life lived and also lost. Appropriately, the single image that captures *Arresting the Echo* for me is the continuously circling record still moving at the end of the final performance. Emitting a comforting crackling sound, the needle is caught in the silent loop at the end of the record, arresting the last echo of the recording.

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Method as Metaphor: Imagination, Art and the Gravid Body

Julie Monro-Allison

adapted from PhD (Visual Arts) exegesis: “Intracorporeal Entanglement, and other provocations of the gestating body.” School of Art and Design; Australian National University 2021.

Julie.Monro-Allison@anu.edu.au

Abstract

Gestation is a mode of existence in which one is physiologically and ontologically entangled with another being. It is a corporeal state characterised by movement, change and ambiguity, which, for the gravid woman, can facilitate a unique imaginative experience of her body. This paper is an exegetical account of my research into how bodily and imaginative experiences of gestation might be conveyed in drawing and textile sculpture. Adopting a practice-led research methodology and working with materials including cane, fabric, paper, ink and pencil, and techniques including weaving, netting, stitching, drawing and college, this investigation generated a mode of practice corresponding with the imaginative and corporeal experiences of the gravid body.

Method as Metaphor: Imagination, Art and the Gravid Body

Gestation is a mode of existence in which one is physiologically and ontologically entangled with another being, a corporeal state characterised by movement, change and ambiguity. Haploid gametes fuse, zygote cells divide and multiply, an embryo forms—microscopic and internal movements occur, perhaps experienced as a visceral sensation of fatigue or nausea, but otherwise hidden within the interior of the gravid body. It may be several months before the pregnancy becomes perceptible to others, when the contours of the gestating body swell and become rounder. Yet still there is hidden movement and change: the formation and growth of heart, lungs, brain, limbs, fingers, toes, eyes, teeth and hair; and the development of circulatory, immune and other bodily systems, as the body of the gravid woman gestates another body into existence.

For the gravid woman, these hidden movements and interior changes can facilitate a unique imaginative experience of her body. This proposition, along with two others, was central to my doctoral research into how the experience of gestation, at once both corporeal and imaginative, might be conveyed in drawing and textile sculpture. My research adopted a practice-led methodology which included working with materials such as cane, fabric, paper, ink and pencil, and techniques such as weaving, netting, stitching, drawing and collage. Through my investigation I developed of a mode of practice reflecting the simultaneous imaginative and corporeal experience of pregnancy, exemplified in the sculptural installation *The hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence (light unfurls)* (2021) **(fig. 1)**. This essay is an exegetical account of the research that led to the creation of this work.

The claim that imagination can be a significant element of gravid experience originates from my own experience of pregnancy. During my pregnancy I often imagined the interior of my body, more specifically, the interior of my womb. I do not remember imagining the interior of my body before becoming pregnant, and I did not continue to do so after giving birth. Envisaging the interior of my body was an imaginative practice directly connected to my state of gravidity. The space I imagined felt small and enclosed, yet was visually expansive and without boundaries, a space largely made up of shadows

Figure 1: Julie Monro-Allison, *The hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence (light unfurls),* 2021. Paper, 400 x 250 x 250 cm. Photo: Brenton McGeachie.

and of the softest of flesh – flesh so soft it is blood – and a sense of activity, though very little distinguishable movement. Perhaps surprisingly, I rarely imagined the embryo or foetus; rather, it was the impression of space that occupied my imagination.

Initially my research focused on conjuring that imaginary impression of interior bodily space in textile sculpture, in works that were shadowy and soft and full of space. I pieced together organza geometric shapes to make undulating, expanding surfaces, and experimented with woven cane and netted membranes **(fig. 2)**. As my investigation proceeded, however, my focus turned toward the imaginative and spatial aspects of sculptural practice. Informed by my experiences of domestic, civic and artistic space while undertaking fieldwork in Japan, I evolved a creative methodology around the idea of working from the imagination to make a work that does not come into complete existence and is not seen in its entirety until its in-situ installation. I propose that this method of working corresponds with the imaginative experience of gestation, of bringing another body into existence and not seeing it until it is born, and also corresponds with the unpredictability of pregnancy and birth, processes which, like creative processes, do not necessarily unfold as one imagines they will.

The metaphors employed to describe pregnancy often imagine the womb as having a spatial quality. Rebecca Whiteley observes that in the early Modern period there was a general understanding among the English population of the foetus in utero as a miniature human dwelling within a domestic environment; here, the foetus was thought of “as a houseguest, and the mother as both housewife and house” (Whiteley 2017, 20). Labour was understood as the neonate attempting to “escape” from a house that it had outgrown, with a live birth the outcome of a successful departure.

Jane Lymer notes that the perception of spaciousness within the womb is physiologically inaccurate. She explains that the embryo is folded into the cushion of the uterus leaving no void space within the womb at all:

> the womb, even the pregnant womb, never contains empty space, it is not a cavity, nor a receptacle, but rather layers of tissues that are capable of separation and can stretch and alter shape to encase growing matter, be that a foetus or a tumour (Lymer 2018, 23).

Figure 2: Julie Monro-Allison, *Cluster together, hold tight* (detail), 2019. Cane, string, various dims. Photo: Julie Monro-Allison.

In making this observation Lymer is addressing, and dismissing, the ideologically problematic metaphor of a woman as a container, her body and specifically her womb an empty and passive space for the actively growing foetus. The description of the womb not being a space but layers of tissue, however, challenged the imaginative impression I had of my womb as a shadowy, expansive space. That shadowy space was a space wholly of my imagination: it was a space imagined because it did not exist, not merely imagined because it could not be seen. My womb was not a space but layers of tissue: the interior bodily space that I imagined during my pregnancy did not correlate with the physiological reality of my body. I found that this newly gained knowledge, however, did not negate or diminish how intensely I imagined my womb as a shadowy space, even several years after giving birth. Rather, the strength of that vision transcended what I had read of the physiological reality. As I will demonstrate presently, the idea of imagining something that did not necessarily exist became a significant aspect of my investigation.

Historians of science note the potency of imagination and metaphor in how science is practiced and in how scientific theories are expressed. Donna Haraway contends that the paradigm shift that occurred in embryology in the twentieth century was contingent on the metaphors used to describe and communicate embryonic development (Haraway, 1976). From seventeenth century to the nineteenth century the embryo was likened to a miniature machine, and its development described as a mechanical process. However, confidence in the theory of mechanism began to falter in the late nineteenth century when experiments with sea urchin eggs showed embryos developing in ways that the mechanical metaphor could not accommodate. Despite these observations, the strength of the mechanistic paradigm persisted until embryologists began formulating alternate theories, expressed through new and alternate metaphors. These metaphors emphasised the forms, patterns and structures of embryos – coincidentally, the same elements that are emphasised and manipulated in creative practice.

Philip Ritterbush also maintains that imagination and expectation influence scientific observation, and result in visual representations of biological organisms that are inaccurate or misleading. Ritterbush notes the “exaggerated regularity” of Ernst Haeckel’s drawings of radiolaria

and contends that Haeckel's belief in the crystalline symmetry of biology influenced his drawn documentation of their forms. To demonstrate the inaccuracies of Haeckel's drawings, Ritterbush compares them with images of radiolaria produced by an electron microscope, a device he claims provides an "objective portrayal" (Ritterbush 1970, 311). The electron microscope, and other technologies of visualisation, Ritterbush claims, "guard against mistakes of interpretation" and "limit the scope for imaginative conjecture" (Ibid, 312-316). This praise of the electron microscope as an instrument of objectivity surprised me. When I examined the images with which Ritterbush illustrates his argument, I was reminded of the foetal "blur" Lisa Mitchell describes when viewing an ultrasound image, which is perhaps intelligible to the trained eye but no less the product of imagination, expectations and cultural positioning than any other image (Mitchell 2001, 3-4).

My initial investigations concentrated on evoking shadow and space, the foetal, or rather uterine, blur of my imagination. I made a spherical form from black organza, alternating pentagons and hexagons like a soccer ball, and stitching a thin gauge wire into the seams in an unsuccessful attempt to give definition and structure to the form. As I stitched, I thought about roundness and scale. The gestating body is rounded, as are stars and planets circling through the dark expanse of the cosmos, as are atoms circling their way through matter across the universe. Both stars and atoms exist on wildly exaggerated scales from our own; both are impossible for us to see without technological assistance. In the absence of such assistance, we approach these scales of existence, so different from our own, via our imagination. I imagine the starry cosmos and the atom as spaces: the atom a pale grey expanse, the cosmos a riot of distant stardust. On these scales, the manifestation of life, of biological existence, becomes something astonishing, improbable and wondrous.

I imagined a work that could be inhabited by the viewer or that the viewer could imagine themself being inside. I bought a bolt of black organza and cut out more hexagons and pentagons. This time I did not alternate the shapes but instead joined them arbitrarily. Stitching a thicker gauge wire into the seams succeeded in giving the geometric shapes more definition and the object a more sculptural form. I had thought the bolt of fabric would be sufficient to make a form on a scale matching an adult human body but ended

Figure 3: Julie Monro-Allison, *Untitled (black organza forms in studio),* 2018. Organza, each form approx. 100 cm dia. Photo: Julie Monro-Allison.

up with six segments each less than a metre in diameter. I experimented with placing the six segments in different configurations, finally settling on suspending the three larger forms and nestling the three smaller ones within them **(fig. 3)**. I could imagine the work on a larger scale, the organza forms spreading through space. Untrimmed stitching threads hung from the forms, thin tendrils of black, vestiges of biological generation on the geometrically multiplied forms. On several separate occasions people told me they associated the black of the organza with a malignant growth; the spread of a melanoma or something equally malevolent. I considered making the piece with white or cream organza, but pale organza is the traditional material of wedding gowns, an association I worried could be misconstrued in a work about gestation and reproduction.

The interplay of imagination, cultural expectations, art-making and gestation can be read in Paula Modersohn-Becker's painting *Self-portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Day* (1906)*.* Modersohn-Becker stands with her arms circling her round belly, wearing only a string of beads and holding a white cloth around

her hips. The muted tones of her skin are similar in tone to the speckled background against which she stands. I read her expression as still, observant and enigmatic; as well as possibly sad, possibly defiant. Rosemary Betterton and Anne Higonnet, among others, have noted that Modersohn-Becker was not pregnant when she painted this picture, despite her posture and the suggestive circle of her arms around her belly. Nor was the painting made on her sixth wedding day, but five years later, after she had left her marriage to dedicate herself to her vocation as an artist. Betterton describes the portrait as a "temporary moment of coherence" during a period of transition and upheaval in Modersohn-Becker's life and suggests that making the work was a device by which Modersohn-Becker was able to confront and reject the possibility of motherhood in favour of her identity as an artist (Betterton 1996, 32). *Self-portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Day* is a self-portrait operating in the realm of the imaginary—a creative negotiation of the possible and the impossible.

The creative negotiation of the possible and the impossible became a focus of my research during the time I spent undertaking fieldwork in Japan. I travelled to Kyoto to interview artist Machiko Agano, who creates large-scale textile installations with knitted monofilament and stainless-steel wire; or with silk organza, which floats through space or is held suspended within towering bamboo structures. Her installations catch the movements of the air and move along with it, making visible this otherwise invisible motion. I asked Agano about her working process when making large works. She told me she works in sections, one segment at a time, constructing the work from measurements and memories of the space in which it will be installed. She described holding an idea in her imagination and working from this imagined vision, noting that although the work itself can become very large, the fabrication is always at the scale of her hands. In most cases, the first time she sees the work in its entirety is its final installation for exhibition. Listening to Agano describe how she works from her imagination into the physical world and is not able to see her work as she makes it, I started contemplating the correlations between this method of working and the processes of gestation and birth. Just as the studio is a site of creation, the body of the gestating person is a site of creation; and like the large-scale installation, the conceptus can be imagined, but in many ways remains unknown until the moment of birth.

Florentien Verhage observes that gestation and birth are sometimes dismissed as metaphors for creativity because the gestating person is seen to have no active or direct participation, beyond the provision of her body, to the creative process of reproduction. Unlike the artist, who actively thinks and makes, the gestating person is seen as a “passive instrument”, who “does not really make the child: it is made within her” (Verhage 2013, 301). Acknowledging that the gestating woman, and especially the labouring/birthing woman, is not fully in control of the generative process, Verhage develops the idea of gestation as a mode of passive creativity, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s description of the artist as being open, attentive and non-intrusive – “part of the world just as any other object” (Verhage 2013, 307). The artist shapes the world while simultaneously being shaped by the world and the artwork is created through the interplay between painter and world. The relationship between artist and world is intersubjective, decentred and entwined. Verhage contends that the gestating woman has a similarly intersubjective, decentred and entwined relationship with the foetus within her body. She asserts that gestation and birth are creative processes and that the pregnant subject, like an artist, is a creative actor in these processes.

After my interview with Agano my investigation of imagined space evolved, away from seeking to depict an imagined space, and towards a practice methodology in which I would imagine and make a work without being able to see what I am making, in its entirety, until the work is installed for exhibition. The art making method would be a metaphor for gestation and birth. The work would be large in scale, reflecting the immense significance of pregnancy as a life-creating and life-changing process. Working in segments also offered a strategy for overcoming the problem of not having access to a large studio or storage space, as Agano had outlined in our conversation.

While in Kyoto I also interviewed textile curator Keiko Kawashima, who said that Japanese artists are like the magicians who pull hundreds of silk scarves from their smallest waistcoat pocket. Japanese artists, Kawashima told me, are accustomed to thinking of space as malleable from their daily experiences of transformation in their domestic spaces. She described how traditional Japanese homes are designed around a central main room, in which the family eats and spends most of its time. Futons are stored in cupboards and at night they are taken out and unrolled, transforming the room into

Figure 4: Julie Monro-Allison, *Faithless Litter* (installation view), 2018. Cane, various dims. Photo: Julie Monro-Allison.

a bedroom. This daily experience of spatial transformation, Kawashima claimed, trained artists to think of space as malleable and flexible from an early age and informs their approach to installation and exhibition design.

The risk of working solely from the imagination is, of course, that the installed and finished work might differ from – or, worse, fall short of – the imagined work. That a work does not materialise as imagined is characteristic of art practice more generally, at least in my experience. For example, one of the works I had made earlier in my research, *Faithless Litter* (2018), comprised of nine asymmetrical rounded forms, woven from cane **(fig. 4)**. The woven structures were open and light, yet despite this almost skeletal structure the cane forms succeeded in enclosing and defining a rounded, three-dimensional space **(fig. 5)**. When I moved the work from my studio to a larger space, however, the thin cane I had used did not define the internal space of the forms to the same extent. On a smaller scale, the risk of the work falling short of expectations is mitigated by being able to make it in advance. The risk is amplified, however, when adopting a methodology in which the work can only be completed during its final installation. The installation of the work, like birth, becomes a moment of reckoning where it is not possible to go back or to withdraw. I remembered my experience of giving birth, the paediatrician setting up the infant intensive care unit beside me after thirty or so hours of labour, and how without the care and medical resources I was privileged to receive, my child would not have survived his birth. I also remembered how, as the hours of labour stretched by, I experienced the sensation of occupying a shadowy space, very much like the shadowy space I had imagined earlier in my pregnancy, in an endless crevasse of pain.

In Japan I experienced James Turrell's *Backside of the Moon* (1999) prompted me to consider light and immersion in my research. *Backside of the Moon* is one of the six installations comprising the Benasse House Project on Naoshima Island, Japan. The work occupies a purpose-built wooden building designed by Tadao Ando. Only twelve people are admitted into the work at a time. I did not notice that the building had no windows while I was waiting in line, but, when it was my turn, the space I entered was pitch black. It was unlike any other darkness I had experienced; I could see nothing at all. "Hold your hand against the wall," advised the attendant, as I and the eleven other viewers stumbled in, one behind the other. Inside, the attendant directed

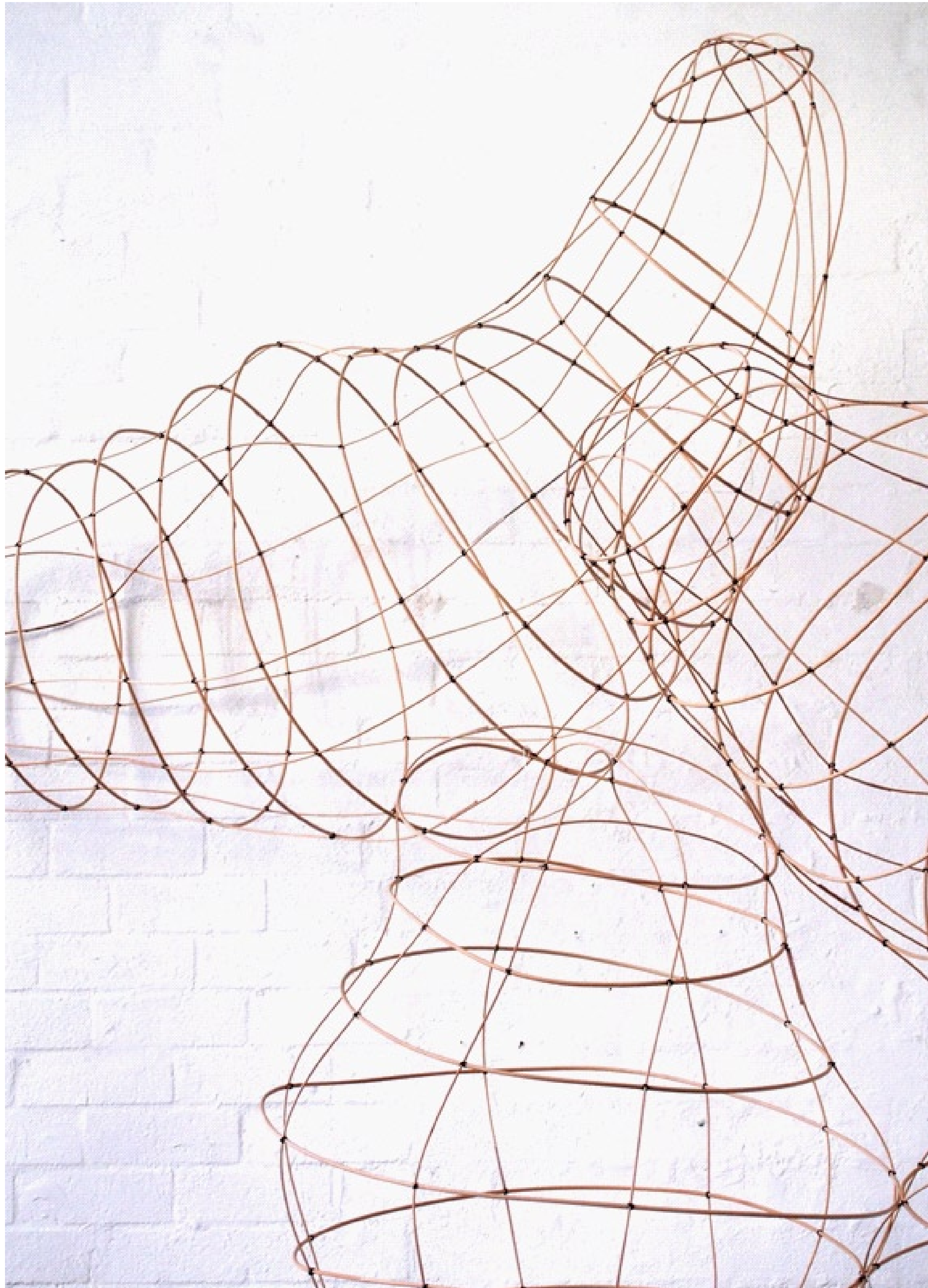

Figure 5: Julie Monro-Allison, *Faithless Litter* (detail), 2018. Cane, various dims. Photo: Julie Monro-Allison.

us to sit down, assuring us there was in fact a bench to sit on, built into the wall along which we had been feeling our way. She gave a long introduction in Japanese and then a shorter one in English: "Welcome, the installation experience lasts for about twelve minutes, look straight ahead." She was silent and we sat, staring into the darkness.

After a time, the darkness seemed to shift somehow, a barely perceptible alteration, very possibly imagined. I felt that the darkness into which I was looking had diminished a little, towards the middle perhaps, or was it more at the edges? We sat and looked. Yes, there was a change: I could see a rectangle, a dark rectangle, but its darkness differed in quality from the darkness all around. The attendant spoke again. "You can now see a shape at the end of the room, a rectangle, like a movie screen. The light in the room has not changed in the time you have been here: your eyes have adjusted. When you are ready, please stand and walk towards the light." The distance to the end of the room is about six metres and when we reach the end all twelve of us stand there together, delighted, reaching our hands into the milky, pearly, mysterious light we find there at the end of the room. Even up close we cannot see that the light has any edges, we cannot see where the light is coming from. The light feels enchanted, it seems to come from nowhere. When we turn back the room is now visible, still dark but bathed in the soft low light. We can see the perimeter of the room, we can see our attendant and her gentle, kind smile. We walk back through the milky light; we can make our way easily now. We go out into the afternoon light; we enter the world again.

The experience of being physically immersed in a work of art was something I wanted to incorporate into the work I would make. I wanted the audience to experience the work not only visually but with their whole bodies, for their encounter with the work to involve moving around and potentially within it. My reasoning was that this movement might heighten their awareness of their own bodies and perhaps facilitate an increased responsiveness to and empathy with the embodied experience of the gestating person.

The darkness and pale milky light of *Dark side of the Moon* also prompted me to think again about shadow, light and the anonymous palette of whites, creams and natural cane with which I was mostly working and which I had

learned functioned to increase the imaginative potential of my work. Kenya Hara describes white as a colour “on the periphery of life,” citing milk and eggshells as examples, both connected with birth and new life (Hara 2019, 11). For Hara, white is the colour of life at the threshold of its own existence, an observation that resonated with my investigation of life coming into being.

Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, on the other hand, exalts the hidden mystery of shadows and of darkness. He celebrates the dimness of Japanese houses, admiring the “soft fragile beauty of the feeble light” as it filters through the deep eaves and *shōji*, the paper-lined walls (Tanizaki 2001, 30). The Japanese house I stayed in did not have traditional paper *shōji*, but the frosted glass in the windows and doors had a similar effect, letting very little light through to the interior of the house. I thought about a gestating woman, wondering if, as she moves though the day, her body filters soft, feeble light to the conceptus *in utero*.

I imagined a work with both light and shadow, a work that would evoke the hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence. A rounded form, large enough for a person to be immersed within. I would fabricate the work in sections and the final construction would take place during installation, when the work would become entire and complete.

My attempts to source the material used to make translucent Japanese *shoji* eventually led to the Awagami paper mill in Tokushima, Japan, manufactures of traditional Japanese *washi* paper. I ordered two types of paper. The first, *Asarakusai*, is made from hemp, with long intertwined fibres half a millimetre thick, and the thinnest possible mesh of washi pulp. It is so thin that the paper is riddled with holes, like lace. The second, *Kumogarashi,* is mostly hemp with a little mulberry, with a smooth surface. Tightly packed in its roll the paper appears to have a flat, uniform surface, but as it curls off the roll its diaphanous texture it revealed, especially when set against the light, like soft, delicate clouds. Unrolling the papers was a moment of joy, an extraordinary and unexpected gift. The papers both matched exactly what I wanted: light and shadow simultaneously.

Having the paper in my studio stimulated me to begin imagining the work in more detail. I imagined the height of the work to be around three metres,

Figure 6: Julie Monro-Allison, *The hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence (light unfurls)* (work in progress), 2021. Paper, flexible dims. Photo: Julie Monro-Allison.

high enough that it would not be possible to see over the work, even when standing at a distance, and having an internal diameter of no more than three metres, the size of a smallish room. I imagined that the work would be lit from the outside, with the lights operating on a slow fade up and down. As the viewer is inside the work, some parts of the form become illuminated as others fade into shadow. I imagined the work would be hung from the ceiling, and would need several points of attachment, not because of its weight, which would not be significant, but to stop the paper from collapsing in on itself and to hold the form open.

The installation would be constructed from geometric shapes, *Asarakusai* hexagons and *Kumogarashi* pentagons, pieced together to make a rounded form. Earlier in my research I had found hexagons and pentagons offered potential for limitless geometric growth, by simply continuing to piece on shape to the next, and that together the two shapes had the ability to trace a curved form. I decided to cut the pentagon and hexagon shapes as large as possible. For the hexagons I used the *Asarakusai* paper and *Kumogarashi* for the pentagons. I cut each shape by hand, folded down the edges to make a tab, and then glued the tabs together with rice glue. Both papers were very thin, only 27 gsm, and although the paper had more structural integrity than the silk organza I had been using earlier, and once several shapes were glued together the paper began to collapse. I experimented with reinforcing the glued edges with wire and thick paper before settling on thin, straight lengths of cane **(fig. 6)**. Having developed the technical systems, I could then begin making the larger sections. The cutting and folding were time-consuming, and the pile of washi sections on my table gradually grew until I had used all paper, and the installation date was imminent.

The hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence (light unfurls) aimed to elaborate an analogy between the experience of gestation and birth and the practice of making a large-scale installation. During gestation, the embryo/foetus can be imagined but not seen; in the methodology I developed the work is imagined but not seen as a whole, only in fragments. The work existed in my imagination, but its tangible physical reality was unknown and did not emerge until it was brought into existence as it was installed for exhibition. Like gestation and birth, the installation process and final fabrication of the work could be planned, but on the day may unfold

Figure 7: Julie Monro-Allison, *The hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence (light unfurls),* 2021. Paper, 400 x 250 x 250 cm. Photo: Brenton McGeachie.

in unanticipated and unintended directions, and indeed, this proved to be the case for me. The work I created in the gallery was not exactly as I had imagined – less round, more awkwardly formed – however, like the infant I birthed, the work that emerged had its own unexpected character, which came to eclipse my imagined expectations the more familiar I became with it **(fig. 7)**. *The hidden mystery of life at the threshold of its own existence (light unfurls)* articulated the imaginative experience a gestating woman might have with her changing and creative body, through a mode of creative art practice centred on the generative potential of the imagined unknown.

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Eve’s Embarrassments

Mathew Jones

adapted from PhD (Fine Art) exegesis: “Snugglepot & Cuddlepie Are Gay!: A Par*eidol*ic Whim Wham.” Monash Art, Design & Architecture; Monash University 2022.

mathewmjones@yahoo.com

Abstract

Over the last thirty years the popular embrace of queer theory has encouraged an opposition between queer and Gay politics. Within this opposition “Gay” has come to be seen as an identity politic and “queer” as a politic refusing identity. This essay revisits the origins of Gay politics. Its particular focus is on a peculiar conflation between the verbal and the visible in post-Stonewall politics which resulted in subsequent emphasis on visibility as a defining element of Gay political involvement. This emphatic (mis)understanding of the visible continues to find expression in queer theory and critiques of Gay politics such Nicholas de Villiers’s work on opacity and the closet. Such critiques promote the subversive value of confounding or refusing identity through a consciously elusive, ill-defined or shifting use of both word and image. But turning to recent attempts to understand the concept and practice of pre-Platonic image making—especially the use of eidola in the work of the Achilles Painter—encourages an altogether more complex notion of the visible. This, more complex notion, both undermines twentieth century image theory and lends credence to the recent thought of Hans Belting who argues that images are always liminal and often full of contradiction. Images are not affidavits and therefore any opposition between Gay and queer politics becomes, in this regard at least, profoundly unhelpful.

Eve's Embarrassments

I wasn't in the 1995 AIDS show (*Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in Age of AIDS* at National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 12 November 1994 to 5 March 1995). I wasn't in the Queer show either (*QUEER: Stories from the NGV Collection* at NGV International, Melbourne, 10 March 2022 to 21 August 2022). My brief bio, the one I give in application to the Australia Council and elsewhere, says "for thirty-five years my work has consistently dealt with the double-edged complexities of gay identity and queer politics," and I did do an awful lot of work that was up and down in all the contemporary art spaces about AIDS and the politics surrounding the responses to it, but it wasn't Gay enough for the AIDS show (and yes, I'm painfully aware of that little conflation). Challenged by my dealer the curator said I was too young for the show. I was the same age he was. Perhaps he meant my politics was young. Perhaps I was proto-queer and therefore not Gay enough.

