

Chapter 5: The Body as Laboratory: performing affect

What I want to say is: I love performance most when I enter into it, when it calls me forward shamelessly, across those hard-edged maps into spaces where I must go.

—D. Soyini Madison *Performing Theory/Embodied Writing*¹

I began this PhD as a creative writing project with thoughts about autoethnography and philosophy. It is clear from my chapter discussing methodologies that I am unfaithful to a single approach, and that *just* writing doesn't work with my trans-media/trans-method approach. This, in turn, may well have to do with the way I make connections, create meaning and learn. A diagnosis of ADHD later in life gave me pause to consider how split focus and hyperfixation is part of the way I make art. Another less clinical way of putting it might be "following my bliss", where bliss means the flow state, or simple contentment. How this manifests in a creative mode is that when I work on a project I have a lot of other side-projects that I work on concurrently. I used to think of these as "sense-making" activities, or ways of working out a problem. They also provided me with pleasure and respite. The sense-making activity would be discarded, eventually, sacrificed like a vestigial limb. This way of treating creative production resulted in a hierarchy of primacy in terms of my practice, which is antithetical to notions of collaboration, sympoeisis, undelimited fields of research, and general trans-ness! Shifting my perspective on this approach enabled me to enfold all my creative activities into The Work. Gardening is the work. Fermenting cabbage is the work. Baking bread is the work. Spinning wool is the work. Editing video is the work. Learning a new sound program is the work. Singing is the work. None of these activities can be separated out or discarded as unimportant. The work would be incomplete without this meandering multiplicity.

¹ D. Soyini Madison, "Performing Theory /Embodied Writing," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1999): 108.

What began as an autoethnography of my life with panic exceeded its boundaries, opened its mouth and swallowed an undelimited, embodied and philosophical experimentation that threw me into the middle of my panic as the only possible place to create from and through. The panic led me through sonic spaces, affective spaces, spaces of theory and philosophy and embodied performance spaces. It took me to death and not-death and stripped back the layers of being alive to its skeletal structures, the underpinnings of how we are in relation to all other beings. I stood in different psychoarchitectural and psychogeographical² locations in contextual relationships with audiences, with chairs, with fluorescent lighting tubes and whiteboards. With windows opening perhaps onto a garden or looking out over a city. In spaces with no windows and low ceilings. In caves and repurposed monasteries. It was raining. It was bright. Each of these things brought affect to bear upon me and others. I opened my mouth and made noises that are not language and are not not language in order to trigger a ripple of affective resonance that will never end. A vibration may become faint, but it will never end. It continues to resonate in my body, even today. I feelhear it as it shifts my organs around, in a historical wandering, in an analytical lossing, in a humoral dripping. I am a record of time, compressed and fleshy.

Plugging into the academic assemblage perversely frees an unbidden eruption of panic, intensified by the rigid overcoding of psychoarchitectural affect. When—after I had cried in the academy, stuttered and choked in the academy, humiliated myself in the academy, lost my composure utterly in the academy—somebody asked me if it was dangerous to channel this panic state as an experiment in affective communication, I responded that the only way to get to panic was to channel it, to be open to it, and allow it to write itself upon my execrable body. The performance space somehow contains the embodied experience of panic, creates a safe space to identify, collect and record the emic data generated in the event. D. Soyini Madison, performance ethnographer, human rights researcher, and self-confessed performance romantic speaks about entering into performance “as a witness and a

² I am using these terms to indicate the differing psychological valence of performing in different spaces and places—a seminar room is affectively different to a church, a local audience of artists is a different gathering than a class of grad students in a country where I don't speak the local language.

doer”.³ This dual work has resonances of the phenomenology feedback loop—that we have a world because we have a body—and so we create a world through performance. Madison continues, “[w]e see the familiar for the very first time and after that we can no longer speak or reason about what we thought we knew in the exact same way, lest we forget the performance”.⁴ What I learn about panic in my body and therefore about panic in the world via this performance experiment is something I can’t learn or know in any other context. To hold that affect close and to reproduce it is hard work, but work that, as Madison says, “helps me see...It illuminates like good theory. It orders the world and lets the world loose”.⁵

Lorne Dwight Conquergood, ethnographer, human rights activist and performance studies theorist, explored the arbitrary demarcations between disciplines that I allude to above, especially in terms of performance studies, as a way to understand power structures. He calls this demarcation an “Apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating.”⁶ Conquergood calls on practitioners and researchers to “refuse and supercede this deeply entrenched division of labor...between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment”.⁷

I certainly have functioned within institutionally demarcated disciplinary frameworks, because I felt pressured to do so, and that, too, is hard work. I have made choices between writing and performance or poetry and theory and tried to be faithful. I have called myself a writer, then sometimes a performer. I have applied strange personal equations whereby writing equals thinking and performance equals doing, whereby academia trumps art, and institutional writing trumps experimental texts. Ultimately, I don’t have a natural capacity for monogamy, and I respond to Conquergood’s call to resist the Apartheid of knowledges by finding my way through the swamps of an enmeshed praxis of thinking and doing and being and becoming in an endless

³ Madison, "Performing Theory /Embodied Writing."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *TDR* 46, no. 2 (2002): 153. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146965>.