But then I wasn't queer enough for the Queer show either. The NGV even has one of my paintings, but I'm still not in it. Perhaps, because it's not a rainbow-coloured painting or obviously a male nude, its queerness isn't visible. The late Queen Mother was in the Queer show (a 1953 photo of her by E. G. Adamson), because she employed gay men and was friends with Cecil Beaton & Co.. Perhaps I just don't have the right friends. I don't know if my friends define as Gay or queer. I don't know which word I should chose either. There was recently a TV documentary about this problem of self-definition called *Where Have All the Lesbians Gone?* (Channel 4, UK, 28 April 2022), which suggested the young are likely to identify as queer, seeing the words Lesbian or Gay as limiting and apolitical whilst in complete contrast those over sixty still saw the word "Lesbian" as a slap in the face for all those who had sought to constrain them. I guess the semantics will become less of an issue as us oldies die out.

But I shouldn't complain, the NGV show was "stories" from the NGV collection, not "pictures" from the NGV collection. Stories always get edited down or edited out—they take too long. Pictures get a glance whilst stories take time. Even the most comprehensive collection of stories, the *Arne Thompson Uther Index* of all known folk tales, got filtered—some say Stith

Thompson binned all the gay and lesbian folktales (Wareham, 2020). But even here traces remain in Type 540, or Type 758 “The Origin of Fairies.” The latter includes this Icelandic version:

> Once upon a time, God Almighty came to visit Adam and Eve. They received him with joy and showed him everything they had in the house. They also brought their children to him, to show him, and these He found promising and full of hope. Then He asked Eve whether she had no other children than these whom she now showed him. She said “None.” But it so happened that she had not finished washing them all, and, being ashamed to let God see them dirty, had hidden the unwashed ones. This God knew well, and said therefore to her, “What man hides from God, God will hide from man.” These unwashed children became forthwith invisible, and took up their abode in mounds, and hills, and rocks. From these are the elves descended, but we men from those of Eve’s children whom she had openly and frankly shown to God. And it is only by the will and desire of the elves themselves that humans can ever see them (Árnason 1864, 19-20).

This fairy-like ability of Eve’s embarrassments to chose to make themselves visible corresponds to a Gay politic immediately recognisable in the still familiar expression “coming out of the closet,” in fact I couldn’t help notice one translation had Eve hiding those children *in* a closet. Does one really only become visibly homosexual through the speech act “I am Gay”? Is “coming out” a bit like the Duck/Rabbit problem—one sees only the rabbit until someone says, “Can’t you see the duck?” and then magically the duck aspect dawns (where one is first recognised as an entirely straight rabbit, and then, in a mutually exclusive way, as an entirely *Queer Duck*)? This speaks to another awkward conflation—that of the verbal with the visible. This is something which I argue characterises Gay and queer politics alike, but it also highlights another, separate, anxiety about the demarcation of the visible and the invisible.

For starters, author Samuel R. Delany witnessed a completely different use of the terms “coming out” and “closet” in pre-Stonewall New York. “‘Coming out’ meant having your first homosexual experience. … But it took some

major form of the sexual act itself … fooling around with your bunk-mates [at summer camp] after lights out, I was informed, was *not* major. … The origins of the term were debutante cotillions" (Delany 1999, 81). On the other hand, "A closet queen was someone who *liked* doing it in the closet—that is, who enjoyed the fact that friends and others didn't know" (Ibid, 82). In the eighteen months after the Stonewall Riot the term coming out changed completely. "Gay Liberation proponents began to speak about 'coming out' *of* 'the closet'—the first time either the words or the concepts had been linked" (Ibid, 89). Suddenly one came out *to* a straight community rather than came out *within* a homosexual community and Delany explains this as a post-McCarthy logic: that if one took the initiative and was public about one's sexuality one could not then be accused of being vulnerable to blackmail. Thus if coming out had once been a bodily practise (a sex act between two homosexuals), "now it had become a purely verbal one" (Ibid, 91 i.e., a verbal or textual exchange between a Gay and a "straight"). Delany recognises the awkwardness of glossing the verbal with the visual, by paraphrasing it as "coming out of the closet of silence" as if cupboards and closets were somehow associated with keeping things silent rather than keeping stuff out of sight (Ibid).

A decade later when I was coming out I understood it differently. It was somehow my understanding that the Gay Liberation movement arising from the events at the Stonewall bar the night of June 27 into June 28, 1969 was inspired by the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements so successful at the same time. But it nursed a secret inferiority complex, because visual signs of skin colour and gender are things our culture is acutely sensitive to, but our culture (supposedly) does not see any visual signs of sexuality, at least it did not in the late 1960s. Therefore coming out was part of a package of fabricated visual signs of sexuality which would place Gay Liberation on an equal footing with the other liberation movements. Over the next twenty years making a visual spectacle of oneself became mandatory in gay politics, whether that was expressed in the dress code **(fig. 1)**, the placards**,** the vibrance of the rainbow flag, the glitter and fluorescence of a Mardi Gras, or the razzmatazz of David McDiarmid and Peter Tully's aesthetic as we collectively workshopped a visual, non-linguistic speech act equivalent to the speech act "I am Gay."

Certainly, coming out became a categorical imperative for the Gay Liberation movement. Homosexuality was “rendered as something that people claim to ‘be’ instead of something that people ‘do’”(Liao 2010, 21). Even Delany remembers worrying, “for all the act’s utopian thrust” (Delany 1999, 97) “there seemed to be an oppressive aspect of surveillance and containment intertwined with it, especially when compared to the term’s older meaning” (Ibid, 91). In *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (2012) Nicholas de Villiers writes:

> Foucault has detailed the manifold ways in which sexuality has become ‘the truth’ of a person, a truth that must be *made to speak,* ceaselessly, … The operation described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as ‘the epistemology of the closet’ makes sexuality into a secret that can be known, causing certain types of privileged ‘knowingness’ to circulate (de Villiers 2012, 2).

The political act of “outing” so popular in the 1980s and 1990s, de Villiers suggests, is a repressive, “controlling impulse” (Ibid, 3) which creates the last word, the categorical categorisation of a core “true self” in the spotlight. As such the Gay Liberation movement’s insistence on coming out has been argued by some, like de Villiers, as totally counter-productive to, and irreconcilable with, “a queer theoretical perspective” (Liao 2010, 20).

In his book de Villiers reassesses three late twentieth century figures—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Andy Warhol—each of whom has been slurred at some time as a “closet-case.” But de Villiers sees them as negotiating “their public personas in interviews and published texts” (de Villiers, 2015) so as to undermine “the massively overdetermined rhetoric of the truth, of secrets revealed, of bringing into the light, of clarity, of transparency” (de Villiers 2012, 3-4) which informs “the confessional metaphor of coming out of the closet”(de Villiers, 2015). De Villiers argues “that homophobia can involve anxiously insisting on knowing … about the sexuality of gay people” (Ibid). He details the kinds of concealment, obfuscation and refusal that Barthes, Foucault and Warhol (consciously and unconsciously) used to confound expectations within confessional, biographical and interview contexts as a means to problematise neat expectations around identity, authority and truth. “This is what I am calling *queer opacity*,” writes de Villiers (2012, 15). It is a

tactic more suitable for a neoliberal era "wherein queer people are controlled less by homophobic exclusion than by a politics of inclusion and legalization, therefore regulation, commercialization, and, ironically, 'privatization'" (de Villiers 2015). The Gay political strategy of being visibly out and proud is, in this neoliberal era, redundant at best and at worst complicit with mechanisms of control.

For me there is an awkwardness in claiming de Villiers's strategy of refusal as new or uniquely queer. All three individuals he discusses predate our current use of the term "queer," and by implication the identity "Gay" and the subculture "homosexual" gave no substantive impediment to the strategy's deployment. And such tactics of obfuscation can hardly be considered the exclusive domain of the queer, the Gay, the homosexual, or Barthes, or Foucault, or Warhol alone. It would be a shame, also, in appreciating de Villiers's observations to mask the fact that those who came out in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s (those who proactively flaunted their sexuality through their speech or placards or dress sense or behaviour) secured rights and redressed wrongs which blighted many lives, their own and others. And they frequently suffered heavy penalty in both their careers and private lives for the audacity of their coming out. Similarly, many who doggedly refused to come out during that period, or who were outed or forced out accidentally (e.g., pop star George Michael) were not motivated by the sophisticated strategies of defiance de Villiers outlines but by self-interest. Exploration of de Villiers's ideas needs also be framed by the consideration that the closet is a specifically Anglo-American-partial-European-Australian-raceless metaphor. But none of these are issues I wish to tackle here. I wish only to focus on the role "visibility" plays in his thinking.

De Villiers echoes comments made by Delany above which note "an interesting slippage in gay political thought regarding 'visibility' and 'speech,' 'audibility' or 'readability'" (de Villiers 2012, 21). But I would argue an analogous slippage persists in de Villiers's (self-described) queer thought. De Villiers drafts a list of "highly charged cultural dualisms" (Ibid) commingled in the epistemology of the closet:

> Schematically, the closet suggests—and in some cases takes for granted—the following oppositions: silence/speech, invisible/visible,

> in/out, private/public, secret/open, disavowal/avowal, negation/ affirmation, shame/pride, shyness/exhibitionism, secrecy/disclosure, connotation/denotation, covert/overt, conceal/reveal, deny/admit, dishonesty/honesty, lie/truth, surface/depth, obtuse/obvious, oblique/ direct, obscure/illuminated, opaque/transparent" (Ibid, 21-22).

In these binary oppositions not only are "visible" and "speech" aligned as correspondent (likewise "invisible" and "silence"), but also aligned are "opaque" and "invisible." Clearly what is meant here is a similarity between "hard to understand" and "hidden," a similarity in the linguistic register, but in the visual register the idea that opaque equals invisible seems a false correspondence. Surely a transparency is less visible, or invisible, because light (and vision) is more likely to pass through it, whilst an opacity is clearly visible as it bounces light back to the eye. Perhaps, since he is privileging what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called gaps and lapses (Ibid, 15) de Villiers should rethink his "queer opacity" as "queer transparency," as in "there is nothing to see here." But it is difficult to think of refusal as a passage (e.g., of light waves) rather than as a blockage, and "queer transparency" comes perilously close to the "glass closet"—where everyone knows you're gay but no-one talks about it (Musto 2008).

Whilst I don't wish to undermine what I find attractive about de Villiers's arguments, and whilst I have long been interested in refusal as a tactic or formal stratagem, de Villiers seems to compound my suspicion that an anxious tendency to over-simplify or misrecognise what is or isn't visible (e.g., visible = speech, invisible = opaque) characterises Gay and queer theory alike.

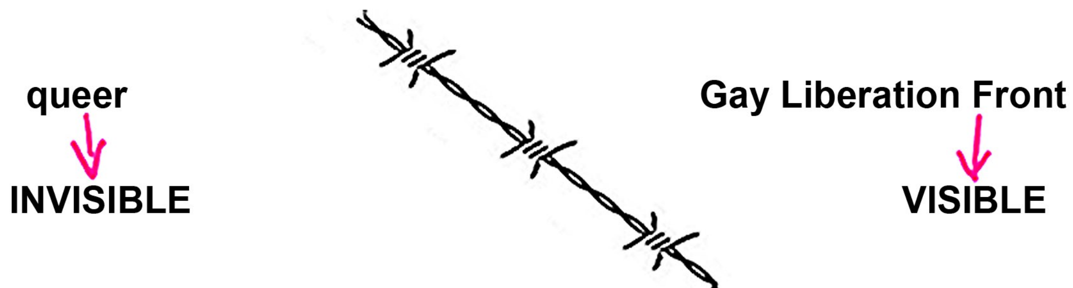
> Opaque and transparent—taken to their limits—don't work as opposites, since for something to be fully transparent it would be invisible, and for something to be completely opaque would mean a complete blockage of vision altogether, another invisibility. So *opacity* is visible only outside of the purity of the opposition

Try as I might, I simply cannot understand this logic. It seems to me that despite his caveats, de Villiers anxiously reinforces the idea of an opposition between the visible and the invisible. Ultimately, he concludes "queer

Figure 1: Rog01, *10 Things You See At Every Pride*, 2011. https://www.romeo.com/en/blog/10-people-see-every-pride/

Figure 2: Attributed to the Achilles Painter, *Attic White-Ground Lekythos* (detail), c. 440–435 BCE. Terracotta, 37.39 cm (height). New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (Gift of the Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989.281.72). Photo: www.metmuseum.org.

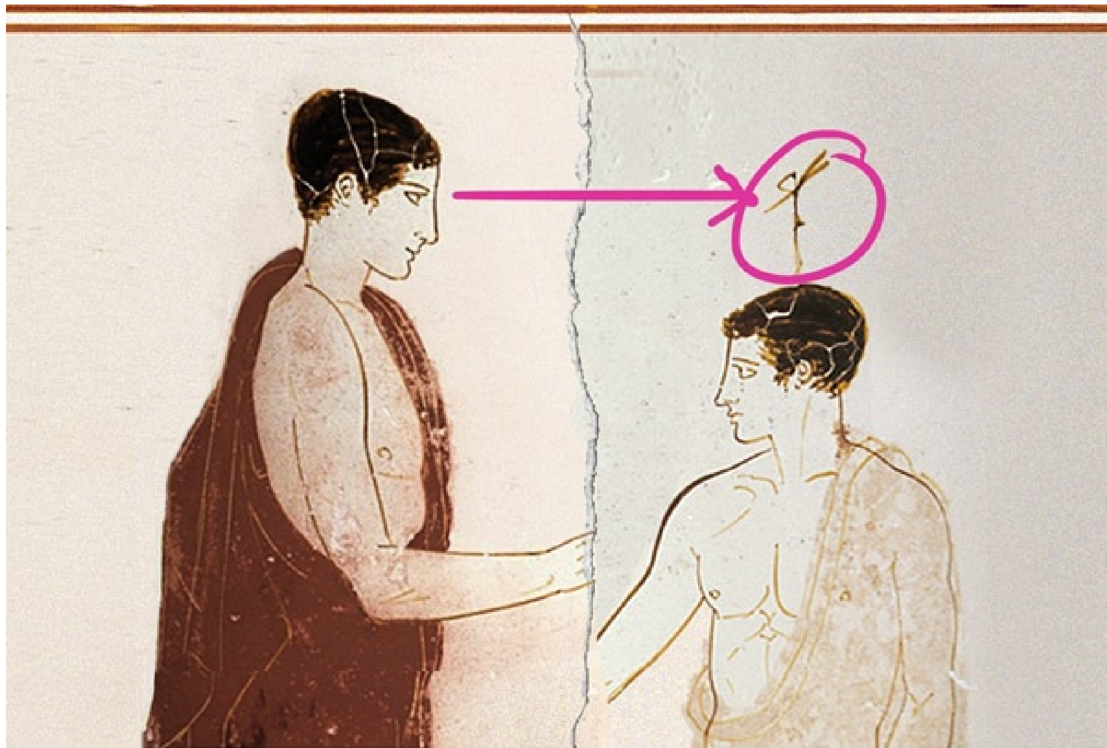
subjectivity is produced through a kind of displacement vis-à-vis the closet itself" (de Villiers 2012, 163). He clearly positions queer politics on one side (as a politics of invisibility still potent and subversive), whilst out and proud Gay politics is on the other side of the divide—a politics of visibility controlled by a neoliberal mechanics "of inclusion and legalization" (de Villiers 2015).



Turning away from these binary oppositions I look now to more ancient fairy figures **(fig. 2)** which the conventions of classical historicism call *eidōla*—the Greek root of Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum's neologism "pareidolia" (Sibbald 1867). "Eidolon" is said to appear in English from 1801 as a term for ghost or phantom, but in academic literature related to Ancient Greece it is usually translated as "image"—which would make this fairy figure an image of an image. Other possible translations in Ancient-Greek-to-English lexicons include "any insubstantial form," or, an "image reflected in a mirror," or, an "image in the mind" (Doikas 2021). The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014) has an entry which explains *eidōlon* [εἴδωλον] as stemming from *eidon* [εἶδον], or, "to see". Although often translated as "image" this does

> a poor job of transmitting the multiple echoes that accompany the Greek vocabulary related to images, which includes *eidōlon* [εἴδωλον], *eikon* [εἰκών], *phantasma* [φάντασμα], *emphasis* [ἔμφασις], *tupos* [τύπος], etc. … The *eidōlon* is what we see as if it were the thing itself, but which is in fact a double … which is not really there. In other words, the *eidōlon* is the bearer of visual illusion (Simon 2014, 245).

These are textual definitions drawn from textual sources in which the textual meaning can be guessed from textual context. But even here the spectre of anachronism has been raised by classical historian Jean-Pierre Vernant who triggered hot debate with his claim that the Greeks did not have the concept of the image as we would understand it until Plato and that prior to the fifth century BCE sculpture and painting were understood as (what we might consider more magical) "presentifications" (Vernant 2006 and 1991). "In the



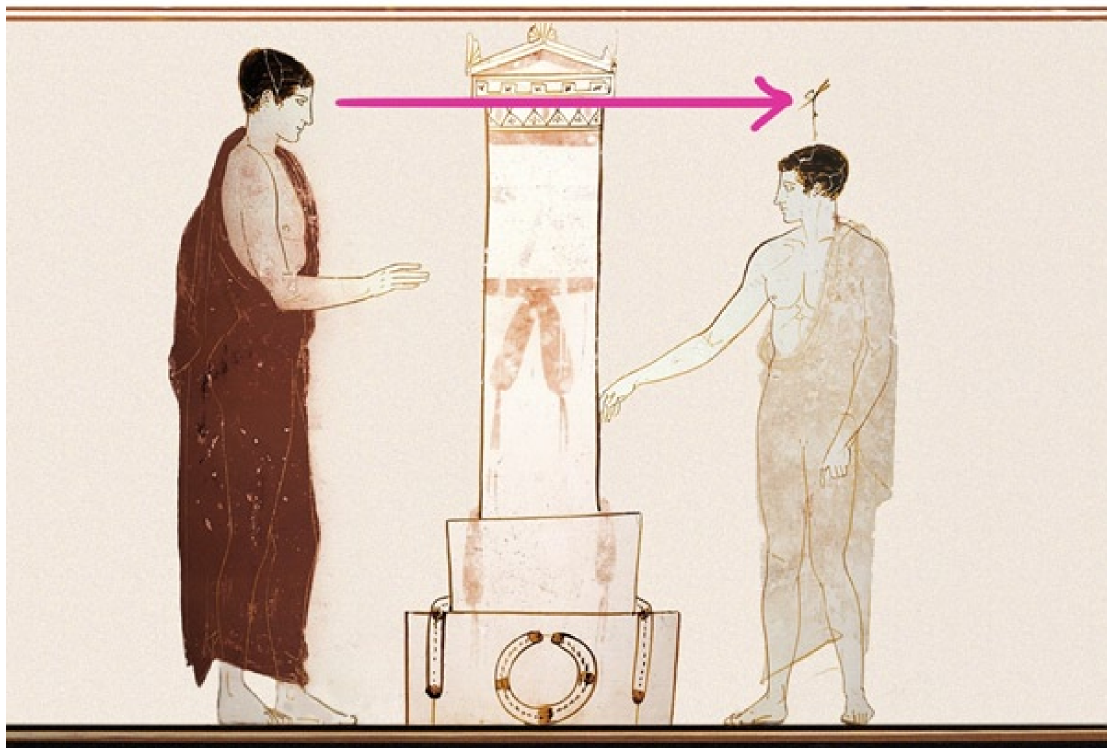
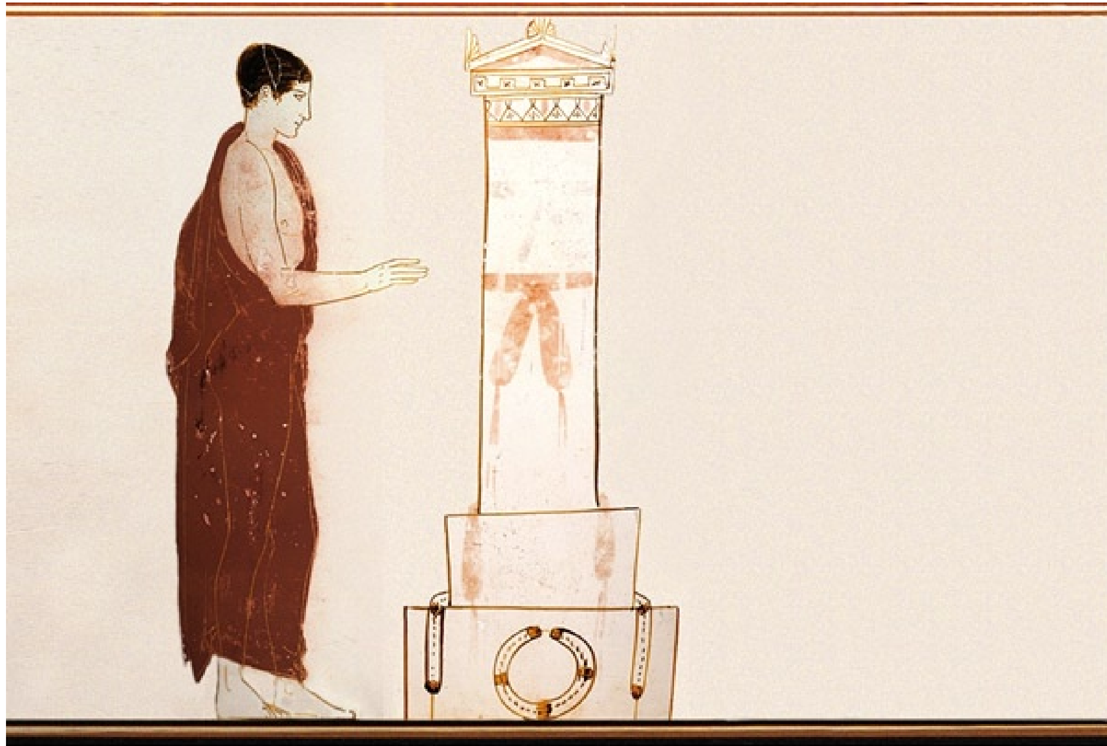


Figure 3: *after The Achilles Painter* (author's diagram as if on a flattened surface, showing eye-line of the figure in red).

Figure 4: *after The Achilles Painter* (author's diagram as if on a flattened surface, showing eye-line of the figure in red).



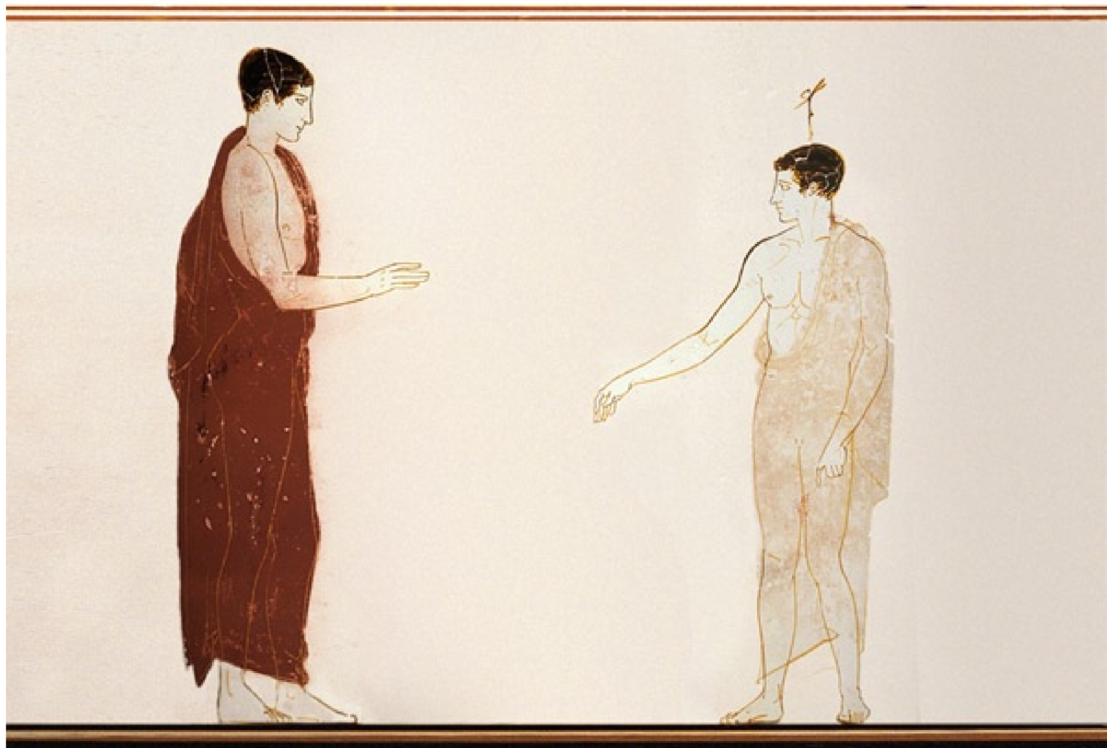


Figure 5: *after The Achilles Painter* (author's diagram of the scene if the figure in red and the tomb are real but the shorter figure in faded yellow is imagined).

Figure 6: *after The Achilles Painter* (author's diagram of the scene if both figures are real but the tomb is imagined. This suggests a scene of greeting or conversation).

Homeric epics, the word *eidōlon* generally refers only to a soul that remained behind, a sort of likeness, after abandoning the body. It breaks away from the body to continue a shadow life of its own in Hades” (Belting 2011, 109). Plato’s notion of the image reversed this such that *eidōla* were the corpses left behind by souls - their presence provided a lifeless likeness. Plato’s concept “would have a long afterlife in future revaluations of images as art” (Ibid, 115).

Efforts to match these different textual understandings of εἴδωλον to possible visual incarnations are even more frustrating (Bardel 2000, 141). In an essay on one particular mid fifth century vase by the Achilles Painter held in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, archaeologist Nathaniel B. Jones (2015) finds the signification of this “fairy figure” so elusive he is reluctant to call it an εἴδωλον/*eidōlon* at all—in part because we only know that word from texts and in part because this vase predates Plato’s domineering definition. At first the scene seems a straightforward visit by two guys to a tomb. But what’s that small winged figure? In an attempt to better understand the image I have doctored and reconstructed the very curved surface as a flat one. The fairy figure in the image seems unreal and yet the lad in red is clearly looking straight at it **(fig. 3** & **4)**. That lad also seems to be addressing the shorter youth, holding out his hand, unless the grave stele is between them, blocking the view **(fig. 5)**. But at this time, in this place, that type of gravestone probably didn’t exist, being outlawed by sumptuary legislation (Jones 2015, 825). Is it real or imagined? **(fig. 6)**.

The little fairy figure, common in white lekythoi of fifth century Athens might represent not a soul, which would be invisible, but a soul somehow still corrupted by bodily concerns, halfway between visible and invisible, notional and physical, or rather something which collapses the distinction (Ibid). They proliferate in scenes of crossings from the corporeal visible to the world of Hades (whose helmet was a cap of invisibility) (Ibid, 826). Sometimes they are multiple, sometimes singular. It is debatable whether they therefore represent mark him out as deceased? In which case, although we the viewer can see him, the lad in red might not. And if he can see him, is it a confrontation with a ghostly apparition or the contemplation of a mental image—an “internal memory-image” (Ibid, 832)? I believe a modern painter

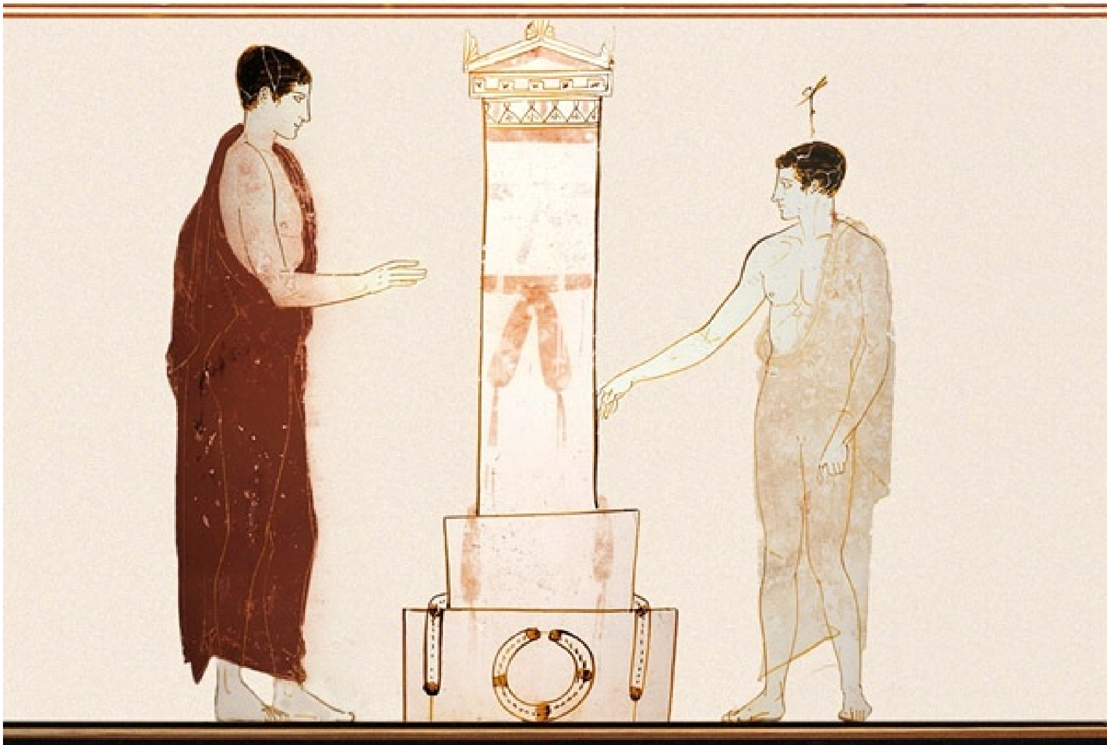


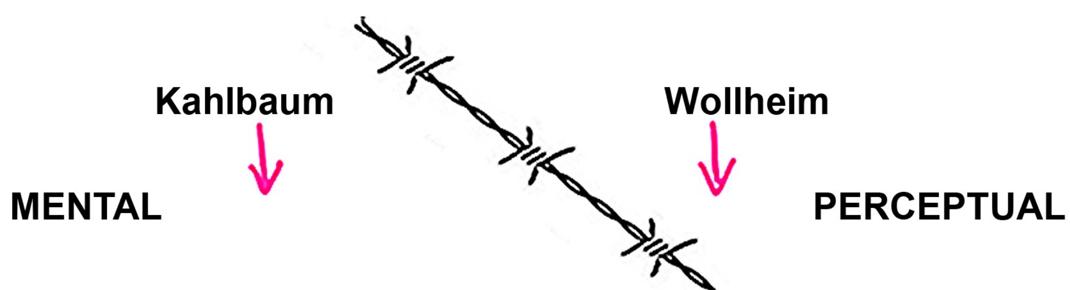
Figure 7: *after The Achilles Painter* (author's diagram of a "modern" rendering of the subject. The gesture of lamentation echoes that of the stick figure *eidōlon*).

Figure 8: *after The Achilles Painter* (Nathaniel B. Jones suggests the shorter figure in faded yellow is fused with the stele and therefore deceased).

would draw the absence of his dead friend from the visible, isolating the figure in red, lending him a face visibly expressing sadness **(fig. 7)**, or, simply paint a memorial portrait of the dead youth on his lonesome. The Achilles Painter's fairy figure, however, indicates the image is of real or imagined communion between the living and the dead **(fig. 8)**, because the *eidōlon* always marks a liminal zone between the invisible and visible, the mental and perceptual, the internal and external image.

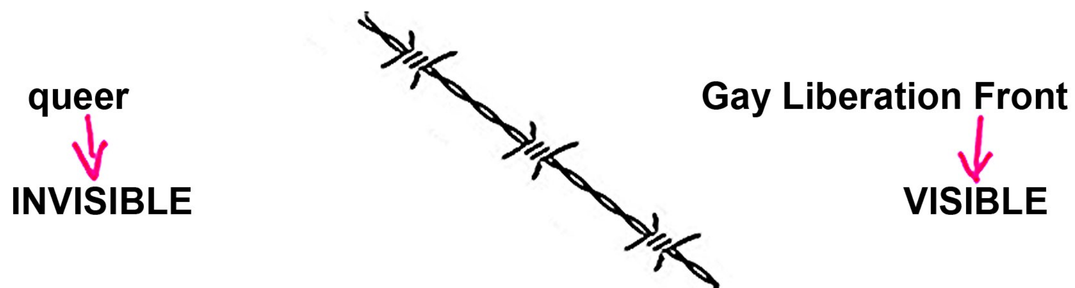
Hans Belting argues "internal and external representations, or mental and physical images, may be considered two sides of the same coin." He suggests the image *resides* in media, and that media might be a PowerPoint projection, a vase painting, or, the human brain. "We know that we all have or that we all own images, that they live in our bodies or in our dreams and wait to be summoned by our bodies to show up. … bodies (that is, brains) serve as a living medium that makes us perceive, project, or remember images and that also enables our imagination to censor or to transform them" (Belting 2005, 305-306). Belting pulls focus away from the external presentation as image on canvas to the internal presentation as mental image, however inchoate this may be. The image can drift between brain and canvas, between canvas and brain, or between computer screen, brain and bread in the case of a pareidolic recognition of Jesus in a piece of burnt toast as pictured on the internet. In fact, to my mind, Belting is the only image theorist to accurately account for pareidolia—our ability to perceive an image in random visual data or in another, unrelated image.

According to Wittgenstein the invisible mental image and visible perception are poles apart, or even a contradiction in terms (Wittgenstein 2001, 167). Is pareidolia mental or perceptual? Well, that presents a problem. Kahlbaum in his 1865 study of psychosis and Richard Wollheim in his 1970s essays on "seeing as," both take pains to position pareidolia accurately in relation to an imagined opposition between the hallucinatory subjective mental image and the objective perception of images external to ourselves (Sibbald 1867, 238; Wollheim 1980, 218).



But Belting, like the Achilles Painter, abandons that opposition altogether, describing instead a visuality where the objective and subjective, the visible and invisible, are counter-intuitively intervolved:

"The gaze reveals images in the interval between 'here' [the internal] and 'there' [the external]," says Belting (Moxey 2013, 87). This suggests the opposition created by Kahlbaum and pursued by Wittgenstein and others, which is basically also the opposition created by de Villiers (to revisit the earlier diagram, seen below), figures an unobtainable clarity which is actually hugely misleading.



But what does this mean for "coming out" versus "the opacity of the closet"? What does it mean for Sedgwick's warning about "the epistemology of the closet" cited by de Villiers? Or for my invisibility within Australian compendiums of queer or Gay art? It alleviates the pressure and takes the urgency from such questions, introducing instead an acceptance of a "seeing" which is more subjective than we are comfortable acknowledging,

> Our internal images are not necessarily personal in nature, but even when they are collective in origin, we internalize them in such a way that we come to consider them as our own. We perceive the world as individuals, all the time making use of the collective conventions of the day (Belting 2011, 16).

The Achilles Painter's *eidōla* confound de Villiers's forced distinction between visibility and invisibility and work to undermine the casual equation of visibility

Figure 9: fragment from an unknown Sydney newspaper c.1991.

with definition, identity, objectivity, speech, publication, affirmation, disclosure, denotation, revelation, honesty, truth, intelligibility and illumination. In his explication of the contradictory notions of the image at play within the Achilles Painter's work, Jones understands an important point—when our attention is drawn to contradictions within a text we reject that text as poorly written, but when our attention is drawn to contradictions within an image our enjoyment of that image increases.

Images are not affidavits and the notion of the visual that has been used in queer and Gay theory (as opposed to praxis) alike, is too often reductive. I ask how, in practise, Figure 1 (said to be one of the ten things you will always see at a Gay Pride march) can be seen as anything but an extremely complex image of pride and parody, identification, counter-identification and dis-identification, ultimately confounding categorisation more than de Villiers's championing of invisibility could ever do. In Belting's thinking, images work us as we work and rework them. We live always amongst *eidōla* (literally *para eidōla*), in ways that render de Villiers's refusal of the visible impossible, and his distinction between Gay visibility and queer opacity chimerical.

Thirty years ago I was trimming something with a Stanley knife and had put some newspaper down to stop me cutting through to the surface below. Days later I found an isolated rectangular fragment of newsprint which must have fallen out of the bundle of paper I shoved in the bin as I tidied up. It was a single frame from an Asterix cartoon which exclaimed "POOF!" **(fig. 9)**. Things can both appear in a puff of smoke or disappear in a puff of smoke but in this case, without the frames which came before or followed after, it was impossible to tell what this frame represented. The cartoon inspired two of my installations: *POOF!* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne in 1993, and, *POOF!* as part of *Australian Perspecta 1995*, in the vestibule of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Something about it has for me the emphatic appearance of disappearance, or a perhaps a disappearing appearance which, either way, is a contradiction in terms, a conundrum. This ambiguous fragment, this single glance within a story, has long struck me as the perfect analogue for the homosexual, the Gay or the queer's liminal relationship with visibility, one which like the pareidolic, and (in Belting's thinking) all images, are merely glimpses seized from a state of becoming or unbecoming.

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Lecture-Performance: A Parody of Split Consciousness

Jen Valender

adapted from MFA (Visual Art) exegesis: “Performing cross-dissonant problems in the projected image.” Faculty of Fine Art and Music; Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne 2021.

jen.valender@outlook.com

Abstract

“Lecture-Performance: A Parody of Split Consciousness” explores visual arts research that utilises lecture-performance as a practice-led methodology and tool to examine (and parody) the modes of self-conscious criticality typical of art institutions and the academy. The difficulty of self-positioning as a practice-based researcher can be fraught with shifting subject positions, conflicting priorities, or ethical dilemmas. To describe this relational and evolving process, the neologism “cross-dissonance” is proposed in order to capture the specific method of investigating, addressing and potentially embracing problems and contradictions as they arise for the artist-researcher in order to perform the research itself.

Lecture-Performance: A Parody of Split Consciousness

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window (Gilles Deleuze, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 1980).

This article explores visual arts research that utilises lecture-performance as a practice-led methodology and tool to examine (and parody) the modes of self-conscious criticality typical of art institutions and the academy. When researching within the academy, artists are expected to adopt a split consciousness: becoming both practitioners and analysts of their own artwork. The difficulty of self-positioning as a practice-based researcher can be fraught with shifting subject positions, conflicting priorities or ethical dilemmas. To describe this relational and evolving process, I propose the neologism "cross-dissonance" in order to capture the specific method of investigating, addressing and potentially embracing problems and contradictions as they arise for the artist-researcher in order to perform the research itself. The artist Sister Corita Kent once noted that making and analysing are separate processes—you cannot do both at the same time (Kent and Steward 1992, 167). Yet, paradoxically, creating artwork within the research academy requires an analysis of the work to be produced in tandem with studio outputs. In this practice-led research, the lecture-performance-as-artwork allows the two processes—making and analysing—to be woven into a single paratext (Andrist 2018). I embrace lecture-performance as a tool which may act as a receptacle for my research and its findings. The analysis becomes a performance and space in which I can kick up dilemmas; where responses to my own artworks move beyond black and white thinking, to create room for shifting positionality. I use generative lines of questioning to produce tension and split open the subjective and objective readings of my artworks. This strategy does not offer me, the artist-researcher, solid resolutions. Rather, it offers a plethora of positions and poses questions that may be answered over and over again in various ways, weaving between stages of being stuck, unstuck and stuck again (Koobak 2014, 194-207). This axis of aporia, is where many artist-researchers within the institution are positioned. In this chapter, I argue that lecture-performance can operate as a useful tool with which to blend and process cross-disciplinary and cross-

Figure 1: Jen Valender, *Facts about Projection, boardroom iteration of Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, 2021, Royal Domain Plaza, Melbourne. Image: Dr. D.

dispositional binds. It should be noted, that the transition of the art academy to academia is a fairly recent development in the history of art training and education—the Victorian College of the Arts only began its affiliation with the University of Melbourne in 2006, for instance (Grishin 2020). Thus, measuring art as a form of knowledge within a university structure is a challenge that rides alongside this research.

This initial higher degree research project was accompanied with a suite of creative works, together creating a fractured digital conference, delivered separately at three live research events in 2021 via Zoom: VCA University of Melbourne Research Symposium (February); Birds and Language Conference, University of Sydney (August); and Memory Conference, CoVA, University of Melbourne (September). The first lecture-performance, *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings,* explored the discontent I experienced from using once living beings—moths and flies—as art materials to unpack the term 'cross-dissonance' and to address the questions: how can using insects in artwork be harnessed as a way to navigate ethical quandaries that arise from research projects? In addition, how might ethical grey areas be examined using lecture-performance strategies? Lecture-performance two, titled *Silenced Strings*, used culturally sensitive copyrighted material to present the story of an extinct avian species, and mobilised the lecture-performance as a conceptual device to interrogate and explore institutionalised knowledge transactions (Rike 2013, 4-15). The final lecture-performance, *Deaf Pixels*, combined personal memories and 35mm film projection technology to explore constructed realities and question knowledge production and exchange. However, the discussion here will focus solely on the initial lecture-performance *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings* in order to explore how cross-dissonant questioning may be used as a formal linguistic oblique strategy—a system to prompt creative thinking, as coined by artists Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt—and research method for artist-researchers within the lecture-performance model.[1]

The cross-dissonance method for making work in the context of practice-led research draws on the already existing tensions in the figure of the artist as

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1. This term is in reference to musician and artist Brian Eno and artist Peter Schmidt's card-based prompts for creative thinking, titled *Oblique Strategies: over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas* (1975).

researcher and may result in bringing forth inconsistent opinions held about one's own artwork. The psychological phenomena "cognitive dissonance" is a key concept with which to investigate the concern experienced when one is at odds with the issues that emerge in one's artwork and research. The term cognitive dissonance was developed by American psychologist Leon Festinger, who defined the experience as a psychological defense mechanism used to avoid experiencing discomfort by developing justifications when an individual's actions are at odds with their ethics, morals or rational mind (Harmon-Jones 2019). It is from this perspective that I propose the concept "cross-dissonance" to describe the deliberate action of investigating problems (as opposed to engaging in avoidance) that the research is generating to facilitate the process of thinking through the challenges of making art when at odds with the research. The term *cross* replaces *cognitive* to denote looking back and forth/left and right, implying reflexivity. The distinction between the two terms is intentional: cognitive dissonance is an *experience*, whereas cross-dissonance is a *process* of surfacing and identifying problems while living with the research.

While some may relish complicating and opening up their artworks and art practice using the cross-dissonance method, the process is not necessarily a pleasant one—it can be volatile, messy and unstable. The cost of these inquisitive conversations may result in doubt and confusion; however, such self-consciousness may later be gleaned as material for parody in the lecture-performance. This unsteady experience is closely aligned with *agonism*, defined as a "philosophical outlook emphasising the importance of conflict to politics," or, in other words, the experience of having multiple points of view internally or externally in the room (Fisken 2021). In addition, cross-dissonance as a method can be understood as experiencing states of *ambi*: from the Latin *ambo*, meaning *both*: "on both sides," where ambivalence and ambiguity are drawn upon as rich resources for art making. In the same way, I connect cross-dissonance to my experience of living with cross-dominance or "mix-handedness" wherein one has no dominant hand, but rather prefers the use of one hand for various tasks and favours the opposite hand for others (Wolman 2005). This is not to be confused with ambidexterity, which implies equal ability of both hands, as the mix-handed brain is somewhat at odds with itself, seeing tasks being delegated inconsistently to either hand. Using the cross-dissonance method, one can become entangled, trapped even, in

the research until the self-critique and analysis is formed into a performance where the artwork is found in the lecture story.

To *lecture* commonly denotes authority or critique, whereas *performance* may denote a level of play or exaggeration. Therefore, independently lecture and performance evoke an opposition. Using lecture-performance to critique the historical context and established conceptions of what constitutes a lecture is a meta-practice that highlights the tensions between institutional frameworks, art making and research-exchange (Pessoa De Lima 2017). At face value, the notion of a *lecture-performance* presents a tautology: to "lecture" implies the spoken delivery of knowledge, which is, in itself, performative (CoVa 2019). However, *performance* in the field of "lecture-performance as art" plays with and challenges the boundaries and conceptual potential of the *lecture* as mode of information delivery. Further, note that the word *lecture* is positioned before *performance* in this research, as the performative exploration sits inside the lecture format, differentiating the term from simply pedagogical delivery.[2]

In the early stages of the project I was influenced by the lineage of John Cage, using the "monomorphic structure—the 'single, simple form' that underlay many of the early Fluxus scores and performances" and utilising chance and indeterminacy as compositional methods to create soundtracks for simple digital moving image footage (Jensen 2021, 97-102; Armstrong et al. 1993, 124). The transition to "lecture-performance" followed the interests of many artists and musicians of Cage's era—the field of "lecture-performance as artwork" derives from the Fluxus network performance art and institutional critique of the sixties and seventies (Steyerl 2009, 14-15; Kahn 1993, 100-121). While an expanded survey of the entirety of lecture-performance in art history is beyond the scope of this essay, I will cite salient examples of lecture-performances over time in order to contextualise this project and its findings.

The lecture-performance-as-artwork can implant fissures in the logic of institutionalised presentations of knowledge through parody. Take, for example, what is often cited as, the first "lecture as medium" artwork: Robert

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2. Here I follow the use of the hyphenated compound use of the term "lecture-performance" in Rike (2013).

Figure 2: Jen Valender, detail of *Played as They Lay, Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, 2021, three-channel colour projection, installation view, Martyn Myer Arena, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

Morris's 1964 re-enactment of German art historian Erwin Panofsky's 1939 methodological essay "Ikonographie und Ikonologie" (Rike 2013, 6). Morris used teaching at the core of his practice, making lecture-performance an accessible format to explore and subvert education, similar to the likes of John Cage in *Lecture on Nothing* (1950) and Joseph Beuys in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) (Pessoa De Lima). In his lecture-performance, titled *21.3*, Morris parodically silently lip-synced and gesture-synced his own reading of Panofsky's lecture, inserting a delay by performing slightly out of time and desynchronising with recorded sounds of his water glass being placed on the podium, and so forth (Rike, 7). Similarly, Belgian artist Eric Duyckaerts's lecture-performance, *Conference on the Hand* (1993), saw the artist satirically pose evolutionary conundrums to poke fun at scientific principles and findings.[3] By distorting the lecture through presenting peculiar, yet oddly plausible theories, Duyckaerts played with and mixed the presentation of research with conceptual performance.

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3. "Homage to Eric Duyckaerts," Perrotin Gallery, exhibition dates September 7–21, 2019, https://www. perrotin.com/exhibitions/eric_duyckaerts-homage-to-eric-duyckaerts/6740.

As the function of a lecture is to convey information, defining lecture-performance and its relationship with knowledge is complex. A useful description is offered by Berlin-based curator, writer and academic Frank Rike, who asserts that the primary role of the lecture-performance is to resist containment of classification in order to "frustrate the status of 'information,'" while reflecting institutionalised interpretations of art education (Rike, 8). By opening up the boundaries of the format, to use Rike's logic, others practicing in the field of personal dialogue performance are invited into the conversation. The recorded presentation of artist David Antin's poem-talks, for example, which were compiled as text after the live events in the volume *Talking at the Boundaries* (1976), can be thought of as lecture-performances. Antin's poem-performances take the audience on a journey of examination. As Antin describes, he is "committed to a poetry of thinking—not of thought, but of *thinking*" (Ibid, 5). In other words, it is not of arrival but of *process*. I consider my lecture-performances in the same manner—a cyclical process of orbiting around and through ideas without ever seeking to concretely arrive at a definitive destination.

Research Project Overview

As a format, the lecture-performance can act as a vessel in which to house reflexivity and practice/research problems, such as asking: what happens when an artist is at odds with their own research? How might one recognise and use problems as material in an art practice? Much like the understanding that beliefs and relationships are not fixed, this approach to practice-led research is a process of constantly building things up, while letting others go. The lecture-performance as research creates a space for neuroses by dealing with systemic "projecting." It requires the practice of looking and turning the looking in on itself, creating a psychological sinkhole, where each artwork adds an additional layer. Writing through and around the problems to create lecture content became a significant methodology in this research, seeing the academic and studio practice combined as synergetic methods of inquiry (Richardson 2000, 923–949).

My overarching aim was to complicate and obscure the didactic function of a lecture by way of a personalised, less institutionalised presentation. Titled *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, the lecture-

performance begins with an interrogation of my moving image and sound artwork *Played as they lay* (2020), which follows a series of dead moths as found in pantry traps. Each moth was seized, lured by pheromones, emanating from tacky adhesive. I blithely traced the forms to compose a score, transferring the serendipitous path into notes on a musical stave. The lecture continues to examine a second moving image artwork *Keaton Fly, after Gordon* (2020), which recorded my observations of a housefly. The fly enters the screen in lieu of an actor and its movements inform the composition of the accompanying score, sound-tracking as the fly performs in each scene until it slowly dies—a micro-parody of a classic silent film. The production involved witnessing the fly as it struggled for hours, trying to escape from a pantry trap on a windowsill. To make sense of the moral predicament, in which I justified to myself this slightly sadistic behaviour in the name of making small sound-worlds, I turned to the text *Joyful Militancy* by poet Carla Bergman and activist Nick Montgomery, who describe ethical questioning as “progressing into a space that is always already conflicting yet, while shifting, can also be strong ground on which to build.” (Bergman and Montgomery 2017, 5). The act of questioning was the ground upon which I built this performance as it unfolded through the development of the first lecture (out of three) during the progression of this project. I used the cross-dissonant method to question: how can using insects in artwork be harnessed to navigate ethical quandaries that arise from research projects? This reflection suddenly shifted the focus of the research from creating music informed by the visual record of the insects to grappling with ambivalent attitudes around cohabiting with pests, and thus acknowledging the ethical problems that had surfaced from the work. Both artworks made me question: when does a pest become a pest? Equally, why does the extermination of a pest become a useful agent in the making of an artwork? Further, once such questions present themselves, the next tier of research takes hold, resulting in an additional layer of questions: how does one map, resolve, or wade through the muddied, unreconciled ethical space newly surrounding the existing artworks? Further still, can the lecture offer a coherent inquiry while subverting logic and reason through the use of performance conventions that allow for counter-logical and counter-rational claims which obfuscate the production of “knowledge”?

On reflection, I realised that this messiness was not a series of dead ends or false starts, even though it felt like they were at the time, but better understood as bricks: a collection of units of thought made available to test

and build connections through interrelated symbols and language. In the lecture-performance *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, I interrogate *Played as they lay* and *Keaton Fly, after Gordon* by questioning the content of the films out loud. To illustrate the line of questioning, I blend poor quality clips shot on my phone with high-definition footage, mixed with disparate low quality, found scenes, creating an amalgamation of aesthetics to personify my conflicted disposition. The process of trying to answer impossible questions within a visual soup of real and fake footage adds to the absurdity of the performance and provocation.

Heightening my awareness of my own cognitive dissonance produced by these fallen creatures—the fact that I am uneasy about using once-living beings as material yet can justify my actions as commonplace activities—is how I arrived at the concept of cross-dissonance, a theory of split consciousness and tool to discuss the work from outside and within. I developed the following definition of the term:

> *cross-dissonance*: the process of identifying elements in an artwork that are at odds with the artist's own personal beliefs and morality. These may present themselves as contradictions, problems or insecurities. Usually, it is identified first as an ineffable bodily response, an uncomfortable sinking feeling that surfaces from the work. The prefix 'cross' denotes looking back and forth, left and right, specifically implying reflexivity from multiple perspectives.

Cross-dissonance is closely linked with *cognitive dissonance*, defined as "opposing cognitions;" or the difference between what we believe and what we do and how we justify the difference (Harmon-Jones 2019, 3-4). Through this mimetic gesture I attempt to fuse psychoanalysis with art theory to frame the communication process as the artwork itself.

Writer Jeremy Millar described American artist, Robert Smithson's use of lecture-performance as "attentive indifference" (Millar 2020).[4] To identify to my own indifferent attention toward insects, I used Canadian poet Carl Leggo's process of *Narrative Inquiry* which utilises writing as a method of analysis through rumination, story and discourse in order to detect perspectives that may be at odds in the artwork (Leggo [2008] 2019, 85). Using my own voice

Figure 3: Jen Valender, detail of *Keaton Fly, After Gordon, Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, 2021, three-channel colour projection, installation view, Martyn Myer Arena, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

as narrator is both emancipating and excruciating. On the one hand, I have complete freedom and control over the performance; on the other, the sound of personal neurosis being expressed is cringeworthy. However, applying a reflexive stance to the performance allows for self-consciousness to be called into account, as well as other broader frictions, for example: those between domestic spaces and the landscape, environmental inconsistencies, cultural conflicts or historical complexities, and so on, all of which may shift over time. This approach seeks to build the artwork through the performance of unpacking and throwing a brick at visual material.

Smithson provides a key example of narrative inquiry in his lecture-performance *Hotel Palenque* (1969–72), wherein he presents images of an old hotel in Mexico, "undergoing a cycle of simultaneous decay and

4. I borrow the term attentive indifference from Jeremy Millar's 2020 text, used to describe Robert Smithson's Hotel Palenque lecture (1969–72). Jeremy Millar, "Robert Smithson, Hotel Palenque (1969– 72)." Holt/Smithson Foundation, published September 2020, https://Holt-smithsonfoundation.Org/Robert-Smithson-Hotel-Palenque-1969-72.

renovation” (Spector 2021). Smithson plays with academic and art jargon to describe details in each photograph and applies theory with deadpan timing, making an analysis (or spoof) of the “de-architecturalised” centre of a “ruin in reverse” and the “curving curves”of the site (Ibid.). The audio of Smithson’s voice presenting the lecture was recorded and used to recreate an archived version of the performance including filmed footage of the printed versions of his projection slides: a copy of the parody lecture-performance. The recording of the lecture with images became established as an artwork in itself, having been acquired by the Guggenheim from the artist’s estate in 1999 (Allen 2021).

Similar to Smithson and resonant with Leggo, I use the format of “knowledge-transfer-presentation” in *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings* to present an inquiry into ethics and artmaking (Gibson 2018, 20). By mirroring and utilising theoretical language, the artwork satirises institutional sites of knowledge production—poking fun at both the academy and the artworld by showing how authenticity, profundity and originality are in each case contingent qualities with their own laws and rules. Moreover, the satire highlights the tension between art as research project, with an expectation to produce new knowledge in the academy and the counterlogical/counterralational knowledge that emerges in/as the artwork. Using narrative inquiry pushed the boundaries between ethics and art to the surface, specifically, the ability for rationality to be modified in order to satisfy one’s conscience: “no one cares about flies,” for instance. To make sense of such shifting positions, I refer to the text *Ethics in Research on Learning: Dialectics of Praxis and Praxeology* by Sung Won Hwang and Roth Wolff-Michael, who frame ethics as multiplicities of relational, culturally lived experience. They state:

> First, ethics is an ongoing historical event; second, ethics is based on the communicative praxis of material bodies; and third, ethics involves the creation of new communicative configurations (Hwang and Wolff-Michael 2005, 1–19).