⁷ Ibid.

looping cycle. Calling on the spirit of sympoeisis again, I find myself in the generative compost of trans-disciplinary practice.

Della Pollock, a theorist who works at the intersections of performance and cultural studies, complicates the distinctions between creative disciplines, describing a praxis in which “the writer and the world's bodies intertwine in evocative writing, in intimate co-performance of language and experience”.⁸ Further to this sticky embrace of bodies and the world, she contends that:

performative writing simultaneously slips the chokehold of conventional (scientific, rational) scholarly discourses and their enabling structures...It requires that the writer drop down to a place where words and the world intersect in active interpretation, where each pushes, cajoles, entrances the other into alternative formations, where words press into and are deeply impressed by “the sensuousness of their referents.”⁹

Pollock deepens the intersectional relationality of performative writing when discussing the work of Carol Mavor¹⁰ and its affective resonance. One of Mavor's texts discusses a series of Victorian photographs of diarist and “maid-of-all-work” Hannah Cullwick taken by her spouse and master Arthur Munby. Pollock notes that in the ekphrastic text Mavor “reads/writes in body-time”,¹¹ co-performing language and experience, “fingering, feeling, making us feel”¹². Pollock suggests that Mavor “does not re-present the photographs as much as she rehearses their claim on the reader/viewer's body-imagination”.¹³ This deep enmeshment, this sensuous and affective entanglement of being a body, writing a body and performing a body that affects other bodies is at the very heart of performing affect.

⁸ Pollock, "Performing Writing," 81.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Carol Mavor is an American writer. This passage by Pollock refers to her book *Pleasures Taken* in which Mavor writes about “maid of all work” and diarist Hannah Cullwick. She writes about Hannah through a series of photographs taken by prominent barrister Arthur Munby, to whom she was wife and servant.

¹¹ Pollock, "Performing Writing," 82.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

These tangled and knotty relations are dizzying at times but drive me towards a precipice of disciplinarity from which I am happy to leap. Out into the experimental. This project was always already in excess of “writing”, and autotheory provided me with a way to push into those other spaces and step out of the stasis of a bounded approach to writing. Within autotheory I found a way to situate a non-standard thesis of writing and performance, writing as performance, and writing of performance. A thesis that does not conform to rigid taxonomies, a project embracing the human and non-human, the flesh of the world, the feminist, the queer, the quotidian and the extraordinary. From the first moment I panicked and left my body I understood ecstatic evacuation. Pollock reframes “ecstasy” as “ex-stasis”¹⁴, signifying not just the literal meaning of “to be or stand outside oneself”¹⁵ but also to be out of stasis and into “e(motion)”.¹⁶

Autotheory is a praxis in motion. It invites experimentality and blurs boundaries, especially between lived experience, creative experimentation, politics and theory. In her introduction to *Autotheory Theory*, Robyn Wiegman, feminist scholar and critical race theorist, seeks to inspire a “collective curiosity about the many ways that an autotheoretical impulse can be found not only in contemporary literature and academic criticism but in the traditions of writing and thinking that pollinate each.”¹⁷ Wiegman provides a comprehensive overview of the institutional canon of autobiography, memoir and other forms of life-writing, and also of the intellectual tradition of critical theory, which she refers to as “the field of proper names”.¹⁸ Despite the intellectual upheavals that have influenced both fields, Wiegman states that the canonical form ultimately equates to “institutionalized business as usual”, with all the inherent bias, violence and patronymy that implies. Wiegman does not position autotheory as a single taxonomical response to the collapse of these fields into, or out of, one another, contending that it “carries no collectively assumed aesthetic, historical, or theoretical definition”.¹⁹ Instead, Wiegman focuses on the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecstasy_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecstasy_(philosophy))

¹⁶ Pollock, “Performing Writing,” 82.