In using this definition of relational ethics, I focus on living with dissonance by framing my research problems firstly as changeable events, secondly as contextual communication of materiality through artworks, and thirdly as a conduit in which to discuss broader problems.

In an attempt to dissect the logic of the ethical matter that I was encountering, I sought to make connections with the university's ethics protocols. While the need to prepare graduate researchers for ethical practice within the institution and beyond is vital, the procedural structures in place to ensure that they do so may risk inhibiting the development of creative outcomes (MacNeill et. al. 2021,75). The ethical problems I present echo the self-conscious predicament and frustrations of personal and academic issues that many graduate students in creative practices face (Ibid, 74). I relate to the statement of an anonymous graduate researcher in the 2015–2017 study undertaken as part of the iDARE (Developing New Approaches to Ethics and Research Integrity Training through Challenges Presented by Creative Practice Research) project:

> In another context, discomfort was central to the power of an artwork, with one [graduate researcher] commenting that in situations where 'the point of the work can be to provoke, I do not feel this is unethical. Context is everything and permission cannot always be sought' (Ibid, 84).

Such "discomfort" is where I too attempt to locate my artwork. The use of dead insects found within my apartment provided the impetus to antagonise, without the need to go through the rigorous forms, procedures and justifications now commonplace for research candidates in the arts. Placing myself and the research at the boundaries of ethical quandary resulted in further questioning of the institutionalised nature of "knowledge-exchange" and creative research methods.

These institutional connections led me to associate my lecture-performance with the practice of American artist Andrea Fraser, specifically in reference to her performance/lecture/video *Museum Highlights: a gallery talk* (1989). In the recorded performance, Fraser acts as a guide for an explanatory tour in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Her commentary on the building's cloakroom and toilets, which she addresses with equal reverence as the artworks in the museum, echoes the parody of Smithson's *Hotel Palenque*, subverting and mimicking the grandiose language of the institution. This is not to say that Fraser, nor Smithson, nor I are presenting mere parody. On the contrary, the lecture-performance strategy is fertile ground for laying bare one's own relation to and critique of the power dynamics that underwrite art as an institution.

In this research project, language and moving image become traps to catch relational ethics and theories of shifting positionality. The first presentation of *Distilled Dissonance* was mediated through digital screens for a remote audience of viewers who tuned into the research symposium via Zoom on their respective personal computers and smart devices. The "live" *in real life* installation, however, played with the definition of 'projection' as an etymological metaphor that mirrors the content of the lecture:

> *projection*
> noun 1. a projecting or protruding part.
> 2. the state or fact of jutting out or protruding.
> 3. a causing to jut out or protrude.[5]

As the moths protrude from the "stave," I contemplate my own stuck position of cross-dissonance, while presenting a kite as it juts out, caught in a tree; all three layers (the moths, the kite and I) trapped in the projected image. The application of psychological theory resonates with further definitions of what it *is* to project:

> *Projection*
> a. Psychology, the tendency to attribute to another person, or to the environment, what is actually within oneself.
> b. Psychoanalysis (usually) such an attribution relieving the ego of guilt feelings.[6]

Placing the research in a psychological space makes further reference to Fraser and the way she engages the concept of "projection" in her own practice to explore personal insecurities and emotions amongst her critique of power imbalance. In the two-channel projection, titled *Projection* (2008), Fraser takes on the role of both therapist and patient, in which she recites her own transcribed psychotherapy session (Fraser, 2008). The dynamic is schizophrenic, as Fraser whittles down the mental health institution hierarchy to a single plateau, blurring the distinction between patient and therapist.

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5. Macquarie Dictionary, s.v. "Projection," accessed April 1, 2020, https://www-macquarie-dictionary-com-au.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/features/word/search/?search_word_type=Dictionary&word=projection.
6. Ibid.

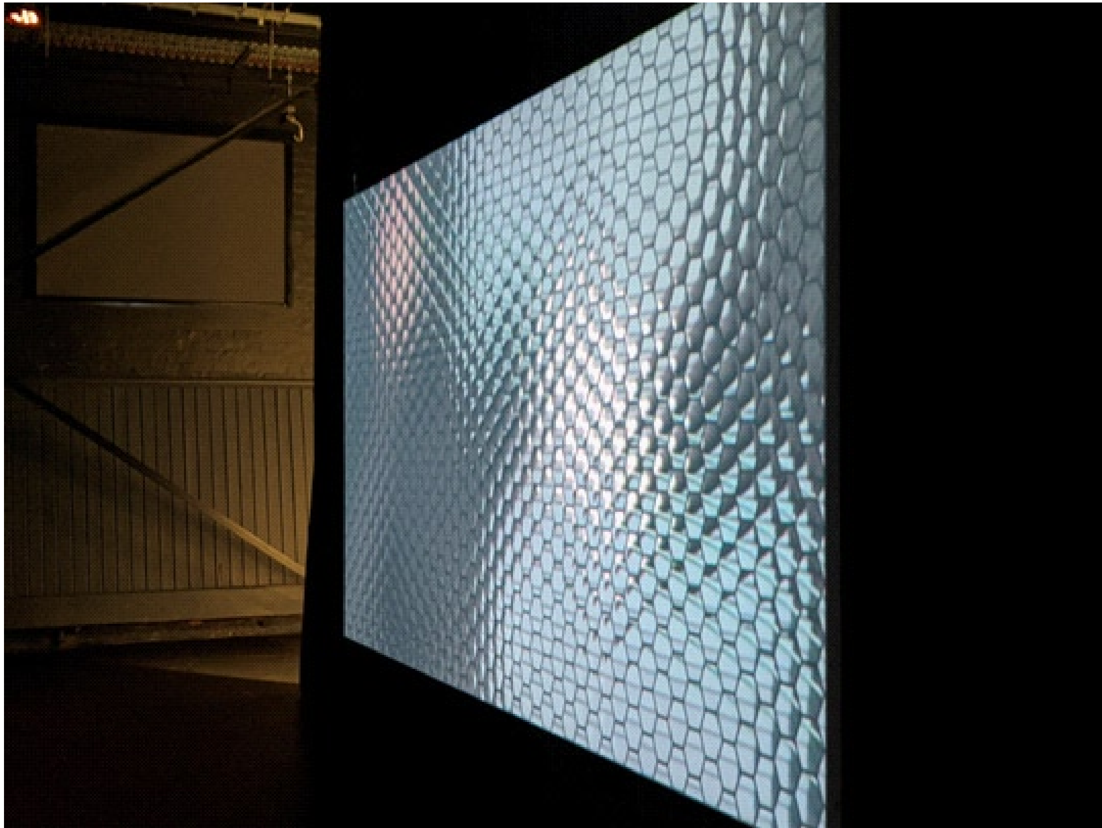

Figure 4: Jen Valender, detail of philosopher Slavoj Žižek from the perspective of the fly, *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, 2021, three-channel colour projection, installation view, Martyn Myer Arena, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

Similar to Fraser, my lecture-performances relate to multiple facets of psychoanalysis, self-performance, self-projection and self-critique. As a result of *Distilled Dissonance: the species known & other beings*, I uncovered a research strategy in which I:

1. Create initial artworks.
2. Interrogate those artworks using agonistic cross-dissonance to surface relational and dialectical dynamics.
3. Continue to do so.
4. Using lecture-performance, allow the line of questioning to become the artwork.

As a result, this strategy provided me with a format to assuage my insect-related guilt while also housing the aporia that swarmed the artmaking.

As this research was almost entirely conducted during the lockdown periods of 2020–2021, the live lecture-performance was initially forfeited due to the

reliability of pre-recorded presentations via Zoom. While at first considered to be a necessity for overcoming unstable internet connections, the potential for the lecture-performance to exist in the performer's absence as a powerful digital ghost was realised during the recording and production of the creative works. Hence, the "staging" of a lecture-performance emerged as the carrier and structure of the artwork. Zoom became a conduit for the practice, offering a digital outlet for conversational parody and critique—a digital-mirror for the epidemic epoch upon which I could project a constructed version of self. As Zoom is a screen-based medium, I engaged with projection in its different guises and definitions to connect reflexivity with the installation of the final artwork—projection as optical; projection of still and moving images; projection as noun, i.e., something protruding; projection as psychoanalysis, i.e., to self-project; and so on. Transitioning the lecture-performance to a digital format allowed me to present several make-believe, constructed versions of myself with ease.

As a multidisciplinary device to critique conventions of knowledge formation and associated notions of professionalism and authenticity, lecture-performance is a valuable tool in artistic and academic fields (Rainer 2017, 19). The lecture-performance-as-artwork not only reflects the institution in its symbolic language and form, but also my struggle, as an artist-researcher, to conform to the university framework. This research is partly an endeavour to investigate artistic practice and partly an endeavour to understand the institutional systems that support and facilitate it. As a structure, the lecture-performance may skip between fact and fiction—a strategy that invites the audience into a space of doubt, such as a glitch, a dodgy edit that cuts away unexpectedly, or absurd statement presented with earnestness. Additional boundaries may be gently pushed upon, getting close to the limits between copyright infringement and fair use, the difference between ethical and unethical practice, and the blurring between a recorded live performance and fictional film.

Talking through the lecture format is an experience of reflexive thinking and formation: a feedback system that lends itself naturally to critique and analysis (Rike, 6). Parody, absurdity and displacement techniques are lecture-performance strategies that may be used to complicate the representation of information, while also creating a reflective space to dig

up past regrets, project subtle self-loathing or daydream. Playing with the techniques and tools of the institution as materials and creative constraints when developing the lecture-performances was central—Zoom, for instance, played a pivotal role in the execution and continuation of my practice and ability to “exhibit” during a pandemic and zeitgeist of horror.

In this research, the lecture-performance is used to capture relational ethics, while mimicking and critiquing knowledge-exchange institutions and the position of artist-researchers within such systems. The cross-dissonance method has an ambipresence: it is ambiguous and ever lingering, surrounding the artist-researcher’s work in its making and outcomes. This research illustrates the expansion, logic and evolution of the lecture-performance as a methodology to parody the split consciousness of the practitioner-researcher within the institution. In presenting the concept of cross-dissonance as a productive strategy and method to produce content for lecture-performances, the process of questioning collapses into the creative output, ultimately becoming the artwork itself.

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Cavity Wounds: writing the female body as an act of societal exposure

Amber Moffat

adapted from BA Hons (Creative Writing) exegesis: “Cavity Wounds: Three Short Stories and a Critical Essay.” School of Arts and Humanities; Edith Cowan University 2020.

amber@ambermoffat.com

Abstract

The body is central to the human experience, making fictional bodies potent tools for exploring societal anxieties. This essay reflects on the process of writing the three short stories that comprise *Cavity Wounds*: “Blood Eagle,” “Inside Play,” and “The Debrider.” These stories explore the role of the female body in contemporary capitalist society, using current bodily trends and practices as starting points for speculative fiction. Psychoanalytic literary theory is used to analyse the work, exploring creative writing in relation to the unconscious and its relationship to the body. Freud’s uncanny, Kristeva’s abject and Bakhtin’s grotesque provide insights into the author’s creative process and ways of understanding how literary meaning is generated in the narratives. The author’s creative practice is also investigated in terms of feminist thought, considering Cixous’s perspectives on writing and Bartky’s insights into representations of the female body. The short stories are considered alongside other works of fiction that challenge dominant discourses about the female body, positioning the author’s creative writing within existing fields of literary investigation.

Cavity Wounds: writing the female body as an act of societal exposure

This essay contends that literary exploration of bodily experience can reveal tensions just beneath the surface of contemporary society. In 2020 I embarked on a period of practice-led research which resulted in a collection of short stories about alteration and damage to the female body called *Cavity Wounds*. A cavity wound is defined as a wound that extends beneath the layers of the skin into the body's deeper structures (Timmons and Cooper, 2008). Like the wound type that the collection takes its name from, the stories expose underlying structures that shape the way the female body is experienced, perceived and managed. This essay reflects on the writing of the three short stories that comprise *Cavity Wounds*: "Blood Eagle" (Moffat 2021a), *"*Inside Play*"* (Moffat 2021b), and "The Debrider" (Moffat 2021c). The investigation considers my creative practice in terms of feminist perspectives on writing (Cixous 1978; 1986) and the body (Bartky 1990), framing the stories as part of feminist discourse. I use psychoanalytic literary theory to examine the creative work in relation to the unconscious and its relationship to the body, particularly theories of the uncanny (Freud [1919] 2003), the abject (Kristeva 1982) and the grotesque (Bakhtin 1984). These concepts provide insights into my creative process and offer ways of understanding how literary meaning is generated in the stories. I position my work within existing fields of literary investigation, discussing other works of fiction that also challenge dominant discourses about the female body.

The process of developing the stories of *Cavity Wounds* was primarily an investigation through departure, a movement towards that which cannot yet be seen. As Hélène Cixous describes:

> Writing is not arriving; most of the time it's not arriving. One must go on foot, with the body. One has to go away, leave the self. How far must one not arrive in order to write, how far must one wander and wear out and have pleasure? One must walk as far as the night. One's own night. Walking through the self toward the dark (Sellers, 1994, 203)

The stories in *Cavity Wounds* trace a journey of this kind. As a writer who inhabits a female body, the exploration was both an exercise in going far away and coming painfully close. "Blood Eagle," "Inside Play" and "The Debrider" are stories of the female body and the contemporary contexts in which it wanders. While the work is undoubtedly linked to my experience living as part of capitalist structures in urban/suburban Australia, it is also rooted in the more fundamental position of my existence; that is within the parameters of my own flesh and the realms of my own psyche. In this way I walked through myself when writing these works, towards the darkness of "one's own night" that Cixous describes.

The stories were produced consecutively over a period of three months. "Blood Eagle" was written first, followed by "Inside Play" and then "The Debrider." "Blood Eagle" centres around the experience of Beth, a woman in her late twenties who is striving for bodily perfection. It conveys a fraught experience of suburban life in contemporary Australia and reveals an uncomfortable power dynamic between Beth and her male partner. "Blood Eagle" combines depictions of the body under pressure through intense exercise with violent imagery that Beth has seen on TV. The title of the story refers to a key image in the story, the "Blood Eagle": a ritual method of execution referenced in Norse literature. The story begins with Beth having a delusional episode at the gym. As her trainer encourages her to past her pain threshold, Beth moves outside of her body, watching herself from above as her back opens into a bloody wound. Later in the story, Beth's discomfort in her body is represented through a pain in her shoulder that she cannot alleviate. The narrative culminates in Beth seriously injuring herself with a meat thermometer.

The second story I wrote was "Inside Play," a work of speculative fiction that follows Ash, a mother who purchases a product to apply to "problem areas" of her body. The story begins at a child's birthday party at an indoor play centre where Ash meets another mother who is selling Ezy-Contour, a product that utilises tiny fat-eating creatures called "hirudo adipolis" to achieve targeted weight loss. The eggs of the hirudo adipolis hatch when they come into contact with human skin and are applied to the human body in oil via Ezy-Contour. Ash applies Ezy-Contour oil to her belly and then over several weeks experiences the hirudo adipolis growing and moving inside her as they

consume her body fat. Once they have done their job, Ash must remove and kill the creatures, a process that proves to be both grotesque and traumatic.

“The Debrider” was the third work I produced. It depicts a future in which the beauty industry has expanded into the realms of skin production, breeding animals specifically for the purpose of replacing natural human skin with an enhanced and endlessly upgradable “NuSkin.” The protagonist of “The Debrider” is a female high-school student who works in a NuSkin production facility but cannot afford to replace her own natural skin. The story follows her work caring for dermlings (the young animals from which skin is harvested) and explores her hatred of her own skin which has been ravaged by acne. The protagonist decides to endure significant physical risk to acquire her own NuSkin, agreeing to be operated on by a man still learning the craft of affixing dermling skin to the human body. The story ends just before she goes under anaesthetic and realises her donor skin will come from one of the adult creatures in the facility instead of from the valuable dermlings.

“Blood Eagle” does not contain any speculative elements, “Inside Play” introduces an imagined means of body modification that could exist within our current society, and “The Debrider” depicts a world in which advances in biotechnology have fundamentally altered the scale and impact of the beauty industry. The way the stories became more speculative was not consciously planned, but rather an unfurling and extending of the ideas through the process of writing. In relation to Cixous’s words, this development could be considered a means of going deeper into the night, with each story moving further through and beyond my own experience.

Producing the short stories for *Cavity Wounds* embodied the concept of “nomadic emergence” as defined by Harry Whitehead (2013). In a similar approach to that of Cixous, Whitehead positions the practice of writing itself as a method of enquiry. His description of the process of creative writing as “interrogating unfinished thinking” resonates with my experience of creating *Cavity Wounds* (Whitehead 2013, 104). When undertaking the practice-led research that resulted in the three stories, I interrogated my unfinished thinking about the various functions the female body performs in contemporary capitalist societies. According to Brad Haseman, “practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows”

(2006, 100). He also asserts that, “the second characteristic of practice-led researchers lies in their insistence that research outputs’ claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic language and forms of their practice” (Haseman 2006, 100). The stories of *Cavity Wounds* are the symbolic expression of my research into literary depictions of the body in relation to the physical and social environments I have experienced living in urban/suburban Australia. They are also a means of challenging some of the dominant ideologies about the female body that exist in these contexts. When analysing the physical and social environments I was exploring through *Cavity Wounds* I considered Michel Foucault’s (1980; [1977] 1995; 2003) concepts of power relations, but as the stories evolved it was the body itself that emerged as the primary focus of the work.

The body is central to the human experience, making fictional bodies potent tools for exploring societal anxieties. When depicting the body, authors can convey unease viscerally, allowing an intense experience for the reader. Psychoanalytic literature provides insight into the way literary texts can operate in this sense, with the work of Sigmund Freud being foundational. As observed by Jean-Michel Rabaté (2014, 106), Freud was a literary scholar who considered an understanding of literary criticism to be essential to the work of the psychoanalyst. Freud’s concept of the uncanny ([1919] 2003) is informed by works of fiction that feature damage, or fear of damage, to the body. His observation that, “The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar,” explains the particular resonance of fictional texts that relate to primal fears and are recognised by the reader on a deep psychic level (Freud [1919] 2003, 124). Notably, Freud argues that Nathaniel’s fear of losing his eyes in E.T.A. Hoffman’s story The “Sand-Man” (1817) illustrates the infantile castration complex (Ibid, 140). Although I acknowledge subsequent critiques of Freud’s phallocentric approach such as that by Luce Irigary (1974), I consider Howard Levine’s observation that the castration complex can be viewed as “an existential universal of the human condition (limitations and loss)” compelling and believe that damage to bodies can symbolise the essential vulnerability of being human (Levine 2018, 110).

The bodily damage sustained in *Cavity Wounds* could be understood to represent the essential vulnerability of humanity in contemporary capitalist

society, but it is specifically positioned in relation to the female body and psyche. This is undoubtedly connected to my own position as a female writer and is a manifestation of Cixous's instruction to: "Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out" (Cixous and Clement 1986, 97). When reflecting on the stories of *Cavity Wounds* after the creative process was complete, I found that the work revealed a world that was hidden deep within my body, one that could not have been conjured from conscious thought alone. In this place I discovered some unexpected alignments with Freudian understandings of the female psyche, particularly in the story "Blood Eagle." This story differs to other works in *Cavity Wounds* because ultimately, the bodily damage is not undertaken to achieve aesthetic improvement. Beth is trying to release the tension in her shoulder when she injures herself by inserting a meat thermometer into her flesh. Although Beth is shown to be concerned with her physical appearance, the injury that she inflicts upon herself at the end of the story is a way of releasing pain and experiencing pleasure rather than a means of bodily alteration. This resonates with ideas of Helene Deutsch, who extended Freud's concepts of the castration complex in relation to female masochism, sexual desire, childbirth and the maternal relationship (Deutsch, 1930). Deutsch defines a "masochistic triad" of castration, rape and childbirth as being at the root of female neurosis. Beth's episode at the gym could be read as neurosis in this sense, with her delusion in the gym having connotations of castration in the way it represents bodily injury, and also of rape and childbirth in the way it depicts a violent opening of the female body (Ibid, 57). Although Beth is not a mother, she invokes a hypothetical child that she would protect when telling Rhys about how she thinks she could remain silent if she was being "Blood Eagle"d (Moffat 2021a, 165). This reflects Deutsch's idea that masochism is inherently tied to the maternal principle that drives women whether they are mothers or not (Deutsch 1930, 58). The pain Beth experiences in her shoulder evokes gynaecological pain and the sensations experienced in pregnancy: "a spasm loosened and tightened rapidly, a creature arching on a hook" (Moffat, 2021a, 162). This physical pain also echoes the psychic pain and entrapment she experiences in her relationship, with Rhys holding the economic power and controlling the space in which she lives.

The shadow of Beth's entrapment in "Blood Eagle" can also be linked to the concept of narcissism. Sandra Bartky considers narcissism from both the psychoanalytic and existential perspectives, favouring de Beauvoir's argument that female narcissism persists due to the "situation" of women (Bartky 1990, 38). Bartky incorporates Freud's understanding of narcissism with the existential context, proposing that the mechanism of female narcissism is tied to the capitalist, patriarchal structures that women must function within, postulating that the internalised "Other" that views the female self from outside is often a manifestation of the "fashion-beauty complex" (Ibid, 39). Beth's outer body experience can be read as illustrating Bartky's assertion, particularly as it happens at the gym, a setting that is built around physical manifestation of the fashion-beauty complex. Not only does Beth see herself from above, from the point of view of an Other, but she sees her body opening to take a form reminiscent of female genitalia. The way Beth's lungs lift out then echoes childbirth, with Beth's outer-body perspective allowing her to witness the birthing process from the view of an Other, applying a narcissistic lens to Deutsch's masochistic triad. Beth's final act of self-injury with the meat thermometer reinforces a psychoanalytic reading of "Blood Eagle," with the penetrative act having connotations of rape. Since the meat thermometer is a tool for inserting into dead flesh, its use to pierce Beth's body also functions as uncanny in the way it damages her body as if it is already dead.

Primal fears and the uncanny are also relevant to my second story, *"*Inside Play.*"* The hirudo adipolis that grow in Ash's body illustrate Ernst Jentsch's proposition as reiterated by Freud ([1919] 2003, 135), that uncertainty about whether something is animate or not produces an uncanny effect. The concept has retained currency as technological advances, particularly bio-technology, elicit myriad possibilities for the uncanny body. Fred Botting (2008, 8) considers the uncanny to be an inevitable effect of modernity in the way it redraws boundaries. Ash experiences grief, repulsion and guilt when she expels the larvae from her belly, the conflicting emotions reflecting the unclear boundary between the creatures and her body. When discussing uncanny motifs in contemporary literature, Anneleen Masschelein asserts that all forms of the technologically altered "posthuman" are related to the uncanny and explicates the close relationship between the uncanny and the grotesque, noting their significant overlap in regard to confusion over what

constitutes the human body (Masschelein 2011, 149, 67). The hirudo adipolis of *"Inside Play"* function as both uncanny and grotesque, their eruption out of the body evoking both fear and repulsion.

The grotesque body plays a significant role in the literary canon, operating as something that is fundamentally uncertain and unstable. In his analysis of François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the grotesque body is not complete; rather, it constantly rebuilds itself, making another body (Bakhtin 1984, 317). In this way the grotesque body can perform the function of threatening boundaries and disorienting audiences. The particular boundaries that the grotesque literary body threatens can be understood in terms of tensions operating in society at the time of the work's production. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund note that Bakhtin, "distinguishes between grotesque forms in different historical periods, suggesting that grotesquerie shifts as perceptions of monstrosity, laughter and the body change over time" (Edwards and Graulund 2013, 25). The grotesque which is depicted in *"Inside Play"* is specific to contemporary culture in which human body fat is reviled and products to eliminate, reduce and hide fat on the body are ubiquitous. Fat can be accumulated, redistributed and removed from the body, making it an inherently unstable part of our physicality. Hair can also represent instability and the grotesque as it exists in an ambiguous space across the internal and external, the self and the other. In "Blood Eagle," Beth's contempt for female body hair is shown through her interaction with beauty therapist Renee. The relationship between female body hair and the grotesque is also explored through *The Natural Way of Things* (Wood 2015), with the regrowing of the imprisoned women's body hair being described extensively. Control of body hair, like control of body fat, can be considered in terms of Bartky's fashion-beauty complex and the role played by industries that promote 'management' of the female body (Bartky 1990, 39).

The desire to manage the female body can be understood in terms of the abject female body as defined by Julia Kristeva (1982). Like Freud's ([1919] 2003) articulation of the uncanny, Kristeva frames the abject in a psychoanalytic understanding of the self. She describes the experience of the abject as a recognition of something from the self that is "radically separate" (Kristeva 1982, 2). Bodily expulsion is fundamental to the concept

of the abject. Kristeva describes the act of spitting out food being an abject experience as food is not an “other” (1982, 3). This blurring of self and other forms Kristeva’s understanding of the female body’s capacity to represent the abject in terms of the ambiguity between inside and outside inherent in the maternal body (1982). As noted by Edwards and Graulund, “Kristeva is in a sense reminiscent of Bakhtin’s overflowing body… but with a distinct feminist twist.” (2013, 34). Kristeva posits that the female body can evoke a particular kind of disgust which relates to the horror of potential reincorporation into the mother’s body. Barbara Creed (1986) applied this idea of “monstrous-feminine” in order to examine how horror operates in films in which the dangerous creatures embody characteristics of the female reproductive system. The hirudo adipolis in *“Inside Play”* function in a similar way, with their development in Ash’s body mirroring foetal growth: “They’re beings in their own right. Part of her, but separate too. Grown plump from her body” (Moffat, 2021b, 17). The process of extracting the hirudo adipolis is reminiscent of an induced birth in which forceps are used and their appearance outside their host echoes physical aspects of an infant’s body: “They look like angry little legs, segmented rolls of fat kicking hopelessly” (Moffat, 2020b, p. 14). The shadow of birth trauma also manifests through Ash’s belly itself as it is scarred from a caesarean section. Ash’s relationship with her daughter Dulcie can also be considered in relation to Kristeva’s abject, with the boundary between her body and Dulcie’s potentially breaking down through the gift of the last remaining hirudo adipolis. This possible re-merging of Ash and Dulcie’s bodies introduces the spectre of reincorporation into the mother’s body.

The threat of reincorporation into the maternal body is somewhat realised in the “The Debrider,” as the narrator is given the skin of Pam, the sow, instead of that of dermlings. The female capacity for reproduction is depicted as grotesque in “The Debrider” through the use and exploitation of animal bodies. This is similar to *The Natural Way of Things* (Wood, 2015), in which rabbits represent the maternal body, linking them back to the imprisoned women who must eat them to survive. This concept is illustrated powerfully in the novel by the doll that is made for Hetty when she agrees to have sex with the despised male guard Boncer. The making of the doll from scavenged scraps and rabbit skin includes a rape-like construction of a “pockety hole” (Wood, 224). This aspect of the doll can be considered in terms of Mary

Russo's (1995) concept of the grotesque cave and its relation to the vagina. Similarly, in the stalls of "The Debrider," the sows' vaginas can be understood as grotesque caves. Entry into the sows' vaginas is restricted to women who have been through childbirth themselves, inferring that the space is dangerous and secret. The rule also acts as an acknowledgement of the shared animal and human reproductive experiences. Like *The Natural Way of Things*, the line between animal and human is blurred through the motif of the rabbit in Leonora Carrington's short story "White Rabbits" (1975). The rabbits are imbued with the human characteristic of meat-eating in the story, and it is implied that the eating of the carnivorous rabbits' flesh strips people of their humanity, not through death but via fundamental alteration. The question of whether human identity is connected to what the body consumes and incorporates is also raised by "The Debrider" as NuSkin is made from the skin of another species. While bodily transformation occurs through surgical grafting in "The Debrider," it occurs simply from the act of eating in "White Rabbits."