¹⁷ Robyn Wiegman, “Introduction: Autotheory Theory,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2020.0009>.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

“hybridity” of autotheoretical approaches with a contention that in its most “developed line of thinking to date, autotheory is positioned as a distinctly feminist practice, extending second wave feminism’s commitment to putting “flesh” on the universalist pretensions of established theoretical traditions by situating the story of lived experience in politically consequential terms”.²⁰

In Chapter 1 I used Fournier’s lens to look briefly at a history of performance by feminists, queers and Women of Colour. Looking back across my life of artmaking, I see I have been performing in the way that Pollock, Wiegman Fournier and Eades discuss—in an evocative and affective mode that is an enmeshed praxis, beginning with the phenomenology of my body in and of the world. I didn’t know it then, in the 1980s, or didn’t have the language skills to speak of it, but I was hanging in mid-air between a rock and a hard place, giving voice to texts written from the otherness of a nascently queer and pharmaceutically-modified body living with panic, anxiety, depression, ADHD and all the other words given to the broad spectrum of existential and phenomenological experience.

In a sense I’m not doing anything different now when I perform than I was doing then, decades ago. Stepping into the space of performance is stepping into a body of work. I don’t enter into this space alone, but with consenting witnesses, with the quality of light, with the temperature of the atmosphere, with the furniture, with the institution, with the person who turns off the lights and turns on the sound. Performance time does not cohere with clock time, it is a place to shimmer between times in a space of becoming, together. It is a zone, to use the term Deleuze and Guattari apply to a space of artistic becoming, and “life alone creates such zones where living beings whirl around, and only art can reach and penetrate them in its enterprise of co-creation. This is because from the moment that the material passes into sensation...art itself lives on these zones of indetermination”.²¹ I step into this abyssal space willing to open a channel to a cut too real, willing to dissolve into a flood of pure affect, and take you with me. The liminality of the performance space makes it

²⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

²¹ Felix Guattari Gilles Deleuze, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 173.

the perfect place to unleash panic. I take with me whatever I need. The writings on and through the body, some breath, and some courage.

I am creating the conditions.

It begins with the hands.

To call the panic into the space of performance (or to lure panic out, since I carry the performance-world with me always, inside and out), I perform certain gestures. Panic lives in the fingertips, the fingers, the wrists. Eventually the whole arm will fly, but first the hands reach for the throat, to soothe and stroke, to push everything down. Soft fists open and close and the head drops back, stretching the jaw. Fingers tap the sternum, the site of the atrophied thymus. This is a knocking, a waking up. These gestures are like my first language, before and after the tongue. They constitute a ritual, a reiteration. As feminist philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler says, this “act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene”.²² Perhaps I am never not performing. The gestures are deeply embedded in my subtle body. Activating them activates the connected flows of affect that travel from the subtle to the gross body and eventually, beyond, to act upon others, tacitly restructuring how we all sense the world²³, and hence the world itself, since the world is as we co-create and perceive it, for we are in and of the world.

As a person who has been practising and teaching yoga for four decades, I relate these gestures to the idea of the *mudra*, which, in yogic terms, is an attitude, a lock or a seal.²⁴ There are *hasta* (hand) *mudras* and there are full body *mudras*. *Hasta mudras* use the position of the fingers—each representing different elements—and the hands to direct energy, to seal or lock energy along certain channels. The *mudras* can be practiced to serve many purposes including healing, internal focus, energy

²² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990).

²³ Judith Butler, "Performativity," Shannon Jackson and Paula Marincola ed. *In Terms of Performance*, The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, nd., <http://intermsofperformance.site/keywords/performativity/judith-butler>.

²⁴ Revital Carroll Cain Carroll, *Mudras of India: A Comprehensive Guide to the Hand Gestures of Yoga* (London and Philadelphia: Singing Dragon, 2012), 19.

direction and transformation. The symbolic affect is one of union, the undifferentiated nature of, for example, awareness of self and awareness of the world or the undifferentiated nature of mind and emptiness.²⁵ This undifferentiated nature, or oneness, resonates with the phenomena of subjectivity exceeding the body that is experienced during a panic attack. The birthing of the shimmer body. To have a direct knowing of this “merging” with the everything—thus losing our individuation—is perceived as enlightenment by some, and terror by others. *Mudras* and other practices manage the wildness of this experience, assisting us to, as Deleuze and Guattari advised, deterritorialise with caution.

It was with me always, I've been preparing for this performance always. It was with me on the plane traveling to France in 2016. I'm beside myself. I'm travelling with Amy. We are on the A380, 30,000 feet above the earth. I run to the galley and vomit out words: "I AM TERRIFIED!". The staff look at me, surprised and a bit worried. Am I a problem? Yes, I'm a problem.

Amy tells me that it's ok, I am just doing philosophy, and that this doing of philosophy happens in moments of crisis that we can't control, like eating hot Szechuan, she says. This is what she tells me, as I flip the buckle of my seatbelt and literally fly out of my seat, taking all the air with me.

Amy tells me that through crisis I am producing novelty.

*There's nothing you can do, she says.
There's nothing you can do, you have to find a way around it, you have to find a way through it.*

*I huddle up in my seat and whisper into my audio recorder for hours:
There's nothing you can do, there's nothing you can do, there's nothing you can do.*

Productive abjection, digital excrement, that I later mix down into a barely listenable soundtrack to play in France, Toronto, Brisbane and Adelaide.

²⁵ Ibid.

I am creating the conditions.

It begins with the hand and is followed by the breath.

I hasten the breath, and make it shallow and ragged, it's like breathing underwater.

I cough, take sips of air, shrug my shoulders and shiver while exhaling. Deep sighs, breath holding, noisy exhale.

Panic disrupts the normative cycle of breathing and living, making breathing into a dynamic flow of intensities with a corpo-affective aspect, according to Gorska.²⁶ I think of corpo-affectivity as existing at the intersection of corporeality, contingency, relationality and the affective. It is a vulnerable place to be. It brings breath and breathing into a relationship with the political and the social. Panic is a site where we can observe how breathing operates to destabilise ontological security. We usually believe that we, as breathing subjects, have control over the exhale and the inhale. We believe this to the point where we give it no thought. It is tacit. The interruption to free breathing we experience in a panic attack calls our attention to the knock in the smooth running of the machine, not just the machine of the individualised body, but the machine of "normal life"—subjects performing productively, socialising appropriately, presenting normatively. Panic attacks are "powerful temporal moments—and anxieties are powerful temporal durations—that break normative worlds apart in their captivating, exploding and immobilizing, failing, exhausting and reconfiguring dynamics".²⁷ Panic, in full flight, in its mode of extreme affect and subjective evacuation—with the body in all its vulnerability, all its thingness, devoid of life's purpose and all the affordances that makes us "human"—"discloses...beings in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other".²⁸ This strangeness connects us to strange others, connects us to everyday precarity, loss and otherness in a political sense. To those who struggle to breathe because there's no clean air, or because they have a knee on their neck, or because their lungs are diseased from working in jobs that have fatality built into them. Gorska suggests,

²⁶ Gorska, "Breathing Matters," 272.

²⁷ Ibid., 286.

²⁸ Michael Watts, *The Philosophy of Heidegger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 71.

"[p]olitical practices, protest and conceptual alternative cultures take place not only in the streets but also in everyday life".²⁹ While Gorska acknowledges that living with panic and anxiety is exhausting and debilitating, in our collaborative text on geotrauma, Jessie Boylan, Linda Dement and I note that "the potentiality of its productive force holds tremendous agency for socio-political action collectively and individually."³⁰ Gorska extrapolates that the "ambivalent attachment to the political potentialities of the matterwork of anxieties and panic attacks is therefore a constant process of negotiation of vulnerability, strength and desire for change — change that is about reconfiguring social power relations and normalizing discourses of human subjectivity, and change that is about wishing the constant struggle, exhaustion and debilitating pain would go away."³¹

This is the way I invite panic in, through gesture and breath, setting in motion a slow ripple of anxiety that washes over the audience and, fortified by their own waves of attunement, rushes back to me. This feedback loop intensifies until there is a stutter in every heart, in every being a breaking down of the machine of carrying on, a falling apart of the integral subject. We all look into the void together, and together we acknowledge the gap that is our awareness of death, our awareness of emptiness, our awareness of becoming imperceptible. In the collection of fleeting moments that perform themselves, we are all "gathered up and dispersed in evanescence."³²

This is potentially destabilising. Necessarily destabilising.

I am creating the conditions.

I cough, clear my throat, hum for the soothing stimulation, test out my mouth and jaw, make hesitant singing noises. I speak through a beak, or a snout, or a long undulating throat. That is, I am falling into the animality of language—alarmed, vulnerable, satiated, hypervigilant. There is meaning in these sonorous expressions.

²⁹ Gorska, "Breathing Matters," 274.

³⁰ Jessie Boylan Virginia Barratt, Linda Dement, "Experiencing Rupture: affective art and becoming-with slow emergencies " *E-rea* 18, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.11553>.

³¹ Gorska, "Breathing Matters," 274.

³² Butler Performativity.

They call you to attention, maybe, they call you in. The air from my mouth enters your mouth. The air trembles.