The human body requires openings to eat, excrete, and reproduce, linking bodily holes to the concepts of transformation and renewal. Bodily holes feature in all three stories of *Cavity Wounds* and although they provide different narrative functions in each story, they all relate to alteration and change. In "Blood Eagle" Beth attains freedom by making a hole in her body with the meat thermometer while in "Inside Play" the hirudo adipolis make multiple holes in Ash's belly, altering her physical and mental state. In "The Debrider" the skin stock originates from the holes of the sows' vaginas, while the narrator's clogged and inflamed pores represent her bodily instability. For the narrator of "The Debrider" it is problematic dermal perforations that make her willing to have her entire skin washed away in preparation for a NuSkin, the act being both a means to control the overflowing body and a manifestation of it. This depiction of the body's borders being breached in the three stories evokes Kristeva's abject, with the bodily hole facilitating this transgression of boundaries. For the characters in the stories of *Cavity Wounds*, the bodily hole operates as both a source of fear and a means of potential transformation. Kathe Koja's novel *The Cipher* (1991) also explores the capacity for a hole to imbue both terror and desire. Although the hole is in the floor rather than in a body, the hole's interaction with the body is vital to its power. The hole is dubbed the "Funhole" by Nicholas and

Nakota, who become obsessed with its capacity to transform bodies into monstrous iterations. The novel draws parallels between the hole, sexuality and creativity. After they lower a video recorder down the hole and record gruesome sights from within it, Nicholas notes that, “To me it was the affirmation that the Funhole was not a thing or a place but an actual process” (Koja 1991, 56). This concept of portal as process is mirrored in Cixous’s description of writing being an entry into a space in which one is transformed:

> Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me—the other that I am and am not, that I don’t know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live—that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me (Sellers 1994, 42).

Cixous’s also utilises the imagery of the hole in her creative writing. In *Breaths* (Sellers 1994), Cixous’s narrator imagines assailing and degrading a mother figure, saying, “I want her full to bursting. A swarm of bees in a lion’s carcass” (Sellers 1994, 54). In this image, holes are implicit in the concept of entry and exit of from the mother’s body. It seems there is a transformative process within the mother’s body and it is one which is frenetic and dangerous. Her flesh is shown to be simultaneously ripe with the promise of life and representative of death and decay. The narrator goes on to list a series of violent and degrading acts against the mother. In her editorial commentary, Susan Sellers positions *Breaths* in relation to Cixous’s ideas about the maternal body evoking both desire and fear because it holds the secret of life (1994, 52). This can also be related to Russo’s (1995) concept of the grotesque cave and the vagina. The link between the female body and creativity has resonance for feminist writing practice. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1978) Cixous envisages feminine writing to go beyond the male perspective into a mutable form, stating, “I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation” (1978, 890). Cixous’s visceral fiction such as *Breaths* reiterates this point, with the broad twisting threads of narrative being both fleshy and elusive.

Like Cixous’s “body words” (1978, 887), the alteration of the bodily flesh can be used in fiction both to evoke horror and highlight societal issues and

anxieties. In discussing the concept of "body horror" in relation to David Cronenberg's films, Edwards and Graulund reference the work of Philip Brophy, noting how he frames body horror as being not about the fear of death but rather the fear of not being able to control one's own body (2013, 57). Literary depictions of failed attempts to control the body can be analysed in terms of the society in which they were written to reveal underlying tensions particular to the time and context. Mary Shelley's seminal work, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* ([1818] 1977), about a scientist named Victor Frankenstein who makes a monstrous amalgam of a creature from collected body parts is relevant in this sense. Summing up the ultimate tragedy of his pursuit, Victor says to Walton, "I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been" (Shelley [1818] 1977, 38). The act of making the monster is an exercise in both the grotesque and uncanny, as Victor uses corpses to piece together a form that approximates the human body. Allison Lemley observes, "Frankenstein is a conscious example of a writer critiquing prevailing scientific views of the day, namely, the materialist and vitalist debates" (2018, 3). The work of *Cavity Wounds* is a commentary on the position of women and their bodies in contemporary Australian society with all three stories revealing labours and anxieties related to improving the appearance of the female body.

The methods of bodily improvement in the stories of *Cavity Wounds* become progressively more extreme, reflecting Bordo's statement that trying to achieve the feminine ideal is "a pursuit without a terminus" (Bordo 1993, 166). While "Blood Eagle" features exercise as a means of bodily control, "Inside Play" introduces fat extraction, and "The Debrider" finally depicts a world in which surgical skin replacement has become commonplace. This escalation reflects the society in which the stories were written, in which the rapid advancement of medical technology is accompanied by increasing expectations about our ability to control the body. Donna Mazza's "The True Tail" (2019) also interrogates scientific advances and changing social norms in relation to the body. While the protagonist Scarlett augments her body with an animated tail which brings her pleasure and pride, seemingly enhancing her life, the story ends with the tail strangling her, reminiscent of Victor Frankenstein's serpent of a wish that was lethal in its gratification. "The True Tail" explores the increasingly blurred boundary between that which is the body and that which is its ornament, responding to the competing desires

in contemporary culture for the body to be natural yet enhanced, efficient yet decadent, and to be vehicles of pleasure while simultaneously being submissive to painful modifications. Like the stories of *Cavity Wounds*, the cultural context of the body is vital to the literary meaning in the work.

Although the bodies of the protagonists in "Blood Eagle" and "Inside Play" in some ways perform as Foucault's "docile bodies," their entry into the realms of the grotesque and abject undermine their compliance with cultural norms ([1977] 1995, 136). This can be related to Foucault's view that the grotesque is part of broader power discourses (1980; [1977] 1995; 2003). As noted by Edwards and Graulund, Foucault echoes Bakhtin in the way he shows that the grotesque is positioned as abnormal and separate from prevailing ideology (2013, 32). Foucault's perspective on resistance as an inevitable aspect of power relations is also relevant to the way *Cavity Wounds* aims to challenge dominant discourses around the female body in contemporary society, particularly those that operate as part of Bartky's fashion-beauty complex (Foucault 1980, 142; Bartky 1980). For example, in "Inside Play," the final stage of Ash's self-transformation is not depicted as a moment of glory but rather as a grotesque scene in which the body's borders have been breached in a horrific way. The abject hirudo adipolis soil the cleansing space of the bathroom until Ash flushes them down the toilet like bodily waste.

Dominant discourses about the body are disrupted through setting in "The Debrider." The settings in this story perform a different function to those in "Blood Eagle" and "Inside Play." Rather than presenting a contrast to the grotesquerie and abjection that occurs within them, the interior spaces of "The Debrider" are themselves manifestations of the grotesque. The stalls that house the sows and dermlings are the physical expression of repression, confinement and exploitation, while the debriding rooms are places where the body's borders are completely broken down and eliminated. Both the animals' and humans' bodies are shown to be subject to systems of disciplinary power within the stalls:

> When I open the door to the stalls the cries are louder, reverberating off the stainless steel walls. A sow shrieks and others answer her. Grunts and squeals merge, filling the large space. Figures in white overalls move up and down stalls, carry

> things out of trolleys, slam gates shut behind them. It's like an underground station: the rush of fetid air, artificial light, so many bodies. But the screeching here isn't metal on metal, it's flesh calling flesh (Moffat, 2021c).

In his discussion about the monstrous in contemporary society, Fred Botting describes the homogenised, technologically modified body as being utterly routine, comprising "floor cleaners in junk-food outlets to patients wired up on operating tables" (Botting 2008, 159). The mutilated bodies and settings of the clinic have become routine for the narrator of "The Debrider"; she chooses to work there, participating in the self-modification economy with the hope of purchasing her own NuSkin. Gary Kilworth's "Hogfoot Right and Bird Hands" ([1987] 2011) also evokes horror through the depiction of a world in which the mutilated and uncanny body is routine. The story features a woman living in isolation but for the various "pets" that are created from her own redundant body parts. By giving these body part pets autonomy, Kilworth destabilises the concept of the body as something which relates to an individual person and mind. The brutality that the body-part pets are capable of serves as an extension of castration anxiety as the severed body part violently turns upon the body it was taken from. Anxiety about the loss of a body part is expressed in "The Debrider" through the narrator's repulsion at the act of debridement and her discomfort about being exposed without her skin, but ultimately her contempt for her body without a NuSkin means that she is prepared to undergo the traumatic procedure of rebuilding herself.

Like Bakhtin's grotesque body that is constantly rebuilding itself, the act of writing *Cavity Wounds* was a process of dismantling boundaries in order to make something new. The realm of my unconscious leaked into the stories in ways that I did not predict, embodying unarticulated anxieties. Kim Ian Michasiw (1998) posits that cultural production not only serves to organise our desires but also to provides forms, or "screens" for us to attach our anxieties to. He contends that the Gothic scene is a screen, or a displacement in psychoanalytic terms, in the way it masks something else. This idea also relates to William Veeder's argument that Gothic fiction is a means to heal the wounds that society inflicts upon itself (1998, 21). Veeder argues that the healing provided by Gothic narratives is transformational in the way it gives voice to the repressed, according this power to the texts'

common ability to ask the reader, “Why are you so afraid?” (Veeder 1998, 37). I contend that this is also the question that the writers of unsettling or frightening fiction must ask themselves when creating their work. For me, the act of writing *Cavity Wounds* involved not only an interrogation of my unfinished thinking about the female body in contemporary society, but also an excavation of my unconscious feeling. For parts of the creative process I was outside myself like Beth in “Blood Eagle,” seeing the narratives bloody and open from above. At other stages I was like Ash from “Inside Play,” trying to control the form of the work: putting things in, taking things out. And at the deepest points of the journey I was simultaneously the narrator of “The Debrider” and Pam, the sow, coveting my own skin for story.

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Entangled Practice

Alira Callaghan

adapted from PhD (Fine Art) exegesis: "Process as Outcome: Methods of engagement with the nonhuman object/thing/material." School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry; Curtin University 2021.

aliracallaghan@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper considers how an approach to practice-led research, that doesn't set out to meet expected outcomes but rather allows for the method of being truly practice-led to guide creative decisions, can be used to develop further understanding about the material world.

Attending to the ways creative practice and theoretical research can cut across disciplinary boundaries I establish an entangled practice that holds space for inter-disciplinary knowledge apparatuses that support attempts at remaining curious. Following the practice-led lead comes to be a way of maintaining this attentiveness, enabling close consideration of the everyday object/thing/materials encountered in my practice. The entangled approach taken in this research uses Agnes Varda's process of gleaning, Vinciane Despret's proposition of asking the right questions and Natalie Loveless' commitment to curiosity to tape together a supportive but malleable framework for approaching nonhuman object/thing/materials and it is the unwieldy, uncontainable act of doing this creative research that I regard as an entangled practice. By approaching research this way an entangled practice can hold a project in a perpetual cycle of thinking/making/showing—a continuous process of doing research that folds back on itself while expanding and changing. It is through using these approaches that I establish the processorial object/thing/material: a form that exists as a temporary construct of an entangled practice manifested by prioritising curiosity and question-asking over resolved art object outcomes.

Entangled Practice

How to know a sponge? They're odd, I use kitchen sponges everyday but even they have many varieties. So many different versions of largely the same thing. Take it out of the space you usually encounter it and what is it to you? Touch, squeeze, poke, rub, cut, pick, sand, roll, throw, press, stack, wrap, hang, join, affix, all while moving around, in and out. Spending long enough with it as a thing in itself that can be separated from the usual context you would encounter it in. Now, it is a curious nonhuman object/thing/material. How to decipher it? It perplexes once the manufactured function is removed, but how to extend this feeling beyond its current occurrence, beyond the event? Trying things, learning about material qualities. What it might be able to do, not what it is made for. Questioning why I do some things but not others. Trying to reflect on my habits of interaction. Recording, pushing, leaving alone, pictures, sketches, notes, slow processes of construction, immediate actions, sitting, standing, walking, staring, watching, listening.

This paper considers how the processes of a practice-led research project that champions curiosity and entangled relations with the nonhuman object/thing/material can move beyond the bounds of the theory from which it draws. In this move, new challenges are encountered and negotiated in terms of process and unexpected revelations. I lay out the particular mode of practice-led research I have employed to support the aims of the broader project and unpack the terms relevant to creative research in the institution in order to better understand the role this project plays within such a space. In exploring what "entangled practice" means in the context of this project, I discuss the act of learning-through-doing that involves the cycle of thinking, making, and showing art. This process provides opportunities to rethink, reshape, and reconsider common axioms, and move beyond such ways of thinking and towards understandings that shift creative practice into new spaces. Within this article the words "research" and "practice" come to be blurred, as research consists of multiple approaches (reading, thinking, writing, making, watching, showing)—all of which are interwoven in my project.

When I am holding anti-slip grip tape I am thinking of how to write about

Figure 1: Seeing again, seeing differently with collage of documentation images, 2019. Alira Callaghan.

it; when I am writing a paper I am thinking about it being an act of creative research; sometimes when I sit at my computer I record myself and watch it back to see what it looks like when my mind was processing something I read or wrote or thought. It is interesting to see what doing artistic research (i.e., practice) looks like, even when outside of the studio.

As I am aiming to keep this research project in a state of potential rather than one with final outcomes, a practice-based approach is not of particular benefit to me. Practice-based research embeds research work in creative practice, but it sees practice as something which comes to be defined as resolved and shown to the public in its complete state (Candy 2006, 1). There is a key point of difference in how I am viewing distinctions between practice-led and practice-based: when Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds use 'practice', they are alluding to the outcome or, as they say, "artefact"; whereas when I say practice, I am referring to the act of *doing* art practice, whereby practice is the process of undertaking, and spending time in doing, art which may result in an artifact but that is not the only form of outcome (Candy and Edmonds, 2018). It is already accepted that practice-led research includes

the surrounding actions of theorisation and documentation but a broader imagining of practice-led research that considers that same theorisation and documentation *as* the practice, not a consequence of it, is what I am establishing (Smith and Dean 2009, 5).

The notion of practice I employ is akin to doing research. Practice, in this sense, constitutes research if research is exploration, investigation, questioning, and experimentation. As Estelle Barrett says, “there has been a general shift in the arts and humanities towards a second mode of discovery and learning, which Ian Biggs (2009) describes as a mode of knowledge production that emphasizes a context of application, heterogeneity, a reduced reliance on hierarchy and acknowledgment that the production of new knowledge is potentially a transformative act; that is to say that the *production of knowledge is experiential and performative*” (Barrett 2013, 63-64; emphasis added). In a similar vein, Anna Hickey-Moody establishes practice *as* research as being “experimental and materialist because it values responsiveness to context and recognizes agency in the material world, which matters because it means research is always acknowledged as a process of making and value is placed on the research process as well as the product” (Hickey-Moody 2015, 171). This understanding of practice as research is indicative of my entangled practice, one that is informed by theoretical contexts pertaining to the nonhuman and also sees inherent value in how the outcome of practice can be processes, not just artworks.

In addition to locating in both practice as research and artistic research some aspects of the practice-led approach being formulated in this project, I connect Graeme Sullivan’s postdiscipline practice with new materialism’s transversality. Postdiscipline practice is particularly reminiscent of a transversal mode of research which Sullivan explains is “the way visual arts research takes place within and beyond existing discipline boundaries as dimensions of theory are explored” (Sullivan 2010, 111). Helen Palmer and Stanimir Panayotov explain transversality as “non-categorical and non-judgmental. It defies disciplinary categories and resists hierarchies” (Palmer and Panayotov, 2016). Here, I bring Sullivan’s postdiscipline practice into proximity with new materialism’s transversality and, in doing so, feel that my practice-led research form, somewhat like the object/thing/material involved, remains intentionally loosely bound so as to defy disciplinary categorisation.

Figure 2: Developing a thesis structure in the studio, 2018. Alira Callaghan.

While Sullivan advocates for a way of doing art research that still "maintains a degree of integrity," I say the more heretical and radical the better in order to keep carving out research that *comes to know* through curious and caring knowledge apparatuses (Sullivan 2010, 112).

Following the Practice-led Lead

So the artisan, the craftsman, the maker, is someone who has to be ever-observant of the movements of stuff around him, and has to bring the movement of his or her own conscious awareness into line with the movements of the surrounding materials. Thus making something is a mode of questioning and response, in which the maker puts a question to the material, and the material answers to it; the maker puts another question, the material answers again, and so on. Each answers to the other. I use the term *correspondence* to capture this mutual responsiveness. In making, the maker follows the material and that process of following the material is a correspondence between the flow of the material and the movement and flow of the maker's consciousness (Ingold 2015, 64).

Following the lead of practice-led research into uncertain terrain has resulted in discoveries and paths I could not have foreseen at the outset. Letting these processes unfold has proliferated the act of learning-through-doing which sees sometimes intuitive or curiosity-driven action reflected upon, repeated, questioned, done again differently, speculated, and considered. Each action brings with it a plethora of things to know and learn again. When learning-through-doing, I feel I am involved in what Hélène Frichot describes as "gleaning" (Frichot 2019, 83). Drawn from Agnes Varda (who, in a different iteration of my research, could have been an interesting affiliate because of her experimental approach to thinking, making, showing), gleaning is the embodied act of locating.

> What do we do when we glean? We select, extract, gather, pull out of context, recombine and often we have to be prepared to pick up the leftovers because, no doubt, someone has been there before us. This pertains to well-worn concepts too. We compose exhaustive combinatorials of things and string them together in search of some meaning, of some thread to follow, however artificially strung out. (Ibid, 83).

In the context of my project, I glean both through theories and in situated practice. Gleaning, as it occurs with the object/thing/material I engage, also involves myriad acts and actions—touch, squeeze, poke, rub, cut, pick, sand, roll, throw, press, stack, wrap, hang, join, affix (Ibid.). "Gleaning is an art of stooping down to pore over what has been forgotten, to pick at the earth, to pluck at the pavement in the dishevelled aftermath of an event. It is an art of survival. It is an art of creative resistance in response to a fast-paced consumptive lifestyle" (Ibid.). For me, gleaning is as much an observational encounter as it is interactive. A lot of watching and seeing needs to occur; this helps to see the spaces between, the spaces where the relations are happening, the spaces where the object/thing/material is expanding, pushing against their predetermined boundaries. While this watching may come at a distance, it is not the distanced, removed observation of reflection, but more in stride with Donna Haraway's distinction of diffraction, for "unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere" (Haraway 1997, 273). Rather than re-representing, thinking and working diffractively creates critical engagement aimed at deeper understandings. As Evelien Geert and

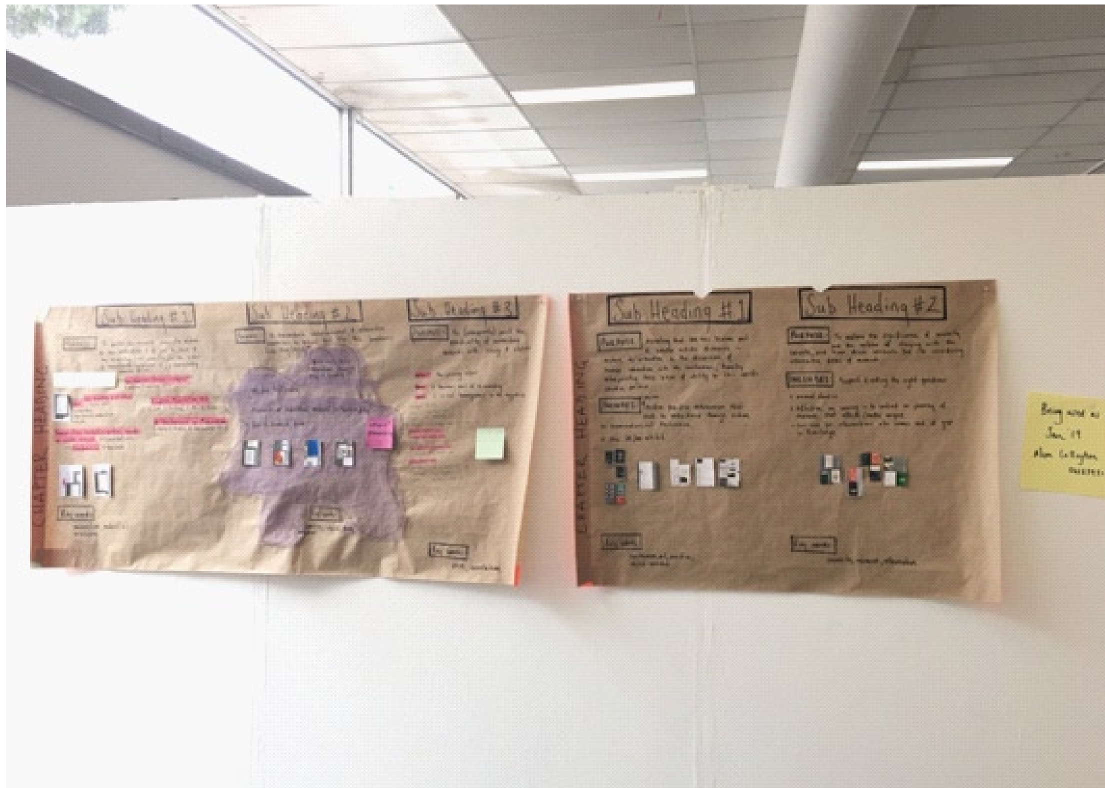

Figure 3: Developing a thesis structure in the studio, 2018. Alira Callaghan.

Iris van der Tuin say, “seeing and thinking diffractively therefore implies self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world” (Geert and Tuin 2021, 175).

My approach to practice-led research has also been impacted by object-oriented ontology and new materialism. This is seen in bringing, across disciplines, those questions of what constitutes a nonhuman; what hierarchies look like in creative practice (if considering matters of vitality or animism); what championing curiosity and difference (as productive, rather than alterity) might look like; and even for asking what the right questions are for engaging with the nonhuman object/thing/material in creative practice. Knowledge gaining practices can occur through many forms but the type of questions we ask impacts on the type of knowledge that comes to be known. The questions I have asked through my project are intentionally expansive and often set in motion more questions. The answers need not be the focal point if, in the asking of such questions, new knowledge is created and the cycle of learning-through-doing continues. This is reflected in my doctoral research question of investigating methods of engagement for encountering the nonhuman—itself prompting a gradual unfolding of the processes with which to encounter object/thing/materials via discovery and curiosity.

Bulldog clip, Velcro bag
strap, wire, bag ties, ring
binders, elastic, rope.
Soft plastic, acrylic,
sandpaper, foam core,
cellophane, anti-slip grip
tape, mini clamp, magnetic
tape, nano tape.

Card, paper, mylar,
contact, PVC, plastic
sleeve, divider,
presentation folio,
adhesive memo pad, sticker
sheet, wrapping paper,
metal foil, aluminium tape,
copper tape, sandpaper,
grip-tape, duct tape.

Vinciane Despret's book *What would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016) reframes the act of inquiry to one of identifying difference and developing approaches to research from that position. Questions like "What are rats interested in during experiments?" and "Why do we say that cows don't do anything?" are starting points for Despret that open up numerous other questions within her research (Despret, 89, 177). The importance is not in asking a question one already knows the answer to, but rather that which takes one on a unique journey of knowledge production, even if nothing is answered. So, in this sense, the questions are anti-hypotheses—that is, to not know what will come from the asking of the questions which, in turn, becomes the purpose of doing the research—rather than a scientific method that uses the questioner's speculations to guide the methods. The unknowability in asking such curiosity-driven questions drives the enthusiasm for undertaking the research; however, one must also remain open to the resultant journey in order to recognise and foster the knowledge that arises.

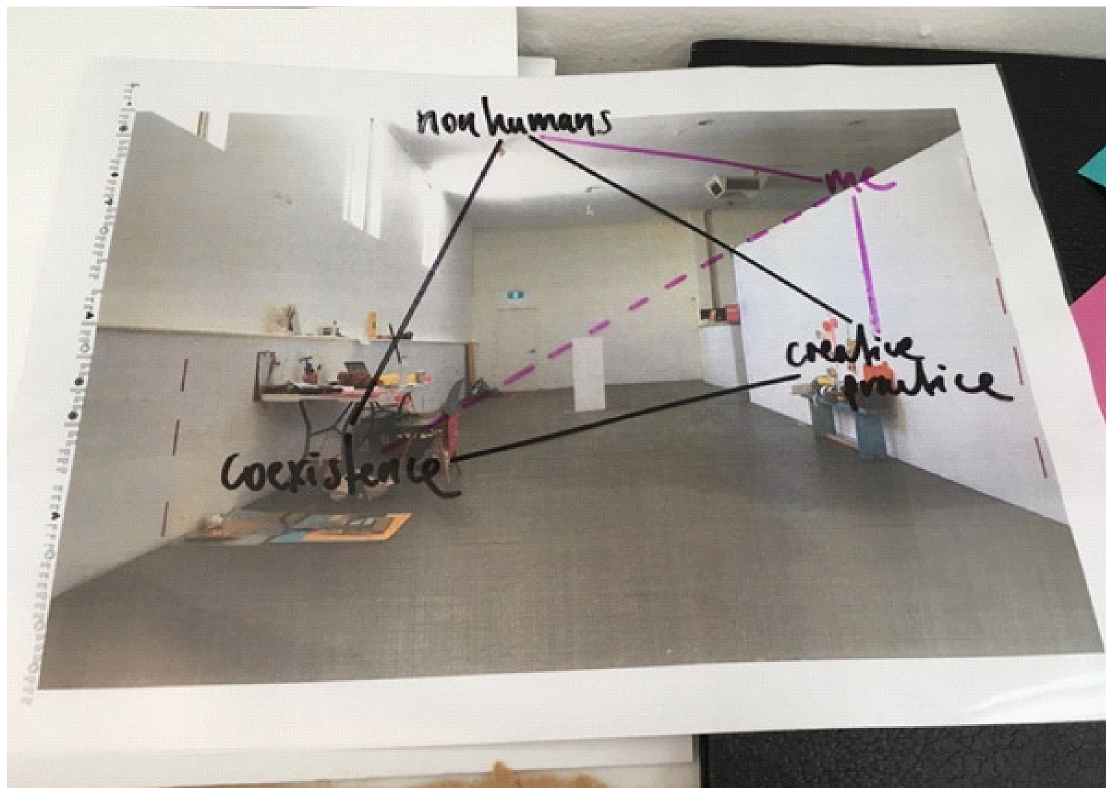

Figure 4: Seeing relations in residency spaces at Paper Mountain, 2018. Alira Callaghan.

Approaching research with curiosity is at the forefront of what Natalie Loveless calls "research-creation" (Loveless 2019, 28). Not dissimilar to practice-led research, research-creation is an "interdisciplinary theory-practice that mobilizes artistic methodologies but is not limited to the arts proper" (Truman et al. 2019, 224). Loveless recognises that we know art research by many names and situates 'research-creation' as another way to affect the conversation about what it means to do art at postgraduate level. Loveless aligns 'research-creation' with the interventions of decolonial, feminist, queer, and interdisciplinary research (Truman et al. 2019) and explicitly follows the work of American First Nations writer Thomas King and multi-species feminist scholar Donna Haraway. The combination of King's and Haraway's methods of storytelling develop through Loveless into an approach to artistic research that understands its power to ask questions that result in important stories (Loveless 2019). Loveless identifies in King's and Haraway's

1. Loveless' research-creation argument for universities to recognise that "multiple formal outputs [should] be treated with equal value" (2019, 115) is specific to Canada/North America. In the form of the creative-practice PhD recognised in Australia, this is already occurring through the exegesis and art format. However, what I will take from Loveless as being beneficial to making change here is the approach to the generation and execution of curiosity-driven research questions.

stories a need for curiosity, and recognises that "it is *curiosity* that emerges as key to our capacity to make changes" and that ultimately, "to do research—of any kind—is not simply to ask questions, it is to let our curiosities drive us and allow them to ethically bind us" (Loveless 2019, 22, 24).[1] To frame research questions as telling stories and crafting an ethics driven by curiosity means to slow down the process of developing such questions in the first place, letting the process guide the unfolding of the right questions. I don't seek to re-name or problematise research-creation or practice-led research, but I can see how a 'process-led practice' might develop from this point—encompassing research question creation and practice as an open (rather than closed/final) format within which immediate steps are laid out in order to begin somewhere but wherein text and creative practice are followed to unknowable ends.

In thinking further about how we construct our research questions and the methodologies we employ in service of them, Carol Taylor's (2016) diffractive reading and thinking of object-oriented ontology via feminist new materialism instantiates the usefulness of letting unknowingness guide research which, in turn, furthers the line of questioning. Positioning this as a generative approach, Taylor openly includes those moments of curiosity and intrigue that led her along the diffracted path: "I had to know how Barad's worlding warped into Bennett's thingly power into Harman's objects" (Taylor 2016, 205). If diffractive methods of engaging with texts or concepts can encourage "thinking otherwise," then Taylor asks how, "if we are thinking otherwise, we might also be reading and writing academic articles otherwise" (Ibid, 201). I would extend this thinking to include how methods of diffraction might also open us up to doing creative practice otherwise—what questions might we ask of the objects, things, and materials we engage in studio practice, and would we come to know them in different ways by doing so? The musings Taylor presents in her writing keep the article in a state of openness, providing access points for readers to share in the process of discovering feminist new materialism and object-oriented ontology through one another. Rather than researching and presenting a final paper that has gone through the process of resolving those questions and queries, Taylor leaves in aspects from earlier draft versions, thereby experimenting with "writing academic articles otherwise" (Ibid). Likewise, I seek to keep the process of this project open, not predetermining the path of the research or any physical outcome, instead, hoping to continue to lead to new questions.

Figure 5: During “Gallery as Residency” at Paper Mountain, 2018. Alira Callaghan.

Sandpaper sheets used to smooth the 4x2mm pine pieces for a support, or circular loops for belt sanding wood lengths; wet and dry sandpaper used to prepare etching plates, or the loose carborundum stuck down for a collagraph; emery boards for filing nails, skateboard decks that wear away shoes; adhesive lines of anti-slip grip tape on step edges, artwork boundary markers in museums.

Not unlike Frichot’s and Varda’s gleaning, coming to know object/thing/materials happens through the artistic experience Barrett describes “as a continuum with normal processes of living and is derived from an impulse to handle objects and to think and *feel* through their handling. What emerges from this process is the aesthetic image—an image that is heterogeneous in that it permits a *knowing* that exceeds what can be captured by the symbolic” (Barrett 2013, 64). Engaging with object/thing/materials through creative practice is the vehicle for asking new questions (or old questions in new ways), thereby embedding research in the landscape of specific sites that allow for sensory processes of coming to know the world.

Developing Process as Outcome

I find solutions I might not have thought of or sketched but rather are the result of an open process of playing with materials and elements I like to work with and which help clarify my intuitive process (Dávila 2018, 39).

Following the practice-led approach meant accepting unknown leads, even if they veered slightly from my original intentions. The project has produced new research insights through a gradual process of learning-through-doing, one that often involved different forms of documenting encounters and engagements in attempts to capture what was occurring. Upon realising that resolving my process into finalised art works would render my engagements fixed and resolved, I began to forget about what I was working towards and instead attempted to extend the moments of curiosity. What does staying with the trouble when encountering object/thing/materials we think we know and understand look like in those moments? What is happening in those entangled meetings? What materialities can be observed? Asking such curious questions, and spending time together with the object/thing/materials, can generate interesting insights that, in turn, prompt further thoughts and questions regarding processes of engagement.

I sanded a balloon, I was trying to use the sandpaper in a way that would be unlike what it might be used for normally, so, counterintuitively. I wondered if sandpaper had ever touched latex before. I also tried to blow up a rock, as in, inflate, to continue the action into more absurd areas.

The way the ideas of this project developed was not in a clean, linear fashion but out of small moments of reading, thinking, and engaging that built up in cycles as things were returned to and re-turned over. What has since become an active distancing from contemporary art and pristine gallery spaces came about because of multiple points converging during the project's undertaking. It became apparent that traditional gallery spaces might not be what is needed for this project and that working in other spaces could be the locus for undertaking a more open-ended exploratory cycle of thinking, making, and showing art. The more I followed this path that the practice had set me on, the more the notion of artwork that presented a final outcome of the

Figure 6: Sanding a balloon, 2018. Balancing on disco balls, 2017. Alira Callaghan.

research journey seemed to undermine the process. If "knowledge occurs as material process through interaction and action" (Barret 2013, 64), then why is it expected that the art gallery is the best format for disseminating such knowledge? Shifting focus from presenting works of art that connect to the notion of a 'finished' outcome, to an expanded understanding of what constitutes such a final state, has led to processes undertaken as a result of practice-led research as an equally successful outcome.

It is not about simply presenting process as process—as that which is permanently situated within the confines of a studio or space of making, as staged, stationary ephemera—but instead locating it in such a way that the very process becomes the subject matter of the art making. The idea here is that process is something in the midst of occurring, which shows its inner workings and exists in a state of greater potential than a 'finished' work. The juxtaposition of process and outcome in this project is akin to name Barad's not in reference list phenomenological "cutting together-apart," which is an action that "produces the very boundaries through which something is made 'inside' and 'outside', 'this' and 'that'" (Sauzet 2018, page). This

tension of process as outcome can be made generative through diffraction that attunes us to the differences, so that in somewhat of a dialectical move, their opposition provides for another option—for example, by constructing a form that utilises vibrant, multi-modal documentation of processes put into proximity with the very object/thing/material the documentation captures. This constructed form is unlike an art object made for the contemporary art market and is instead a dynamic expression of the process.

Documenting instances of proximity and engagement through observation and interaction has been necessary to trace the process of learning through curiosity. Ways of capturing the occurrences in studio and residency spaces developed from habitual image-taking to conscientious attempts at using images to *get at* the object/thing/material, whether to vicariously and indirectly access it, or to closely observe its micro becomings. These attempts saw photos taken from numerous angles and positions, with various focal points and lighting changes, to try to apprehend the temporal encounters. Actions, like squeezing and tearing sponges, or standing on disco balls, were driven by asking "What happens if…?" and "What might I learn if…?" At the same time, however, outside the event in which such actions were occurring, these moments were at risk of being lost. While these types of questions are not wholly unusual in contemporary artistic practices, they are commonly undertaken in the act of working towards the creation of a 'finished' artwork at the perceived end of the process. The common practice of resolving research in the form of artwork outcomes comes back to the types of questions we are asking in our research projects. If, as Despret does, we try to reimagine what the right questions are, and, like Taylor, what doing otherwise might engender, such a desired outcome might not be as prevalent.

The balloons took a surprisingly long (relatively speaking) time to pop, creating a lot of tension in anticipating the noise. I thought about seeing how many it would take until the noise or explosion stopped affecting me, but I didn't see it through. I didn't want the action to become about me, I wanted it to be about these two things coming together in an unusual way.

What I emphasise as being *process* Bianca Hester frames as *event* in her PhD thesis "Material Adventures, Spatial Productions: Manoeuvring

Figure 7: A selection of tapes, belting, elastic, wire, 2021. Alira Callaghan.

Sculpture towards a Proliferating Event" (2007). My project performs some similar steps even though our paths have different start and end points. As Hester explains: "My motivation is not a dialectical or moral opposition to the production of objects, but is sparked by an interest in engaging in the production of art in ways that promotes complexity, rather than reducing it into recognisable forms of object (and subject) and related forms of reception, narration, commodification and knowledge/meaning generation" (Hester 2007, 9-10). Where Hester's desire to produce art that promotes complexity leads her to sculptural installations, in my practice I regard the messy coming together-apart with object/thing/materials as that which produces complexity. Positioning sculpture as a proliferating event in which "a myriad of relations, processes and layers converge" reflects the aim of my project—to make such processes be recognised as outcome (Ibid, 7). Modes of seeing and learning through interaction, in relation to object/thing/materials, converge with the subject matter proper into something which promotes complexity by way of attempting to not be "display-ready" (Ibid, 9).

Though this practice-led research project doesn't present a 'display-ready' art object outcome, a tangible *something* still comes into existence

from engagements with object/thing/materials. Documentation of these occurrences perform a type of constructed form—that of the processorial object/thing/material. Such a form would likely be classed by Candy and Edmonds as an 'artifact', even though it was not a known outcome at the onset of this research and it does not exist for consumption by the public. Exemplifying art's ability to be comfortable with unknowns, Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt say that "innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined and 'outcomes' of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable" (Candy and Edmonds 2007, 3). The fact that there is, somewhat inevitably, a *something* to have come out of such a materially focussed exploration does not equate to practice-*based* research, but rather, perhaps it is, contrarily, the "new art," which Armen Avenessian (2016) not in reference list speaks of that can come from this type of practice-led research.

Returning again through writing, through thinking and editing and rewriting. Returning again to texts from 2016, to things that shaped my thoughts and actions. Returning to curiosity and questions so that the process continues on.

By focussing on the instances of learning through proximity with object/thing/materials in a creative practice, I am performing the type of entanglement Haraway (2016) acknowledges as necessary for working towards liveable futures with the world in a way that acknowledges our problematic attitude towards the nonhuman. Doing so, however, requires more than one or two interactions with object/thing/materials to learn from or through them; rather, the learning comes from ongoing entanglements, beyond art object outcomes. This learning-through-doing has occurred through practice-led research, leading me to realise that creative processes for engaging with the nonhuman object/thing/material are fundamental to understanding them in ways that may engender new modes of entanglement.

Thinking about disco balls as an object, thinking about latex balloons and square mirror pieces as similar in shape and type for making my own. As soon as a balloon is inflated, I want to deflate it, and back again—a curious object/thing/material that invites interaction. So I glue the mirror to the inflated balloon, hang it from the ceiling and prick it so it slowly deflates. The glue crackles and the mirror pieces pop from it onto the floor. I do it again with

Figure 8: Objects, things and materials coming together in form, 2021. Alira Callaghan.

silver vinyl. The results differ by degrees, but the deflated forms created in the loose image of a disco ball now no longer recall its origins. Transformed to crumpled, empty, shiny vessels. In the act of doing I didn't pause to wonder what it would look like. Small variations—different reflective materials on balloons, different types of attaching and hanging, different light at different times of day. Reflecting but not resolving, because resolving into what? and why?

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Mary and the Lamb: A Photographic Return to my Mother

Claudia Caporn

adapted from BA Hons (Photography) exegesis: ‘Mary and the Lamb: A Photographic Return to my Mother.’ School Design and the Built Environment; Curtin University.

claudiacaporn@gmail.com

Abstract

This practice-led research investigates the potential for a maternal return. Facilitated through the photographic medium, it is situated within a feminist approach to photography that traverses discussions of maternal passion. This research also addresses the lack of visual representations of the mother/daughter relationship, specifically from the perspective of the daughter, within the canon of Western contemporary photography. Grounded in my subjective experiences of the mother/daughter relationship, the research includes a book of photographs of my mother, Lisa, titled Mary and the Lamb, and a written exegesis elucidating the theoretical imperatives that both motivated and sustained the project. I fuse Panizza Allmark’s photographie féminine and Julia Kristeva’s maternal passion and herethics, to enable a reinvestment of maternal passion into the photographic portrait. I suggest that the photographic portrait, “laden with ambiguity and uncertainty” possesses the potential to enable a reconnection to the maternal body and a return to the mother. These photographs are a searingly intimate collaboration between my mother and myself that represent our complex and powerful connection. In Mary and the Lamb I celebrate the delicate, tender and impassioned relationship of my mother and I, and contribute to writing the mother/daughter bond into visual culture. The outcome of this research is a photographic book that speaks of an unflagging maternal passion between mother and daughter, embracing a return to the maternal.

Mary and the Lamb: A Photographic Return to my Mother

Introduction

I can still vividly recall the first photograph I ever took. I was seven years old, on a spring camping trip with my family, and given permission by my father to take one photograph on our home camera. Tasked with choosing between the blankets of wildflowers that surrounded our campsite or the tadpoles in a nearby rock pool, I instead turned the lens toward my mother, Lisa, who was seated inconspicuously under a tree in her bathers, calmly swatting flies as she fed my baby sister. This image holds a special place within my box of keepsakes, gifted to me by my mother.

In the seventeen years that have elapsed between this first photographic act and now, I have found myself continually returning to my mother through the camera. The photographs I make expose my own subjectivity and the sense of loss I feel as I reflect upon my mother's body. They have become intimate documents of my maternal passion for her "which is both tender and fierce" (Wilkinson 2012, 32) **(fig. 1)**. According to Kristeva: "The self never stops re-creating the mother through the very freedom it gained from being separated from her. The mother is a woman who is always renewed in images and words, through a process of which 'I' am the creator simply because I am the one who restores her" (Kristeva 2001, 131). The melancholy I felt for my mother, even at seven years old, intensified my process of looking, and it was my mother feeding my sister that drew my gaze. I swung my lens towards her as a method of holding her close.

My practice incorporates contemporary photographic research methods, embracing feminine subjectivity to provide an intimate and embodied approach to interrogating maternal passion within the mother-daughter dyad—a relationship that remains relatively obscured in visual culture.
The title of this project, *Mary and the Lamb*, references the ways Christian ideals of the maternal have pervaded the canons of Western culture. Most images of the mother are drawn from paintings of the Madonna and child, which perpetuate refined and sanitised depictions of motherhood, devoid of the ecstasies of passion. Catherine McCormack (2021, 81) claims that the

Figure 1: Toni Wilkinson, *m/other #7*, from the series *m/others*, 2007. Courtesy from the artist

Madonna and child is perhaps “the most prolific archetype of womanhood to be found in pictures.” My work deviates from limited representations of maternity in an attempt to illustrate motherhood and maternal relationships as complex and contradictory, allowing for more inclusive and open readings. I acknowledge that my subjectivity as an Anglo-Australian woman frames the images of this research. As such, this is not a universal account, but a personal position which attempts to subvert a traditional Christian narrative.

The project title references the *Lamb of God*: a Christian symbol of suffering and sacrifice that ultimately becomes known for its power. I appropriate this symbolism and apply it to the maternal relationship between my mother and myself, destabilising the patriarchal narrative founded upon the paternal relationship between God and Jesus. My mother is both Mary (revered for her motherly love) and the lamb (enduring the suffering and sacrifice of motherhood).

This research was initially intended to explore my mother's relationship to the land at our family farm in the Western Australian wheatbelt—to provide a document that revealed a maternal presence in an industry that is predominantly depicted as a patriarchal domain. However, in the early stages of the research my mother underwent an emergency double-hip replacement and the project shifted to the dyadic nature of our relationship.

The struggle my mother faced at confronting the fragility of her aging maternal body became an opportunity to extend the work as an explication of the dynamic and intense bond between mother and daughter. This inquiry explores the ability of photography to facilitate a maternal return by representing the mother-daughter relationship. To reconcile my personal feelings of maternal loss and separation, I embrace an auto-ethnographic photographic mode of exploration in my practice-based research, engaging, in particular, with Julia Kristeva's theories of maternal passion, which I combine with the work of French theorist Hélène Cixous's *l'écriture feminine* and Panizza Allmark's *photographie féminine*. I reflect on a range of theoretical texts that engage issues of maternity and the photographic gaze, critiquing and expanding upon Freud and Lacan's "psychoanalytic theories which privilege male subjectivity" (Wilkinson 2007, 22).

Photography and the Maternal Return

Like those that have gone before me I use photography to capture the "intimacy and distance, passion and violence" (Hirsch 1981, 204) inherent within familial relationships. Photography and maternity became intimately bonded for me from the age of seven, and like Olive Lipscombe, photography is "a means of both looking inward at myself and reflecting on the complexities and intricacies of maternal relationships" (2020, 2).

Even at seven years old I recognised that my observations were different to my father's, and I refused his visions when reframing the maternal through my process of looking. Despite being unaware at the time, I was rejecting the marginalisation of the mother in Western visual culture, challenging the normative, patriarchal law. Much psychoanalytic theory has given prominence to the father, neglecting that of the mother. Feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva maintains that "what we lack is a reflection on maternal passion … Philosophers and psychoanalysts seem less inspired by the 'maternal function', perhaps because it is not a function but more precisely a *passion*" (Kristeva 2005). She insists that psychoanalytic theory post-Freud and Lacan has overemphasised the 'paternal function' and denied the maternal. She explicates this absence as a result of the complex, contradictory and ambiguous nature of maternal passion that makes it difficult to understand.

In his seminal text *Camera Lucida* (1981), Roland Barthes suggests that photography and the maternal are connected as "the act of viewing a photograph conjures a universal, unconscious, emotional and bodily experience that recalls the separation from the mother at birth" (Lipscombe 2020, 35). Barthes' personal meditation on the *Winter Garden Photograph*, a photograph of his recently deceased mother as a young girl, explicates the power of photography in facilitating a return to the mother. This theoretical tie between the medium of photography and explorations of the maternal elicits the significant and perpetual connection between the mother's body and the child, enabling a sensory, fluid and primal relationship to the mother after the separation of birth.

I concur with Elissa Marder's thoughts in her text *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Destruction* (2012, 181), in which she suggests "that photography and the mother are not accidently related and that the specific links between photography and the maternal function are themselves central to Barthes' reflections on writing history." I suggest that the act of photographing one's mother, linked through the indexicality of photography to an umbilical cord, and the power of the photographic portrait, is embedded in its ability to erase the border between self and other. This notion is reiterated by Kaila Howell in which she claims that "the photograph serves to reconnect the viewer with the (M)other, symbolically re-attaching him or her to the time before birth when the umbilical cord was still attached" (2015, 106).

The photographic portrait, like the maternal experience, is “complex and unstable” (Wilkinson 2010, 194), exhibiting itself as a space that is ideal to develop intricate renderings of the mother-daughter relationship and explore the mutuality of maternal experiences and embodied subjectivity. Susan Bright writes of the photographic portrait:

> Laden with ambiguity and uncertainty the portrait is perhaps the most complex area of artist practice ... portrait is the questioning or exploration of self and identity through a literal representation of what somebody looks like. The paradox is that the inner workings of the complex human psyche can never really be understood just by looking at the picture (2005, 20).

It is this ambiguity that makes the photograph an appropriate medium through which I can investigate Kristeva’s maternal concepts (Wilkinson 2007) and reveal the potential to surrender to maternal return. Toni Wilkinson further supports this synergy between the mother and creativity, stating: “the photographic portrait is ambiguous and consequently possesses the potential to act as a compelling site for the incorporation of Kristeva’s complex maternal passion” (2010, 194). I argue that my subjectivity and process of looking, when fused with the lens of the camera, has the potential to act as a potent space to represent the significance of the maternal from my embodied experience. I use the photograph to enable honest, subjective explorations of maternal intimacy.

Following on from Hélène Cixous and her *l’écriture feminine* – or ‘writing of the female body’ – photographic writing arguably “makes possible a kind of return to the mother’s body” (Marder 2012, 164). My camera enables an intimate and complex interrogation of the mother-daughter relationship, privileging my subjectivity and embodied experience to render the intense and honest maternal passion emanating from this bond. Wilkinson explains: “photography, like maternal passion, is also distinctly ambiguous and this similarity makes the camera a unique implement to represent the significance of maternal passion” (2012, 111). Consequently, I suggest that the act of photography, and photographing one’s mother more specifically, enables a re-joining to the mother. Linked by indexicality to the umbilical cord that united mother and child before birth, photography surrenders both mother and child to a maternal return.

Figure 2: Tierney Gearon, *Untitled,* from *The Mother Project*, 2001. C-type print, 50.8 x 76.2cm. Courtesy the artist.

Representing the Mother and Child

Few photographic bodies of work place the mother-daughter relationship at the centre of inquiry, especially from the vantage point of the daughter. Acclaimed American photographer Tierney Gearon is the most recognised photographer to have used the medium of photography to explore the mother-daughter relationship from this position. Her series *The Mother Project* (2001) combines the stylistic conventions of both documentary and art photography in a raw and tender exploration of her mentally ill mother, and examines the complex and often contradictory feelings of love and loss, and passion and trauma that underpin their relationship **(fig. 2)**. Gearon's work operates "to push the boundaries of her maternal and filial roles" (Straus 2007) and subvert taboos that prevail throughout cultural discourse regarding the mother-daughter dyad. The image *Untitled* (2001) exemplifies a maternal passion that is not placid, but impassioned and ambiguous, denying the maternal icon of the Madonna and child endorsed in Christian

Figure 3: Claudia Caporn, *Mary and the Lamb #27*, 2021. Digital Photograph.

ideology through the sensual and intense embrace of mother and daughter. Susan Bright in her text *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* (2013) describes this work:

> Consisting of a combination of orchestrated scenes and spontaneous moments, the series is a tender and rich body of work that shows that, while traditional familial roles and responsibilities may vanish, the

> strong and very deep bonds between mother and child remain throughout life (158).

Like Gearon, my works deviate from conventional and restrictive representations of the mother and child epitomised in both historical and contemporary representations of the Madonna and child icon. I challenge the devotional images that render motherhood and the mother/child bond as "sacrosanct, monumental, self-sacrificing, subservient and desexualised" (McCormack 2021, 81). Both Gearon and my own works reflect the intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship. However, unlike Gearon, who is a mother to her own children, my work is informed entirely from a daughter's perspective.

Like Gearon, I blur the boundaries of subjectivity to reveal private, intimate moments between my mother and I, to create a passionate representation of motherhood in photographic practice. In much the same way as Gearon, I am aware of the limitations and expectations of photography, and seek to celebrate the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the medium in an attempt to "foreground the role of subjectivity and self-referentiality" (Bright 2013, 10). Although Gearon and I come from different positions and experiences within the mother-child bond, our images seek to disturb and agitate the traditional, limiting representations of the mother.

My Passionate Approach

Traditionally, the mother-daughter bond has not been given significant space in visual cultural representations. In her *Un Voyage vers une Photographie Féminine* (2003) Allmark developed what she called *photographie féminine*. Like her, I seek to engage with "a feminine aesthetic of photography that resonates with feminine embodied experience" (Allmark 2009, 276). As such, throughout the construction of the photographs for the book *Mary and the Lamb*, I engage technical and theoretical codes and conventions to create images that are grounded in feeling. I focus on the "physical sensation, emotion and sensibility" (Soutter 2018, 84) of both the subjects within the photographs, and also the viewers reading the photographs. As discussed by Charlotte Cotton in her text examining the art of the contemporary photograph, "the search here is for a form of photography that, while remaining an account of the relationships between the photographer and their

loved ones, abstracts each scene and omits specificity of detail in order to give us a sense of the universality of these relational bonds and moments in life" (Cotton 2020, 173). My photographic approach, embracing *photographie féminine*, enables a passionate and intimate exploration of the mother, and details the intensity of our bond.

The photographs unite the stylistic devices of both art and documentary photography, navigating a fine line of representation that communicates both narrative and embodied experience and female subjectivity. I cultivate an ambiguity between the staged and the spontaneous, recognising that "intimate photography is an exercise in pathology, an editing and sequencing of seemingly unguarded private moments that reveal the origins and manifestations of the subject's emotional lives" (Ibid, 149). Swaying between the intuitive and the posed, I create images that reveal the vulnerable and tender emotions and moments that underpin the relationship between my mother and I, translating these visceral feelings into the universal language of photography.

All the images are captured on colour negative film, using both a 4x5 inch large format camera, and a medium format 6x7 inch camera. In comparison to the likes of either 35mm film or digital photography, these considerably more time-consuming and cumbersome methods of image capture were deliberately chosen to slow down the image making process. The physical requirements of setting up and operating these systems precipitated a more intimate and collaborative relationship between my mother and myself, necessitating patience, trust, and effort from both sides of the camera. This notion is attested by Bright when she states "the use of a large-plate camera to produce such portraits again slows the process down and enables a very different kind of relationship to be built. In a way it is a more collaborative technique" (2005, 21). This environment facilitated a shared awareness between my mother and I, one in which we were both able to confront the power and meaning of our own presence and bodies, in addition to the intricacies of the passion which motivates my reconnection to the maternal throughout this research.

Arranged in a chronological order, the photographs in the book have been assembled to develop a narrative that follows the events of my mother prior

Figure 4: Claudia Caporn, *Mary and the Lamb #8*, 2021. Digital photograph

to, during and following her double hip replacement surgery. This procedure was a result of her enduring early-onset menopause 16 years earlier. The images communicate the journey of my maternal return to her throughout this traumatic and challenging transitional period in her life. This chronological structure is mirrored in the titles of the photographs, with each image bearing the name *Mary and the Lamb #1*, *Mary and the Lamb #2,* and so on. This narrative then follows my mother from the comfort of our farm to hospital, the site of two painful and confronting weeks for our family as my mother surrendered to the limitations of her body.

Following the surgery, I drove my mother to her father's, where she would stay for three weeks in his care, aided by me during a time that I connected with my maternal tendencies, nurturing and caring for her. The following weeks facilitated the reversal of maternal care in that "the daughter's maternal abilities which she learnt from her mother…were transmitted back to her mother. She eventually reached a point where ... she moved between mothering and being mothered" (Pascoe 1998, 4). The final photograph

within this body of work, *Mary and the Lamb #28*, situates my own maternity within the inquiry, acknowledging the matrilineal lineage from which I come, and suggesting my future in the maternal realm through the possibility that I one day become a mother. As Carl Jung asserts, “every mother contains her daughter within herself, and every daughter her mother ... Every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter” (quoted in Hirsch 1981, 209). This cyclical, undivided nature of the maternal realm is reference in *Mary and Lamb #8*, **(fig. 4)** with my mother bearing a round necklace etched with the names of her four daughters.

Metaphorically, I think of the mother-daughter relationship not in terms of black and white—its complexity as a subject lends itself to being rendered in many shades. As such, colour negative film was employed, representing the spectrum of hues that paint the relationship between my mother and I. Throughout the photographs, a calm, pink undertone emerges, exhibited through various visual schema including clothing, skin tones, home décor and lighting. In psychological terms the colour is understood to symbolise and connote themes of unconditional love, femininity, familial and filial passion, and comfort within Western cultures (van Braam 2020). This hue has been embedded into the work to imbue my representations of maternal passion and mother-daughter tenderness, being the colour that I have always strongly connected with my mother, both within her physicality, and her energy and aura. This colour signifies not only the soft flesh of the maternal body, and my mother’s surgical scars, but the affection and nurturing embedded in my relationship with her. This palette elevates the emotional sensibility of the mother-daughter bond.

The photographic book is a site of intimate engagement, establishing itself as an ideal instrument to disseminate this body of work. “The physical book still possesses a very special quality in the way that images are read and received; it is an intimate format designed for one person to look at” (Fox and Caruana 2021, 184). The tactile nature of the book enables the work to live within an art object. The muted, oatmeal toned dust jacket and linen cover echo the palette within the work, with the fleshy, bloody red of the title reminiscent of the tones in *Mary and the Lamb #2*, referencing the maternal blood and body. The fine, uncoated paper facilitates a sensory experience, drawing from the textured, dimpled, coarse representations of the maternal body throughout the work.

Conclusion

Mary and the Lamb promotes the potential for maternal passion to be reproduced via the photographic medium. By engaging with feminist accounts of photography—such as Kristeva's "herethics" [please supply a brief definition in parentheses with citation] and Allmark's *photographie feminine*—this approach has enabled a delicate, affectionate return to the maternal. The research and images of my mother are not universal representations of mother-daughter relationships, but are, instead, visual metaphors that embody my own subjectivity and maternal passion towards her. Like Wilkinson's declaration on the passions of the maternal in *Uncertain Surrenders* and *m/others,* I, too, delight in a "ferocious tenderness" (2012). The vulnerability and surrender my mother displays when she presents herself as a subject in the images that I make of her reveals her reciprocal maternal passion for me. These images render the sense of loss that I feel at the separation from my mother, opening up a conduit through which I can return to the maternal through photography. They are traces of an enduring love between mother and daughter.