Sound artist and theorist Cristof Migone talks about these holes of ingress and egress by which we enter and leave one another. If we consider this holeyness between bodies, this porosity, he says, “it becomes impossible to think of an individual without a collective, impossible to keep your distance, impossible to delimit the outside from the inside—one turns into a divisible and diseased dividual.”³³ These sounds that exit my body in the process of creating the conditions, of calling panic in, of calling you in is a “contagious performative”. Migone uses the example of the stutter, like so many before and after him, and puts it in the noisy company of a “number of similar actions which have metaphoric force precisely because they remain ensconced in the somatic. Thus to stutters one should add squints, hiccups, blinks, lisps, twitches, squeaks, spasms, shakes, hems & haws, moans & groans, grunts, yelps, screams, murmurs, mumbles, laughs, cracks, garbles...any and all disrupters and disturbers, be they voluntary or involuntary.”³⁴ Each of these sonorous expulsions have weight and meaning if we hear them, if we attend to them. These interruptions to the smooth running of the linguistic machine are usually unheard—the remainder, the rag bag—but when we remove the semantic from the equation, the full range of their meanings becomes evident. Airek Beauchamp refers to “sonic tremblings” that resonate and quiver through the materiality of the body, as “a site of constant unfolding” and engagement, the body unfurling into the world, reaching out “via a series of shimmers and impulses.” He suggests that these “tremblings, always intersectional, encompass past lived experiences, social and cultural constructions”.³⁵ When I step into the performance space with only the remainder as my vocabulary, with the intention of creating a sonic tremble, I am “tapping into a basic irrepressible reaction causing the animality of the human to resurface as the fight or flight response is activated.”³⁶

When singer-songwriter Etta James recorded the song *Feeling Uneasy*, one of her first recorded works, she was ten days into drug detox, after being sentenced to do

³³ Cristof Migone, *Sonic Somatic* (Berlin: errant bodies press, 2012), 121.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Beauchamp Live through This: Sonic Affect, Queerness, and the Trembling Body

³⁶ Migone, *Sonic Somatic*, 144.

time at a harsh rehab. She was bussed from the rehab centre to the studio each day to record. “I was hurting”, she said in her autobiography, *Rage to Survive*:

sick as a dog, withdrawing from drugs and confused about everything...I heard the music, the music was moving me, but all I could do was moan...at the end of my groaning and grunting I just sort of sang out, “I’m feeling uneasy,” which was the gospel truth. Never went back to put words on it...let people take it for what it is...I was belting it out like my life was on the line.³⁷

The affective power of her excessively-vowelled moans, the guttural grind of perpetually un/forming words swallowed and unspoken, the choke of repetitive glottal stopping, the deep throated sob—this sounding communicates her pain in a way that the backstory cannot. James was singing the body, a body and a voice stretched to its limits. It is a painful listen.

When I first performed a panic at Performing Arts Forum in France in 2016, at some point during the awkward presentation I put on headphones, and with closed eyes I moaned along with Etta, attuning to her unspeakable uneasiness. It was awkward for me and for the audience in the way it always is when a person sings loudly and tunelessly with headphones on. It makes you snicker. I want you to snicker, and then find what’s underneath the snicker. Find your own unspeakable.

³⁷ David Ritz Etta James, *Rage to Survive* (New York: Villard Books, 1995), 212.



Figure 1: V Barratt, *III+P*, Format Systems, Tarntanya, Adelaide, 2017

Back in Adelaide, I sat in the windowsill of Format Systems, an artist-run space, and moaned on a window ledge, out into the street. It was the final act of a performance entitled *Interruptions Iterations Intimations and Peregrinations (III+P)* I collaborated on with my friend and long-time collaborator Francesca da Rimini. It was moving. It was mobile, contagious. It was sticky, stretching webbily from me to you. I was singing from the body, with the body and through the body. Etta and I were both in pain, and somehow the moans could hold and communicate this pain in a way that semantics had no capacity to do.

Interruptions Iterations Intimations and Peregrinations (III+P)

Format Systems, Hindley Street

Text and performance: Virginia Barratt and Francesca da Rimini

Choreography: Virginia Barratt

Sound: Virginia Barratt

Photographed by Christopher Arblaster

This bit begins months before the performance that took place at Format Systems in Adelaide. On 29th October 2017. It begins with a road trip which is a protracted relocation from the Northern Rivers region of NSW, Bundjalung Country, to Tarntanya, Adelaide. I'm sad to leave my forest life in the North—fecund mouldy alive home of my heart—but something's shifting and so I allow it to move me.

For the drive I packed my car with things I deemed necessary to my wellbeing and survival, including an object made of thousands of pieces of crumpled paper and many tangled threads. Taking up the whole back seat, I can see it in the rear-view mirror, a white peaked paperscape, snapping in the wind, shedding bits of itself, occasionally taking a blustery line of flight out the window, and all the while making that lovely shivery paper sound.

I install the object in the corner of my guest room at Francesca's home. It hangs there like a monstrous white grub, the knotty threads are pustules, or wounds, like treeknots or whorls, strings dripping onto the floor, mucosal.

Later, I hang the object from the ceiling of the upstairs exhibition space at Format Systems in Hindley Street, strings reaching out to the windowsill, stretchy, sticky. It hangs like a creature pelt, a skin removed from a body. It is part of the performance *III+P*, a collaboration between me and Francesca. I leave the ladder erected beside it. I like the relationship of the angular ladder with its direct action and lines of energy to the exploding and drippy energy of the pelt. Bits have fallen from its fragile superstructure to the floor below and gathered together in crumpled solidarity.