Like the state of flow that exists in all human relationships, including the bond between mother and daughter, this body of work will likely evolve and morph. From here I intend to develop a photographic exploration of the agricultural landscape of Western Australia and to continue to celebrate the presence of women on the land, subverting the masculine, patriarchal dominance in agriculture. Importantly, I will continue to photograph my mother as a way to portray dynamic, complex and lively representations of the mother-daughter relationship.

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Painting the Cliché: A Path Through Exhaustion

Clare Longley

adapted from MFA (Fine Art) exegesis: “Three Routes Through Painting the Cliché.” Monash Art, Design & Architecture; Monash University 2021.

hello@clarelongley.com

Abstract

This essay elaborates on a core component of my studio practice by exploring how processes of repetition and exhaustion may be brought to bear on well used symbols such as the flower. Through an exegetical contemplation of my own paintings alongside those by Rosslynd Piggott, and writing by Sara Ahmed, Anne Carson, and Giles Delleuze, I explore the metaphor of a path to understand how meaning might be made and unmade with frequency of use. Both particular and mercurial by nature, what potential is there for painting to work generatively with the worn-out cliché?

Painting the Cliché: A Path Through Exhaustion

When you follow something around you get to know the way it behaves. When you lean into and push your tongue against the edges of a word or thing, you begin to feel its flexibility and its limits. In her book *What's the Use?* feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed follows the word 'use' around, critiquing the role that utility or use value has in assigning worth to people and things (Ahmed 2019). Kneading the space between concepts of the useless and useful, she uses the analogy of a path to describe the potentials of use, or of using something. Here, I will argue that a cliché is like a well-trodden path, but one that has been used so frequently that is has begun to erode. Is there potential for new use, or to create alternative paths? The garden has furnished a deep well of familiar tropes and motifs which I have been able to lean into and push against in my paintings *By/from C.H.L x* (2019-20) **(fig. 1)** and *Repetitive gestures* (2019) **(fig. 2)**. Through a discussion of these works alongside the work of Rosslynd Piggott, I explore exhaustion, which is distinct from tiredness, as a generative process through which to contend with clichéd subject matter.

Ahmed uses the analogy of a path to analyse the potentials of use, or of using something. Describing a path, she writes, "the more people travel a path, the flatter and smoother the surface becomes. When something is smoother, it is clearer; the more a path is followed the easier it is to follow" (Ibid, 41). I imagine a garden with paths marked by signs, directing one to take this route or that route. With signage, these paths are easier to use through not only repeated use, but also through the maintenance of the path presuming use and direction. Gestures of attention and direction make some paths easier to use than others and make deviation difficult. This analogy applies to pathways through life as well as neural pathways. Ahmed states, "a path can be how thoughts and feelings are directed. Within empirical psychology, this idea of a well-trodden path was certainly in use" (Ibid.). So, use becomes an idiom for habit, and a history of use is a history of something becoming naturalised. This idea can be summarised as the law of exercise: the more muscles are used, the stronger they become. The more a path is used, the more a path is used.

Figure 1: Clare Longley, *By/from C.H.L x*, 2019–20, oil on canvas, 177 x 155 cm. Image courtesy of Reading Room.

Ahmed's analogy of a path brings to mind a translation by the poet and classicist Anne Carson in *Eros: The Bittersweet* (1986). Carson translates the Green term *glukupikron* to English "sweetbitter." Originally written by archaic Greek poet Sappho in the fragment "Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me—sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up," the term holds the convergence of two distinct and opposing metaphors for affect: bitterness and sweetness (Ibid, 3). When we regularly use one word in combination with another, the association between them becomes stronger, and they can even meld into a singular word. When "sweet" and "bitter" were combined

Figure 2: Clare Longley, *Repetitive gestures*, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 51 x 153cm

to describe romantic affect, it not only became a commonplace phrase but a compound word, “bittersweet,” and that word became a cliché. This strengthening of associations follows the same principle as the smoothing of a path.

The disorienting and mysterious lover’s maze has long been considered a cliché in literature, cinema, and design to name a few contexts. Labyrinths and mazes can take the form of horticultural embellishment and are commonly entangled with ideas of mystery and romance, as well as bewilderment, wonder, or fear. They are also a series of established paths. In *Mazes and Labyrinths: A General Account of Their History and Developments,* William Henry Matthews explains “the romantic and mysterious flavour of the word ‘maze’ and ‘labyrinth’ has been induced by many a writer of fiction to adopt one or the other as the theme of a story, or as the setting of some action, or else as the attractive symbolical title for an artwork” (Matthews 1922, 198). He goes on to explain that the “lover’s maze”

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1. Consider the Greek myth of the Minotaur, figured as a creature that takes the form of half-man, half-bull. The Minotaur was saved from slaughter, but simultaneously imprisoned by being expelled to the centre of a labyrinth.
2. The title *By/from C.H.L x* follows the tradition of the aforementioned lovelorn poets, C.H.L being my own initials.

was a tired metaphor already by the sixteenth century in Europe, and that many writers who would adopt a version of this in the subject of their work would credit the writing with pseudonyms or merely initials. The nature of the cliché is sticky like honey, seductive in the way that it drips from your fingers, and persistent in the way that it clings to your skin.

The foliage of hedge mazes is maintained to enforce preordained paths, from which one must choose one's own way. Here, features of the garden become architecture. Within this vegetal design there are multiple paths to be taken, points where you can decide to go here or there, places to get lost and places that simultaneously bear the potential to provide shelter, or in contrast, create entrapment.[1] There are multiple paths and multiple plots. I think of the maze as a compositional framework, as an approach, as misdirection, as a pattern, and as a path or collection of paths. I create multiple pathways quite literally in my painting *By/from C.H.L x* through adopting the maze as subject, for its status as a familiar metaphor and for its compositional complexity.[2] I have used semi-transparent ribbons of fluctuating colour to mark the paths. Paths are spaces that bodies move through, they are transitional spaces similar to the gate, doorway, or threshold.[3] Some of the paths in this painting lead into floral-shaped arbours, places to pause, and some spiral inwards and outwards, potentially ending in dead-ends, or drawing you in just to lead you back out again. The ribbon also runs around the exterior of the maze, drawing a blurred distinction between inside and out. Here, the transparency of the ribbons transforms the usually very solid, boundary-making presence of a border into something shifting and permeable, undermining its power to exclude, trap, or divide. Simultaneously, moments of containment and expansion are important because they separate the viewer from the work, acting as a threshold (rather than a border) that must be creatively contended with. By forging multiple paths a more intimate encounter is encouraged, one that inspires a slowing down of time, a contemplative experience that resists any clear narrative or outcome.

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3. Michel Foucault echoes this idea in his text "Of Other Spaces" through his considera-tion of transportation, particularly train tracks as a collection of paths constituting a heteroto-pia. Foucault writes, "a train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by" (Foucault, 1986, 23-24).

Figure 3: Clare Longley, detail of *By/from C.H.L x*, 2019¬–20, oil on canvas, 177 x 155 cm.

Built up in layers, the hedges of the maze in *By/from C.H.L x* are distinct from the paths, and are marked by a printed texture made using a technique called “rag rolling” **(fig. 3).** Rag rolling is part of a suite of processes I have experimented with in my studio known as “theatrical scene painting” techniques (Pinnell 2008). Those applying paint when making theatre sets are often under time-pressure to efficiently cover large surface areas. Or, in the case that these techniques are used for domestic interior decoration, they are a “no-experience-necessary” method of painting. Viewed from a slight distance the marks appear representational, like clouds, leaves, or sand, but as you move closer they dissolve into abstraction.[4] Another technique used around the edges of the composition is “splattering.” I have used this approach in my works such as *By/from C.H.L x* and *Landscaping or, love languages* (2019-2020) to give the impression of sandstone, using a muddied lemon yellow base with splatters containing mixtures of raw umber and sienna, olive green, and lilac amongst others.[5] What draws me

4. This coalescence of marks that transforms between representation and mere brush-strokes echoes Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s description of Paul Cezanne’s paintings of flowers discussed below.

5. *Landscaping or, love languages*. 2019-2020, oil on canvas, 177 x 155 cm. https://www.clarelongley.com/garden-series-with-boundaries. With a different colour palette, this splattering technique could also be used to create the illusion of a starry sky.

to these techniques is their illusionistic quality, the way they trick one's eye through a subtle nod towards something recognisable. If one looks at a word written down where the first and last letters are correct, and there are the right amount of letters in the word but all the letters in between are jumbled, one is genrelaly able to raed it corrcetly anwyay.[6] Illusion is interesting to me because of its flirtatious quality, the way it leans in and out, teasing the viewer. By creating a representational or recognisable texture I attempt to seduce viewers in the same way that a cliché does. Being in a state of seduction, one may linger longer than one would otherwise would, or wander down paths that one otherwise wouldn't. I am interested in how painting processes are able to create encounters that restructure or un-structure the symbolic hierarchies that can occur through mimetic potentials.

Ahmed uses the example of an apology to explain how, if something is overused, it can become tired and weak. Words can behave almost in the opposite of muscles in this way, as the more you use them, the floppier they become.[7] If someone is constantly saying "sorry" for things that don't warrant an apology, or for things about which they are not really sorry, the word sorry loses its value.[8] Referring to an empty tube of toothpaste, Ahmed writes, "you can feel like that [the tube] yourself; that you have given all that you have to give and now you are just limp and wasted. You can feel like: I have spilled all my contents" (Ahmed 2019, 54). So, if the cliché is a well-trodden path, it is one that has been taken so often that the ground has begun to erode. There are scatterings of potholes, and slippery, muddy puddles.

The used up-ness of a word or thing has a direct relationship to tiredness and exhaustion, which are different in structure from one another. "Exhausted is a whole lot more than tired," reads the first sentence of Deleuze's "The Exhausted" (1995, 1). He writes, "The tired can no longer realise, but the exhausted can no longer possibilitate" (Ibid, 3).[9] Deleuze uses the metaphorical language of punctures, holes, tears, splits, and breaks to visualise the movement that occurs when one transfers from the infinitely

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6. This is called "typoglossia."
7. This could be the case with muscles too. If one overuses their muscles, the muscles become sore and need time to recover.
8. This brings to mind the English idiom 'to cry wolf', which is derived from Aesop's Fables.
9. In the text, Deleuze discusses the work of Samuel Beckett, most notably *Texts for Nothing* (1974).

indecisive potentials of tiredness, through to the fertile void of exhaustion. In Deleuze's vision, spoken or written language is always trapped in the realm of tiredness because words are laden with "calculations and significations, with intentions and personal memories, with old habits that cement them" (Ibid, 22). The realm of tiredness is a lethargic one. In contrast, the image itself is able to inhabit a freer, or maybe even a more energetic space. The cliché is something like an image that is heavy with language—it is an image that behaves like a word (a logo).[10] The image that is free from the cliché can be said to involve an opening out, to have an infinite reach in its particularity.[11] I am interested in the potential of painting to work generatively with the tiredness of the cliché.

The flower as a symbol for romance is clichéd because it has endured in literature and art through centuries; it is tired. It is simultaneously potent and impotent. It is a well-trodden path that is eroding. But is there potential for restructuring, or to take an alternative path? Ahmed states, "for a past use not to be exhaustive, we have work to do, the work of enabling a tool to be used for other purposes" (Ahmed 2019, 222). This work-to-do is the work of my studio practice and occurs in my painting *Repetitive gestures* through the slow and accumulative process of painting that was involved in making it. A diptych comprising of two landscape-oriented canvases pressed together side-by-side, *Repetitive gestures* is filled with layers upon layers of an acid-green floral and curlicue motif. The lines of the patterns are soft, at times almost looking as if they've been airbrushed onto the canvas; at other times, they are a bit scratchier, the way a felt tip marker draws as it begins to run out of ink **(fig. 4)**. One's eye catches glimpses of the pattern and tries to follow the line, before it dissolves into another line and then the green

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10. These well-worn symbols, the 'merchandise' of romantic love, exist like graphic logos of feeling that one grasps at when love's affective whirl is too disorienting and ambivalent to register in language.

11. In "The Method of Exhaustion" Jon Roffe elaborates on Deleuze's differentiation between text and image, bringing it to bear on art, in particular the rise in the past decade of theory in the art academy, in MFA programs, and in galleries. Roffe writes, "the singularities of art works are not captured in this daft chatter." Jon Roffe, "The Method of Exhaustion," *Das Super Paper* 31 (June, 2014): 3. Elizabeth Newman wrote an article in response to Roffe's (and by extension, Deleuze's) titled "Unsustainable," writing, "paradoxically, then, exhaustion is a state of complete liveness, a moment when we open onto life. Those of us who make art recognise this exhaustive and joyous methodology." Elizabeth Newman, "Elizabeth Newman: Unsustainable," *Artlink* 34, no. 4 (December 2014): 50. These ideas around exhaustion are something I translate quite literally in my use of clichés in painting, as I will explain in my discussion of *Repetitive gestures*.

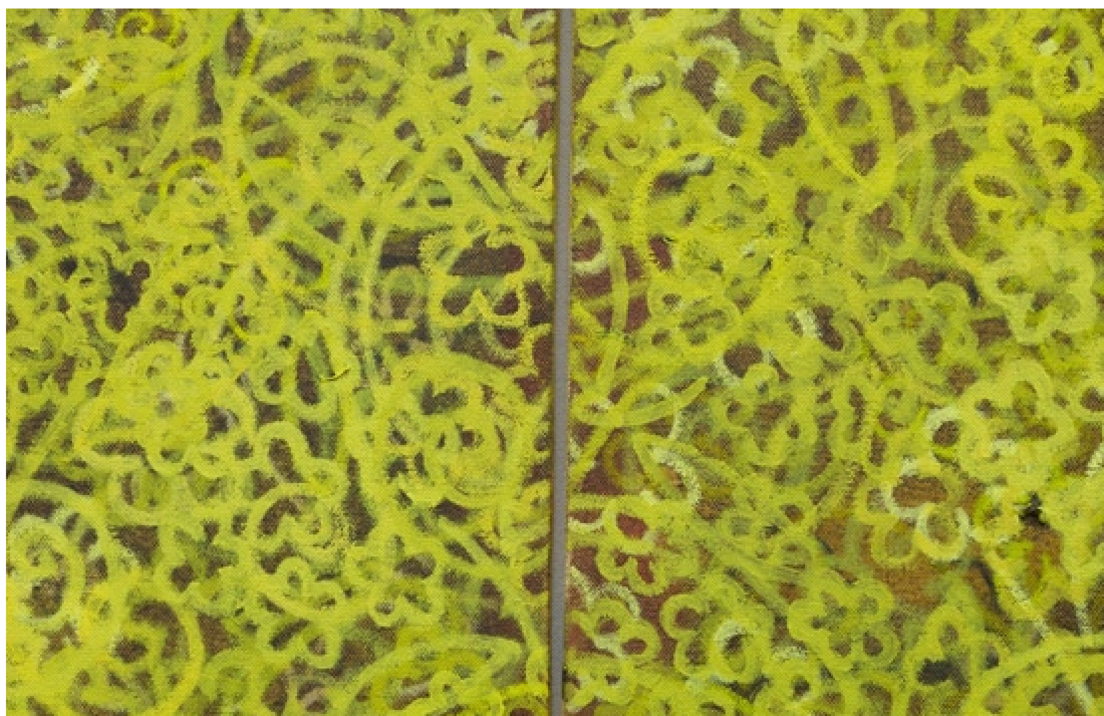

Figure 4: Clare Longley, *Repetitive gestures*, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 51 x 153cm.

abyss, bringing to mind moments of psychological disorientation articulated in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* ([1892]1998). Looking at the wallpaper, the unnamed protagonist describes:

> One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions (Perkins Gillman [1892] 1998, 3).

The lines here, as well as in *Repetitive gestures*, behave like eroded paths. As each layer was added during the process of painting, the patterns became less visible, and slowly began to melt into one another. One's eye wants to follow the curvy paths of curlicues and flowers and could almost make a game of it. In contrast to a game though, there is no central focus to the painting, no place to start and end.

I saw Rosslynd Piggott's work for the first time in person at her retrospective *I sense you, but I cannot see you* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2019,

and attended her exhibition *Gardenia, gardenia and vapour window* at Sutton Gallery later that year. In the exhibition text for the latter, Piggott writes of her paintings: “they are literally observations of flowers” (Piggott 2019). Her earlier, more figurative work reverberates through the gallery and there is a sense of calm and pared back repetition. Piggott embraces the subject of flowers with tenderness and adoration—she attempts to capture their essence through scent translated into painting, hinting at specific subjects with titles such as *Lemon magnolia and nearby blossom tendril* (2019), and *Violet tendril and unseen white wisteria* (2019). In a catalogue essay for *I sense you, but I cannot see you*, Jennifer Higgie writes of Piggott’s work: “at its heart, her work is a form of meditation, a repetition that strives not for material insistence but for stripping back. It is often both celebratory—she is constantly astonished by the world—and elegiac (to know the world is to have your heart broken again and again)” (Devery et al. 2019, 23). Piggott’s approach echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the melodic equivalence between a flower in nature and a painting of a flower: a flower grows by sucking up nutrients from the soil and absorbing the sun, which is forever in motion. In a moment of vibration between elements, a flower manages to capture and preserve the varying energy forces that it draws from, holding itself together in a brief moment of becoming. With Cezanne in mind, Deleuze and Guattari argue that a painting of a flower occurs in an analogous way—when an artist paints a flower they are capturing the flux of their own sensations in a momentary stopping of attention: “a floral history of painting is like the endlessly and continuously resumed creation of the percepts and affects of flowers” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 176).

Piggott’s paintings in *Gardenia, gardenia and vapour window*, such as *Camellia pollinated and ice* **(fig. 5)** and my painting *Repetitive gestures* have the subject of flowers in common. They are also both long, rectangular, and landscape in orientation, were made in the same year, and consist of pared-back colour palettes. Although the surfaces of Piggott’s paintings appear as one neat, smooth coat of paint, they were built up slowly over a long period of time in thin washes—similarly to mine. In both making and viewing, her paintings gently demand a slowing down of time, and a meditation on the subtleties of sense. When entering the gallery space, I felt a pressure to move slowly and shift my focus between the vibration of the room as a whole, and the acute details of the work. I made note of fine pencil lines, the creamy

Figure 5: Rosslynd Piggott, *Camellia pollinated and ice*, 2018–19, oil on linen, 75 x 150cm.

texture of the paint. The works refused to give everything away at once and sat comfortably in their quietness. Similarly to Piggott's slowing down of time, my paintings featuring the repetitive floral motif require multiple, long sessions of adding layers to the pattern, leaving it to dry, then more sessions and more layers in an attempt for the layers to eventually dissolve into one near-monochrome surface. Both in making and viewing, Piggott's painting and mine require patience, and a willingness to meander.

In contrast to Piggott, I am not interested in the flower as flora so much as the flower as symbol. By an insistent use and repetition of the floral motif as a painting strategy, I am aiming to push something that is tired into a space of exhaustion, both literally as the pattern takes up all potential space of the composition, and conceptually. Exhaustion, like closing one's eyes to rest, brings with it the potential for re-energised affective landscapes that may emerge in viewing the painting. Piggott's flowers are nature, without interference, simply observation. Conversely, the flowers in *Repetitive gestures* are symbolic, they have been mined, there are minimal natural resources left and they operate in the realm of the signifier, the logo. As explained by Ahmed's example of the apology, excessive repetition usually strips something of its meaning. However, when pushed from the realm

of tiredness into that of exhaustion, repetition has the potential to behave differently, generatively.

At the beginning of this essay I explained that Ahmed uses neural pathways as an example of the smoothing or naturalising of a path. However, one's nervous system has the ability to change its activity, adapting in response to intrinsic or extrinsic encounters by reorganising its structure, functions, or connections. This is called brain plasticity and is a relatively new concept in the field of neurology, as well as philosophy and critical theory (Malabou 2008). Even if a neural pathway is well worn and deeply ingrained, there is always the potential for diversion, for new associations and new routes. Ahmed explores the word "queer" to show how a word or idea can be re-used and given new meaning, even if it is historically heavy with associations. Ahmed writes, "queer: odd, strange, unseemly, disturbed, disturbing. Queer: a feeling, a sick feeling; feeling queer as feeling nauseous" (Ahmed 2019, 197). Prior to its contemporary LGBTQIA+ use, the word queer would be used to describe things noticeable because they are used, fragile, odd, out of place.[12] Ahmed states, "that some of us can live our lives by assuming that word *queer*, by even saying 'yes' to that word, shows how a past use is not exhaustive of a word or thing, however exhausted a word or thing" (Ibid, 197-8). So, in a sense, queer use is re-use, it is to use something in a different way to that which or for whom it was intended—to pick up something tired and give it a new meaning.

Here I have used paths, among other examples, to discover how repetition may be brought to bear on clichéd symbols such as the flower. By reading Ahmed's ideas on use and re-use alongside those of tiredness and exhaustion by Deleuze, I have been able to conceptualise the cliché as a well-trodden path, one that has become tired and eroded due to too much use. Through a discussion of *Repetitive gestures*, I demonstrate that in pushing the cliché from tired to exhausted through a repetitive and accumulative method of painting, there is potential for revitalisation, or for

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12. In the 1890s the word 'queer' first became used as a homophobic slur, and it wasn't until the gay rights movement of the 1960s and '70s that this started to change. The word 'queer' is known to have been reclaimed by Queer Nation, an offshoot group of ACT UP in 1990. It is worth noting that in recent years the idea of 'queering' as an artistic or academic methodology has become almost a cliché itself in its proliferation and popularity.

different use. Comparing this painting with work by Piggott, I clarify my approach to subjects such as the flower—which I am interested in as an overworn symbol, or a logo of feeling. Using painting to manipulate subjects such as the flower, or the disorienting lover's maze, as contemplated in *By/from C.H.L x*, I aim to create softer trails, desire lines that lead to new encounters. Rethinking clichés, like rethinking the way a word or thing is used, calls not only for redescription and re-inscription, but for a transformative exploration of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable superficial image encounters.

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Like Pavlova For My Soul: Friendship as a Curatorial Methodology

Emma Nixon

adapted from BA Hons (Art History and Curating) exegesis “Like Pavlova For My Soul: Friendship as a Curatorial Methodology.” Monash Art, Design & Architecture; Monash University 2021.

emmnixon@gmail.com

Abstract

Thriving on conversation and collective knowledge, this exegesis will investigate friendship as both a curatorial methodology and as an antidote to grief. Using an auto-theoretical approach to map the constellation of friends and mentors who orbit my life, *Like Pavlova For My Soul* foregrounds the shared and personal as radical lenses for curatorial work. Self-reflexive by nature, the project draws on this relationality both as a methodology and as subject matter. Culminating in an unbound book housing letters, photographs, and artworks, *Like Pavlova For My Soul* is an intimate project that allows the viewer to touch and be close to its contents. Rather than dealing with friendship as a universal and timeless concept, the proximity—of what I can reach and see, and who I can talk to—has become the nexus of this year-long investigation.

Like Pavlova For My Soul: Friendship as a Curatorial Methodology

My gravitational pull towards the wonky squares and lilac lines of Maddi Simm's paintings occurred, I think, because I saw myself reflected in their colours and poetics. I knew whoever had painted these lyrical abstractions was someone I shared a sensibility with, someone I wanted to befriend. I was introduced to her beaming smile and contagious energy the following week, and I quickly realized the paintings and the person were a clear continuation of each other, both emanating a quirky warmth and enthusiasm. We made an exhibition together in two weeks, selecting the still wet paintings on her lounge room floor. Maddi felt like a companion, in art and in friendship, who I had met *through* her salon hang at the VCA grad show. It is this feeling, of companionship, that I have since been walking hastily towards.

Working from a position of deep grief following the recent death of John Nixon, my darling Dad, this project makes an active decision to engage with friendship as a reparative and nourishing structure. Friendship permeated both Dad's art and his life, forming the foundation of the world he inhabited. Relishing in the warmth and comfort that connection provides, my project rejects our society's common propensity towards the negative and the cynical—not to negate these things, but rather to provide a counter argument or other way forward. This framework of friendship allows us to critique or challenge things from a position of generosity, honesty, and trust.

American geometric painter Mary Heilmann remembers how her practice changed in 1978 following the death of some close friends:

> I was still working in a bright-coloured, geometrical, non-image way, but as I gazed at the work I began to see new meaning in it … It honoured Norman and Gordon and all the people I had loved and lost … Now the work came from a different place. It was a big minute for me. Everything would be different (Heliman 2012, 195).

Rather than working out of an enquiry into modernist formalism, she describes herself as painting her wounds, "The passion and fear went out

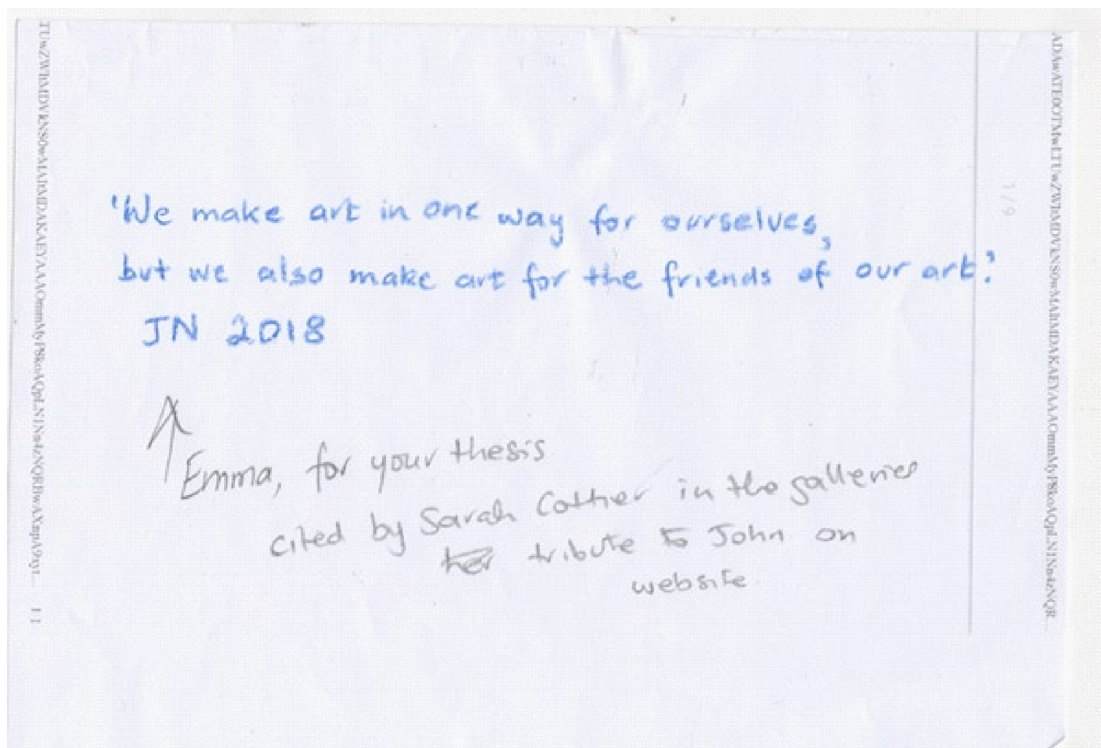


Figure 1: Note stuck to our fridge, Mum quoting Dad.

of my life and into my work," (Ibid, 196) she has said. I briefly offer these quotes from Heilmann to situate my own compulsion to grapple with a similar subjective need, dealing with feelings of loss, and locating my practice in relation to this. I would describe this as an act of friendship towards myself.

It feels pertinent to demarcate what I mean by friendship or to illuminate how I experience it. As I use it in this exegesis, friendship is a feeling of kinship, lightning bolt moments of shared connection and insight, and the relief of being understood. Encountered as an intimate infatuation, the stakes are high in these bonds because there is a lot invested, and therefore a lot to lose. I do not assume that my experience of friendship is finite or universal, but rather that everyone experiences friendship as a shifting, individual feeling. This definition has developed as an antidote to grief and has come into clarity over the past two years.

My teacher Mel suggested the term "soul-mating as a curatorial methodology," instead of friendship, as an alternative title to my project. This expression didn't make sense for me because it didn't encapsulate the sense of the everyday, of the communal, and for a project that centres those things;

it felt like a loss. For me, the everyday and the communal are the spaces within which friendship lives, and to name it something else would be to reduce the potential of how big, exciting, and consuming friendship can be.

The notion of soulmates is similar in feeling to French philosopher Montaigne's belief that we should only have one perfect friend. Writing in 1580 he says, "For the perfect friendship which I am talking about is indivisible: each gives himself so entirely to his friend that he has nothing left to share with another" (Montaigne [1580] 2004, 15). His perfect friend was Etienne de La Boetie, a French magistrate and writer. Antiquated by today's standards, the way Montaigne talks about his 'perfect friend' correlates to how contemporary society thinks about our romantic partner. However, at the time of writing, marriage was thought to be nothing more than a financial deal, securing status. Montaigne goes as far as saying "Women are in truth not normally capable of responding to such familiarity and mutual confidence that would (be needed to) sustain that holy bond of friendship" (Ibid, 6). Despite his misogynistic views consistent with the time of writing, the way Montaigne writes about de La Boetie is poetic and urgent and still speaks to how friendships and connections are built today:

> If you press me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying: 'Because it was him, because it was me.' Mediating this union there was, beyond all my reasoning, beyond all I can say specifically about it, some form of destiny. We were seeking each other before we set eyes on each other ... we discovered ourselves to be so seized by each other, so known to each other and so bound together that from then on none was so close as each was to the other. (Ibid, 9-10)

I wrote about this idea in a letter to artist Beth Maslen, a friend who I have come to know quickly and deeply over the course of this year. Knowing her has taught me more about friendship than I could possibly learn in a book. I introduced Montaigne's idea of friendship to her and then asked:

> I wonder perhaps if you are my perfect friend? Or im/perfect, as I would never ask perfection of you. As I poke my head into your studio and see you sitting on the floor moving marbles around on a disembodied tabletop, I often wonder to myself, where have you been all my life?

When we are together there is a constant frenzy of sharing information. I bring you a seed of a thought and you turn it into prose, an artwork or a book reference. We email each other scans of poetic paragraphs we find, or nice book titles, or colourful objects we know the other will like.

On a walk in Footscray you tell me about Werner Herzog's film *My Best Fiend* (1999) and Anne Carson's novel in verse *An Autobiograhy of Red* (1998) and in doing this you show me the journey of the tumultuous soulmate (Herzog and Klaus Kinski, Geryon and Herakles.)

We edit each other's work, suggesting additions or subtractions but we are both left confused by rogue possessive apostrophes.

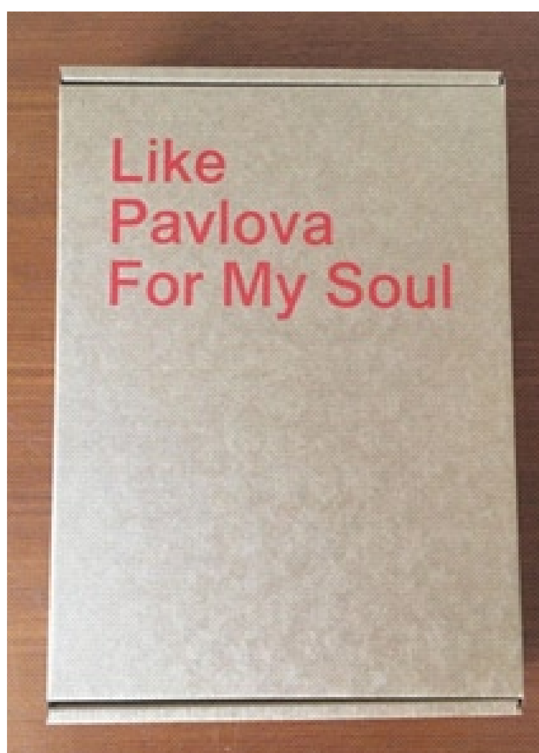
You and I inhabit the world which we built for and with each other, a world driven by beauty, storytelling and a shared vocabulary. With red tongues from sucking on too many raspberry drops, we like to sit in the library at the intersection of the tall artists monographs and books about jewels. You often take my arm, smile up at me and ask, "What else do you know?"

Yours in thought and feeling,
Emma

I wrote this letter to Beth as a way of naming how our friendship lives and breathes.

*   *   *

As a collector of envelopes with abstract patterns inside them, artist, writer and friend Rachel Schenberg inspired me to think about envelopes and letters as symbols of connection, often closing the gap between near and far. She and I began writing letters to one another and I found this process to be so productive that I decided to write letters to all the other artists in my final year exhibition too: Lisa Radford, Rory Maley, Sueann Chen and the aforementioned Beth Maslen and Maddi Simm. A feeling of warmth emanating from them, the letters back and forth began to form a co-authored catalogue essay that was a vehicle for both personal stories and theoretical



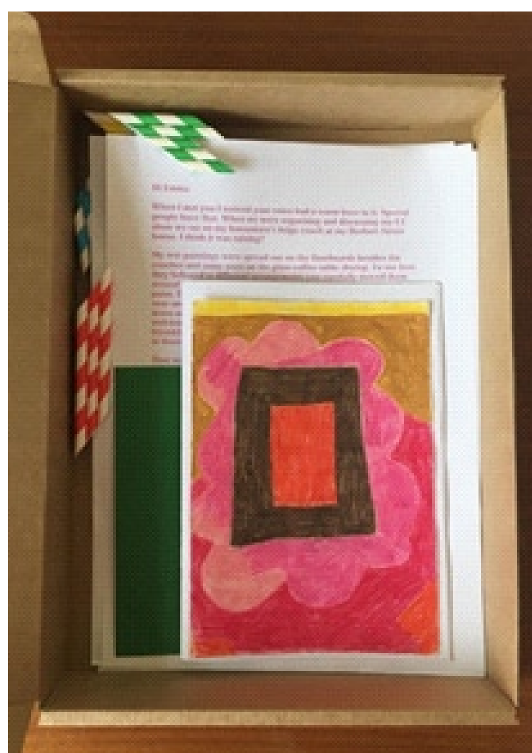


Figure 2: Cardboard box, title screen-printed with Beth.

Figure 3: Inside glimpse of *Like Pavlova For My Soul*.

ideas. Written to be displayed in the public realm, these letters could be seen as a performative expression of friendship, but I felt they evoked the idea of a long-form interview, or as a selective sharing of intimacy.

Slowly but surely, it became apparent that an exhibition wouldn't be possible because of lockdown restrictions. Not wanting to compromise my curatorial intention or the viewers' experience of the artworks, I needed to find another way to create a space where the artworks and letters could co-exist, evoking for the audience a tangible closeness. I wanted readers to be able to touch the paintings, feel the delicateness of the drawing's paper, and dip in and out of the loose-leaf letters. A traditional book felt too linear and restrictive to house friendship: something which is so sprawling, so living, so ongoing. An unbound book housed inside a humble cardboard box became my solution, allowing the objects more space without such tight order or control.
Named *Like Pavlova for my Soul*,[1] the box houses the letters exchanged between the artists and me, as well as an artwork by each artist. Conceived as a multiple of six (so that the artists can all keep one), each box nonetheless has its own character—with different artworks inside. I invited

these contributors because I had inklings and suspicions that they were artists who engaged with friendship in both their lives and their practices. It is deeply satisfying to find that to be true. This was a way of introducing these people to one another through their work and bringing them together—the building of a network. Like inviting six people you think will get along to a dinner party and then getting to overhear their conversations.

Beth has a beautiful idea about portals, about how inverse images of the same thing can create a psychic gateway between two places. Beth and I often send photos of our fridges to each other, on which there is a display of all our favourite things. She contributed six pairs of inverse photographs, one set for each box, held together by two small magnets. One for your fridge and one for a friend's—creating a portal. They bear magical motifs: a lone table in a seemingly abandoned Franco Cozzo store; a blurry pink geranium in a neighbour's backyard; scallops huddled together in their shells.

Maddi contributed an abstract drawing to each box, thin A5 paper and brightly coloured, each different but all with the same energy as the paintings I saw at the VCA grad show and fell in love with. Her drawings are always imbued with her touch—laboured purple pencil pressing hard, leaving its texture and mark. Lisa said I could put her orange and yellow painting *SunsetEPW,*1999, into my unbound book and because I was only in possession of one, I reproduced the painting as a photograph to be placed in each of the other boxes. This photo **(fig. 6)** shows *SunsetEPW* sitting on my sideboard at home, amongst other paintings and objects we have at home, as an ode to how and where painting lives. I will discuss this artwork later in the text.

Rachel wanted to make an intervention in the box, or act as an appendage to the other artworks. Curious about the latent geometric rhombus pattern possessed by rows of straws, she decided to make paper clips, or "page pinches" as she calls them, to hold together each set of correspondence in the boxes. The colourful straws build small abstract sculptures which hold the papers tightly and bring an object quality to them.

In my friends Rory and Sueann, I saw two people who embody how friendship and that which is shared can be at the core of a personal and creative relationship. I asked if they would like to make a gift for one

Figure 4: Photograph by Beth Maslen, mock-up for Portal photograph.

Figure 5: Four of Maddi’s drawings in her studio.

Figure 6: Lisa’s painting SunsetEPW on my sideboard.

Figure 7: Research image of Rachel and her straws.

Figure 8: Page pinches holding letters.

Figure 9: Finished page pinches all together.

another, as gift-giving can be a tangible manifestation of the bond between people. Rory made a booklet dedicated to Sueann and their cat Jasmine which mapped out such things as—all the places they go in the house, where Jasmine is forbidden from entering, how long Sueann's naps will last depending on where she takes them, and at what points their movements through the house overlap. Sueann's gift to Rory was a haircut on a sunny day, almost perfect with just one nick, and a letter remembering the day she first met him, when he had long, moppy hair going down to his chest.

Functioning at the tender intersection between art and life, I feel as though these contributions are thoughtful mixtures of objects and entities—the things that we find together, that sit with us and between us. They are artworks about the home, the everyday, the body, and they are for sharing. Colour permeates the artworks and the words, the letters are bustling with stories and secrets inside the box, waiting to be engaged with.

Certain precedents are of relevance to my enquiry, and my decision to present my exhibition in a box. For instance, I enjoyed the evoked connotations of travelling exhibitions that ensued. Of particular interest is the *Exhibition Box*, 1998 that Rose Nolan showed me, which she had made with friends and artists Marco Fusinato and Stephen Bram after the trio returned from Europe. This white box holds an instructional work by each of the artists that can be folded out and displayed, plus a catalogue with photographs of all the exhibitions they had together in Europe. The boxes were for sale and were like a readymade exhibition holding similar works that were in the European shows. Feminist art critic and curator Lucy Lippard did a series of conceptual art exhibitions which were sent to Latin America in suitcases in the late 1960s. "Transported from country to country by artists, bypassing the institutions and allowing more international networking and face-to-face interaction between artists," these are also examples of alternative vessels for holding exhibitions (Lippard 2009). And, of course, the most famous reference is Marcel Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise* (1935-1940), in which Duchamp created an edition of twenty "portable museums" each containing sixty-nine small scale reproductions of his work, held in brown leather bags (MoMA n.d.). I realised that I didn't want the box to house an exhibition, but rather to be an exhibition unto itself. The most rewarding experience with the unbound book would be one to one, in which the viewer could sit and read and spend time with the letters and artworks.

Figure 10: Sueann cutting Rory’s hair in their backyard, her gift to him.

When I told Lisa about my unbound book, she immediately mentioned New Zealand artist Nick Austin’s *Liquid Dossier* (2013), a collection of documents sent in the mail. Each dossier held a different assortment of objects, including (but not limited to) postcards, photographs, artworks, photocopied essays, DVD’s, a sachet of coffee—all sitting like loose thoughts inside a manilla folder (Radford 2013; Dunne 2013). In some ways it is impossible to grasp Austin’s dossier from only seeing photographs of it—an object meant to arrive at your home, to drink a provided cup of coffee over. In some ways that’s how these projects function—a moment of privacy that can only really be engaged with by the people directly holding the object. An edition of 200, anyone who wanted to buy it could purchase online.

Hoping the audience for my unbound book will grow, I encourage the artists to lend the boxes to their friends, or people who would find the project interesting, for a minimum of two weeks each. I feel this is enough time for it to be read and absorbed: to understand the minor details of Rory’s maps, to see what Beth’s portal photograph and magnet could add to their fridge.

*   *   *

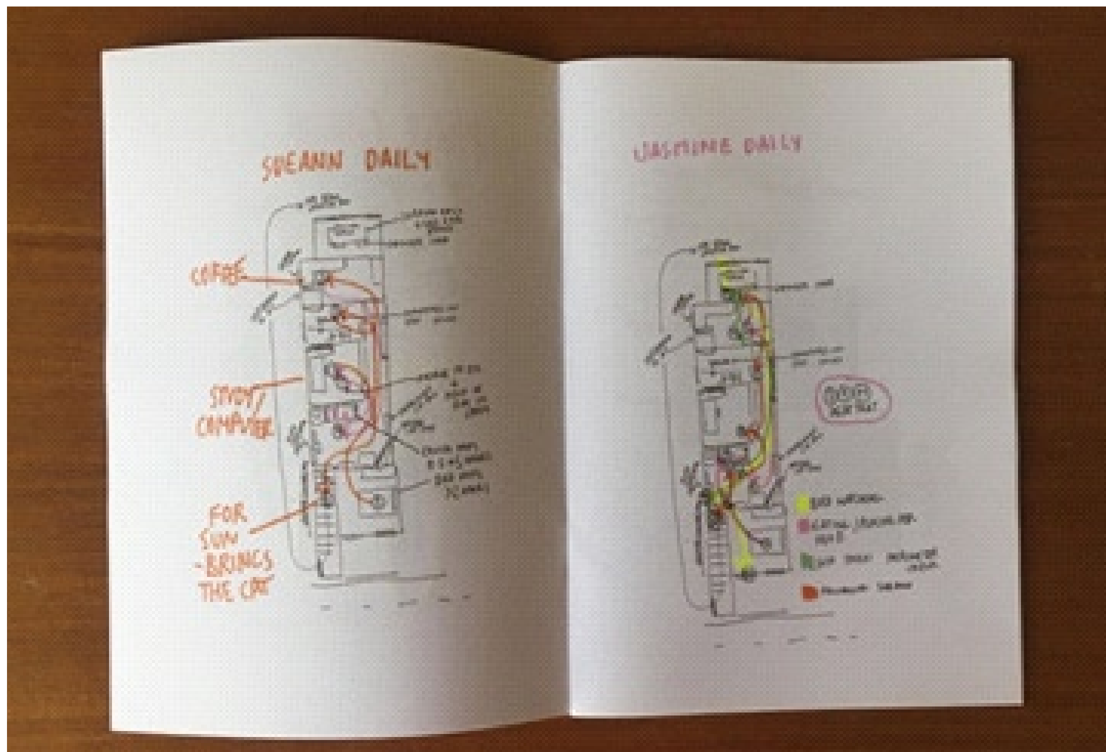


Figure 11: Spread of Rory's booklet made for Sueann and Jasmine.

I ran into Lisa at Maddi's opening at Conners Conners in early March. I was nervous and a little rosy cheeked after one glass of wine and one beer. I was wearing my blue dress and red t-shirt, Lisa was wearing a dress over pants. Maddi encouraged me to talk to Lisa even though I was a bit nervous, "Just say hello!" I told Lisa I had been reading her book *Aesthetic nonsense makes commonsense, thanks X* (2016) all day in bed; she was a bit embarrassed by this and nonchalantly laughed it off. I told her how Jarrod Rawlins's introduction to the book "Writing to my Friends" was very influential to my honours research on friendship and she said, "Oh Jarrod, what a shit stirrer."

Overflowing with witty observations, and sentimental anecdotes "Writing to my Friends" elaborates Lisa and Jarrod's shared methodology for art writing. Growing out of a lack of confidence at art school, this methodology (in which they imagined a friends-only readership), allowed them to "make mistakes, understand existing arguments and discourses incorrectly, or not at all … writing to your friends serves a communicative purpose that most art writing can't" (Rawlins 2016, 17-19).

Lisa's eyes glistened as she told me that her whole practice has been about friendship, but she'd never been quite brave enough to name it that. Her

curiosity now piqued, she asked “Why friendship?” I told her the truth: “Lisa, I’ve had the worst year and now I’m going to have the best year, and the only way to do that is spend it with friends, making them, writing about them, reading about them.” She got a little teary after I’d said this, and she shared with me that her mother had died when she was about my age. She told me that she hadn’t had the language or self-awareness that I did, but that she too had responded the same way, wanting to build a new family around her, one filled with art and friends.

I didn’t see Lisa again for about six months, though I carried her book around constantly (hoping its power of osmosis would work on me) so I never felt as though she was far away. The next time I saw her was at her Art Deco apartment in East Melbourne, following the death of Damiano. It was here that she gave me the painting *Sunset EPW,* an edition of ten which she made at art school during a time in the nineties when her two idols were John Nixon and Kate Daw. Lisa felt that the sunset related thematically to Kate Daw because at that time Daw’s work was about romance, the sunset evoking the feeling of long walks on the beach. The orange monochrome and yellow circle in the painting are an ode to the shapes and colours of Dad’s Experimental Paint Workshop. After Dad and Kate Daw died last year (within two weeks of each other), Lisa decided she wanted to give me one of the paintings, and one to Kate Daw’s children Camille and Theo too. After this meeting, I slowly began to build the courage to write this letter:

> Hi Lisa
>
> I have been thinking about you and your practice pretty much every second day since we ran into each other that March night at Conners Conners—so please forgive me for my nerves in writing to you.
>
> I wanted to thank you for the painting you gave me, *SunsetEPW*, from 1999. I couldn’t really conceptualise what a Lisa Radford / John Nixon / Kate Daw sunset would look like, but of course it was perfect. You told me you displayed the painting with kisses beside it, did you mean lipstick kisses? It is a sad twist of fate that Dad and Kate would die two weeks apart.

I've attached here a photo of the first painting Dad ever made me in 1996, 5 months before I was born. Imagine making a painting for someone you've never met. It's Yellow and Orange like your sunset.

Michael Taussig, Australian philosopher/anthropologist has this idea about Sunset being the death of each day—a time of sadness or loss where people come together to mourn the days end. "Does anything grab the heart more passionately than farewell?" he asks.

He proposes that one of the ways the sadness of twilight can be escaped is by "entering into the setting sun, grasping the drama, the beauty, and the despair, all in one. This will not be the untrammelled joy of midday with blue skies and a radiant sun … (for) the beauty and grandeur of sunset is larded not only with sadness but with an out-of-body sense that something is afoot."

Taussig suggests that we use this time to "battle sadness or, better still, to learn from it by taking up the transformative properties that the mixture of sadness and dying light offer, amounting to a sense of relatedness with the world not present at other times." Taussig points towards Meltdown and the climate crisis often. It is inevitable that one day the sun will go down for the last time (on all of us as we die, and then on civilisation as the climate crisis descends.) So, looking at the larger picture, if we are living through a moment in history *just before* the sun goes down forever, could this render us living inside the transformative properties that sunset offers?

Lisa, if you indulge me with this theory, I will imply that the moment of perpetual sunset we are living in now is a time to take the sadness, wrestle with it, and ultimately harness it for the positive, if such a thing is possible. I think this is what I've been trying to get at by spending the year following Dad's death reading, writing and thinking about friendship.

I want to call my Honours project Like pavlova for my soul: friendship as a curatorial methodology, after our dear friend Damiano Bertoli. Before he died, "Like pavlova for my soul" was how Damiano

described to Amita Kirpalani what teaching in Honours felt like. We miss him. For me, friendship is like pavlova to my soul. Rich and sweet and layered. I think we are describing the same feeling.

With warmth, Emma

I wanted to tell Lisa my theory about Taussig, I think, because I felt she would understand the battle with fatalism that ensues when you lose a parent. She asked me if she could print out our exchange and send it to Camile and Theo along with their paintings. I felt very touched that Lisa wanted to share it with them, and that the letters would now have another life with other people who were grieving. If this project has already managed to do that, then it has succeeded. Taussig's idea of learning from sadness and understanding it as a source of nourishment, walking towards a positive outcome rather than a pessimistic one, is where I want to locate my curatorial practice and also my approach to living.

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Tara McDowell, my mentor and friend lent me her copy of Céline Condorelli's book *The Company She Keeps* (2014) on the condition I promise to give it back. The book is a series of interviews with Condorelli's friends and peers: philosopher Johan Frederik Hartle, sociologist and writer Avery F. Gordon, and curators Polly Staple and Nick Aikens, and is a meditation on friendship as a complex and deeply felt concept. Condorelli's introduction "Notes on Friendship" connects the practice of friendship with "how to live and work together towards change, as a way of acting in the world" (Condorelli 2014, 7). A contemporary view of friendship, written by an artist and woman, which focuses not only on the historical role of friendship (and the exclusion of women from it) but also how it functions now—this book has been vital for the formulation of my thinking and research.

The idea that resonates with me the most in this book is Condorelli's discussion around how exhibitions have been used as models of social critique:

I consider exhibitions as contexts in which relationships to the world

> can take place and can be adjusted … A lot of what feminism achieved in the 1970s, took place through exhibitions and public presentations. Issues regarding gender equality were redefined by artists in exhibitions—not as illustrations, but literally as temporary utopias in the present. I think this is a very strong potential of the exhibition, imagining the world and the future you'd like to live in (Ibid, 108).

This idea of the "temporary utopia" encouraged me towards making exhibitions that explore friendship both as content for artworks, and as a curatorial strategy. My aim is to bring ideas of communality and interdependence into the sphere of the gallery—or as in this project *Like Pavlova for Soul* into the container of the exhibition box. My proposition is for a practice of art/exhibition making that is not just an aesthetic or intellectual pursuit, but which might also offer an alternative pathway forward, a way of enacting change or difference in our relationships to one another.

I watched Tara alter the ambience of an institutional space, and the tenor of the exchanges within it, in 2019 during her two-day symposium *Shapeshifters: New Forms of Curatorial Research*. As you walked towards the MADA Gallery, you were welcomed by Charlie Sofo's *Windows* (2019), a sheer yellow curtain floating along the entrance of the space, beneath it an offering of figs, tomatoes, apples and oranges, all foraged from the streets of Northcote and there for the taking when an audience member felt hungry. Tara wanted to disrupt the traditional symposium and find ways to insert magic, poetry, and a sense of community, in many ways creating a "temporary utopia." Working as her assistant curator, we set up the chairs in a semi-circle on flat ground, avoiding the tilting of a traditional lecture theatre and its focus towards one speaker, completely changing the psychogeography of the space.

To begin the event Astrid Lorange and Andrew Brooks, the poetry duo Snack Syndicate, read odes and love letters that they had written to each of the speakers, rather than giving a formal, academic introduction. DJ and artist Lucreccia Quintanilla played an ambient set to end the first day. Cakes, bread and biscuits aplenty baked by Tara's husband Boris were available to all. The speakers all talked of different worlds, of unknown places and new ways of being, completely expanding my understanding of what curatorial research could be. At the dinner that followed, cocktails were made in the

garden, elongated tables lit by candles and fairy lights. Fortunes were hidden in the bread we broke before the meal. It was the most exhausting and exulting two days, co-ordinating and facilitating everything so carefully—I felt simultaneously very depleted and extremely nourished.

This approach to event or exhibition-making is connected to a genre of curators that "take things to heart, that take things personally"—a description that comes from curator Jo-ey Tang in the introduction of my friend Eloise Sweetman's new book of essays, *Curatorial Feelings* (2021). These writings, and the curatorial practices they convey foreground "subjectivity, intuition, senses, belief systems, while pushing for new art historical narratives and an ethical professionalism" (Tang 2021, 3-8). The notion of centring "curatorial feelings" strongly speaks to how I want to continue to make exhibitions, leaving behind objectivity and following intuition as a valid methodology.

* * *

The notion of conflict has continually been posed by my peers and teachers as a challenge to the topic of friendship. Investigating this thread earnestly and wanting the project to be richer and more nuanced, I looked at Chantal Mouffe's *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (2013) to explore how, politically, conflict has been used for the positive. My teacher Nick recommended R. D. Laing's *Knots* (1970), poems which perform how rigorously we test the boundaries of our closest and most complex relationships—though on my topic of friendship I don't think Nick had much else to say. It became obvious, to both me and my assessors that this notion of conflict wasn't working because it wasn't embodied in my year-long investigation of friendship. For me, a lack of conflict does not correlate to an absence of criticality or rigour. Perhaps this misunderstanding is partially due to a lack of language around the discourses of friendship and support, which is the very thing that this project aims to build.

A moment arrived when I wondered if Beth and I needed to engineer a fight between us, just so that I could have something to write about that would appease them! I am reminded of a scene in Werner Herzog's film *My Best Fiend* (1999) where Herzog reveals that his muse Klaus Kinski's autobiography was "highly fictitious." He quotes Kinski pleading with him, "Werner, nobody will read this book if I don't write bad stuff about you. If I

wrote that we get along well together, nobody would buy it. The scum only wants to hear about the dirt, all the time.” Werner goes on to say that he helped Kinski to “invent particularly vile expletives” to go in the book, and that the two would laugh about this often (Herzog 1999). While he admits that some of these feelings of conflict and hatred were true (and of course the pair truly did share a very turbulent and difficult friendship) I still felt validated by Herzog and Kinski’s experience. Performing conflict lost its hold over me, and instead I realized that the conflict had to arise from my refusal.
Also addressing the lack of language around support is Condorelli’s book *Support Structures* (2009) compiled with Gavin Wade and James Langdon. Described as a bibliography of support, the book is a:

> Manual for that which assists, corroborates, advocates, articulates, substantiates, champions, and endorses; for what stands behind, underpins, frames, presents, maintains, and strengthens … While the work of supporting might traditionally appear as subsequent, unessential, and lacking value in itself, this manual is an attempt to restore attention to one of the neglected, yet crucial modes through which we apprehend and shape the world (Conderelli, Wade and Langdon 2009, 6).

This 450-page book is like a strong and heavy mammoth—here to prove a point. But other than bringing attention to the importance of support, the book delves deep into the difficulties of it, and discusses how support requires a transgression of personal boundaries. Condorelli elaborates: “But this intimacy entails some violence as well, the violence of support: providing support and being supportive implies not only being in contact, but being right up against the subject of concern, and taking it on-board, making common cause with it” (Ibid, 15).

The violence Condorelli speaks about rings true to me. To support someone is the closest you can be to them, the lines are blurred between you and them, there is a very fine line between love and obligation. What I have come to understand over the course of the last two years is the deeply intertwined nature of grief and love. If our love for people didn’t pulse so profoundly and consumingly, it wouldn’t be so unbearably painful to lose them.

Figure 12: Final year presentation, image credit: Andrew Curtis.

The contents of *Like Pavlova for my Soul* will lay spread out on one of Dad's trestle tables for my end of year display, functioning as both a literal support structure, and as a metaphor for the way he still carries me. The trestle will hold everything I have amalgamated this year, all of the friendship building and working through of grief: the bright colours of the artworks, the poetry of the words, the eccentricities of the objects; all the things he taught me to love. Beth and Rachel and Rory, the people he brought me to and connected me with. He used these tables in his studio, and in his art installations, and every year we brought them out as tables for our family Christmas lunch. If he was still alive, I don't think Dad would want me to use one, I imagine him gesticulating, "Get your own table! You can't just use my stuff!!"

I'll level with him—if he comes back, he can have the table.

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