In the exhibition space there are works on the walls by Stuart Maxted and Thomas Moran, young Adelaide artists and students who know of the work of VNS Matrix, a collective of cyberfeminist artists both Francesca and I worked with in the 1990s. The exhibition has a focus on Australian contemporary art history and the works resonate across space and time, creating new webs of connectivity and relationality.



Figure 2: V Barratt, F da Rimini (installation detail), *III+P*, Format Systems, Tarntanya, Adelaide, 2017

The performance uses all the space of the gallery—downstairs, upstairs, the window ledges, the attic, the street front—such that the space, the objects in the space, the other artists, the audience and passers-by, and the traveling affects become co-creators of the work, in a process of relationality.

The day before the performance takes place I am “in residence” in the attic of Format Systems crumpling paper. I have a desk and a table. I create a pile of paper that is higher than the desk. It is covering my feet and creeping tumbling everywhere, a bit like tumbleweed. Hundreds of metres of paper. The attic smells of bleach and crumpets, because there is a pop-up café downstairs. Sometimes a piece of paper or two (they actually look a bit like flowers, though this is not meant) gets caught by the wind and blows out into the back lane behind Format and the shisha bar next door. All the rubbish bins are overflowing. The attic has no glass in the window and looks out over a roof with a single sneaker, some pigeons and roofing nails pointing skyward. Pieces of paper fall into

the gallery space below, hovering over the attic hole like a bird playing on the wind, and then dropping to the floor.

While I am in the attic a couple of people come to see me. Stuart sits with me and asks me about the history of AIDS activism and about how it was to live in plague times. I ask him if the plague is a feature of his life or of the young men he socialises with or dates. We talk about artists like Brenton Heath-Kerr and David Wojnarowicz. We talk about the *Art in the Age of AIDS* exhibition. I remember people changing their habits, getting clean, getting scared, getting fucked up, getting fucked, refusing to be clean and proper bodies, refusing to let go of the agency of pleasure. I feel sad, remembering, and shocked at the passing of time. I remember the first time I read about the plague, sitting in a flat outside London, too afraid to go outside because I was having rapid cycling panic attacks. I felt myself departing from myself in a terrified dissociation as I read the small quarter-column article buried inside the newspaper. I remember the pages and pages of obituaries in the gay rags, the paper long gone, crumpled, pulped, rotted, recycled.

Stuart crumples paper while sitting with me. At one point he says “I think I am being too antagonistic towards the paper”. We place value on things despite ourselves, and judgements. Even the relentless production of pointless artefacts gains meaning and value through repetition.

Two more people come to see me, and I give them paper to crumple, to help me with my labour-of-no-value. One of my co-creators reaches into the hillock of paper to retrieve her paperworks and give them extra crumple. Despite this work having no value, it seems there is a right way to crumple paper. I try to explain to my visitors what I am doing, and why, but have no satisfactory explanation. I talk about how I am doing labour-of-no-value, that I am engaged in the relentless production of the pointless, and about the overwhelming task as an artist to be always already new and surprising, to be collectable, to be consumable, to be fundable, to survive. I talk about the impossibility of exiting Capitalism. Later, my friend Alice reminds me that “it’s harder to imagine the end of capital than the end of the world”. As always, this strikes me as perfectly true. I talk about how an artist might throw a spanner in the machine by creating impossible objects, or outcomes that are useless and difficult to swallow. The machine can accommodate, can swallow and assimilate, all kinds of shapes, but does *this one* stick in the craw? I talked about how, as the work of paper crumpling continues, it becomes important to me. How

best to crumple the paper, how high would I like the pile to be, what is the best method for the production of a single piece of crumpled paper, and then, what is its purpose, for itself, and for me?

The visitors, my co-creators, bring their own affects to bear upon the art. I had thought I wanted to be alone in the attic all day as a meditation upon what makes a performance. I had wanted to be alone with my paper, my uncanny trembling other and listen to its whispers, because “[t]he things of the world sound in their own way. Things...have voices to which we may listen.”³⁸ But strangers climb the ladder and pop their heads through the attic hole and my attitude changes. We are always making work in relation to others, even if those others are unseen and unnamed. A current passes through us and the work is electrified by the presence of these strangers. The paper rustles as they come and go. Stuart presses his melancholy traces into the papers, others leave behind an airless aporia created by the struggle to speak to purpose. All this vitality ends up in the performance.

The crumpling paper process is anxiolytic. Making a hillock of shivery paper is soothing. The hillock of paper, or the “thing” that is made of the paper—fold upon fold upon fold—takes on a creatureness, and this creatureness is imbued with a certain affect. The paper itself seems nervous, shaking as it does, scratching and whispering to itself, being blown by the wind in erratic circles, tumbling like tumbleweed. This brings to mind photographs I have seen of tumbleweed infestations, how lively and companionable the tumbleweeds seem, happy to be together. A single tumbleweed seems lonely, an endless waiting in a vast emptiness. The paper is the material manifestation of my anxiety, I have passed it on, folded my heightened feelings into the crumple, twisted anxiety into its centre.

These crumples will end up in a garbage bag, carted around and made and remade into things. Or tipped into a pile on the gallery floor, just exiting the cavemouth of the garbage bag. The hanging creature that is in the upstairs gallery seems caught in the act of flying apart, many thousands of pieces of paper bursting out from multiple involutions, pressed up next to one another, inside against outside becoming insideoutside, no beginning no end, the traceries infinite.

³⁸ Don Ihde, *Listening and voice: Phenomenologies of sound* (Albany: Suny Press, 2007), 116.

I once made a floor dwelling pile that I could hide under/in/wear as a costume or camouflage. I once hung a yoke of paper round my neck, the blank papers dragging me down and under with the weight of the unwritten words, immanent/imminent and yet inaccessible. Wearing the albatross of paper, the death wreath of paper, the paper millstone, I cried and coughed and poemed my way into and out of panic. After Berlin, and while I was caring for my mother, I continued this practice of following the fold. Over months another paper creature came into being. I was to be its symbiont but eventually it took on a life of its own as an homage to a falling Ana Mendieta and a flight-phobic me, exploding outwards, dripping string like snot, hanging spectral above viewers.



Figure 3: V Barratt (installation detail) *after ana mendieta and me:falling/flying/becoming* Ballinalee, Ballina, 2016

The unspeaking, unwritten creature objects—and yet not, as we already know, the paper has a voice, hearing it is a process of attunement—eschew a one-to-one relationship between speech and writing/writing and paper in favour of unreadable/unspeakable pockets of meaning. They upset the integrity of the book, the academic treatise, the chronotopy of linear narrative in favour of a silent refusal, a secretive involution, a mute thesis. The work is discontinuous, interior, compressed. Folding, infolding, enfolding. There is an anxious tension that exists here, speaking to the struggle of making words

appear, but also speaking to the speaking capacity of the paper, its shape, its own voice and my relationship to it. It is upreaped from the remainder—prelinguistic, non-narrative, affective.

The script for the performance, a collaboration between Francesca da Rimini and me garnishes from Fluxus, Laure, the Invisible Committee, Barthes, Yoko Ono. It is an !ctic! text, rhythming in bursts. A text which interrupts itself with little regard for the speaker, which wanders across time and within the space, which coughs like Yoko Ono in 1961³⁹ and also like the opening “ahem” of sound and media artist and theorist Norie Neumark’s *Voice Tracks* as she is remembering the same “crucial conceptual art piece by Yoko Ono” while “coughing uncontrollably along with it”.⁴⁰ A text which veers from the prosaic to the poetic and beyond into the realm of the redundant, a text which fails to be clear, which repeats itself, a text with no idea what is going to happen, which breaks, which rustles, trembles, stammers, and which is at regular intervals cut short by unpleasant noise from a broken cassette player. This soundtrack, which signals when the performers should do or not do things, explodes with sound at minutes 0,1, and 3 sequentially, framing the text in a strict temporal convention, an enabling constraint which creates both formality and chaos. Glass breaking, a crow cawing on a hot Adelaide morning, typewriters clacking like pecking birds, ominous running noises, samples of “the strangest sounds in the universe”,⁴¹ a solitary weeping, Anne Sexton saying “your face on the dog’s neck”⁴², horrible sitcom laughing and clapping. And all the while we climb, sit, stand, cough, dribble, chew and are silent.

I am wearing a paper trail, or I am shitting paper, depending upon your eye/sight. An intuitive and last-minute amendment to the paper suit costume I am wearing, a gesture towards creatureness and speaking across linguistic borders. Let’s not forget the smallest

³⁹ In 1961 Yoko Ono released *Cough Piece*, which was a recording of her coughing for 30 minutes. She later produced an artist book *Grapefruit*, which contained “event scores” in the Fluxus style, including an instruction for “keep coughing a year”.

⁴⁰ Norie Neumark, *Voicetracks: Attuning to Voice in Media and the Arts* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2017).

⁴¹ The performance soundtrack was made up of found sounds, including sounds believed to be “trumpets of angels” and otherworldly sounds, collected as “the strangest sounds in the universe”.

⁴² This piece of sound was sampled from a cassette tape gifted to me by a friend, of Anne Sexton reading poetry and engaged in a conversational interview.

of creatures, the most invisible, those that make us cough and sneeze, those that live inside us, all contributing to a leaky linguistics. As excremental excess the paper tail is a visual reminder of Lecerle's remainder. The remainder leaks from apertures. These excremental linguistic traces reveal a "proliferation of partial meanings and structures", that both "ruins the coherence of the text and compensates for its lack".⁴³ Poetic waste, to upcycle.

There are reminders of process (the past and the future) everywhere in the performance space. The floor is taped with crisscrossing paths, indicating where we will go/where we have been. There is a sitemap on the wall, next to a list of possible activities to be executed during the performance. There is a score that nobody can understand except me, and I, only in an abstract way. There are upside-down chairs, unworn shoes, arcane markings, and everywhere paper like tumbleweed or sometimes like stepping stones.



Figure 4: V Barratt, F da Rimini (installation detail), *III+P*, Format Systems, Tarntanya, Adelaide, 2017

⁴³ Lecerle, *The Violence of Language*, 5.

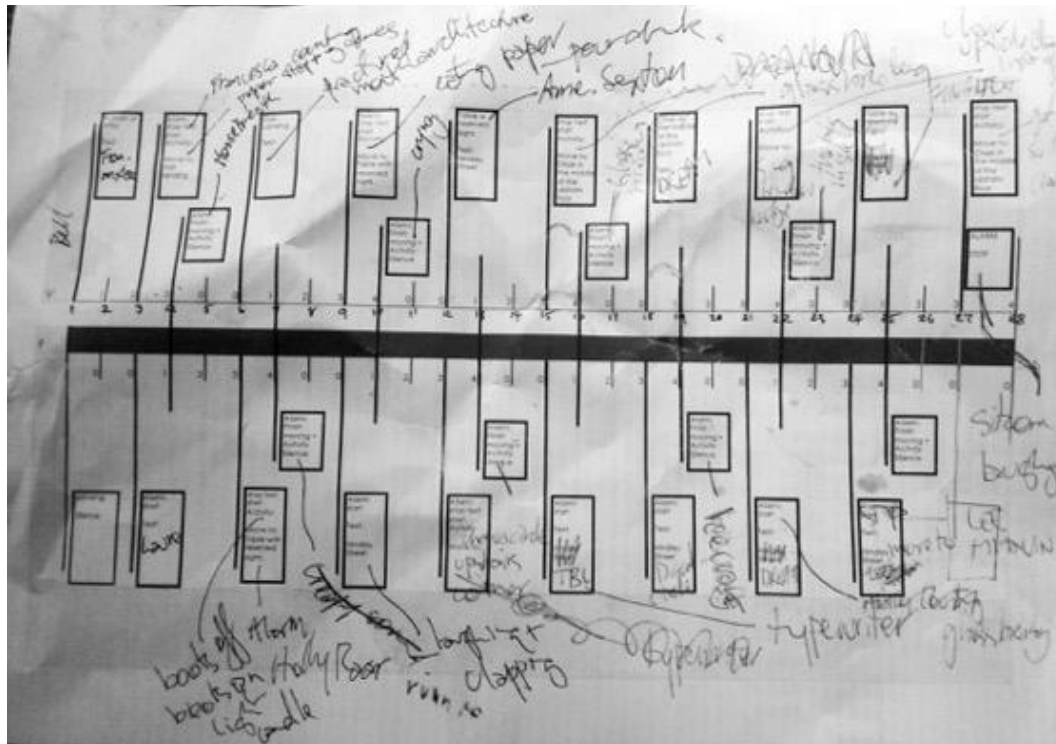


Figure 5: V Barratt, F da Rimini (Score detail), *III+P*, Format Systems, Tarntanya, Adelaide, 2017

I begin the performance without beginning, or before beginning, to be precise, making explicit a “stage direction” which was part of a conversation had earlier with Francesca and existing now only in parentheses. Once spoken, it floats in space without a referent, never meant to be part of a “script”, never meant to be uttered or heard. The statement is part of a process already enacted, no longer necessary, in the background of the script.

"We'll get Stuart to turn the lights off and on."

Thus, the performance begins by reclaiming language's waste, and continues by reciting and re-performing a 1964 Fluxus performance proposed by composer Henning Christiansen⁴⁴, which instructs the performers to turn the lights off and on every five minutes. The typography in the published Fluxus performance instruction is strange, the layout perhaps not faithful to the original, and this affects the mode of recitation, with

⁴⁴ Both Henning Christansen and Yoko Ono were part of the interdisciplinary global avant-garde movement called Fluxus which included artists such as Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys. While there was no unifying style, there was a sense in which it was intended to be a revolutionary anti-art movement. One of the methods used in Fluxus performances was constraints and instructions. This meant that the performance piece could be presented by anybody, by following the instructions.

pauses inserted where perhaps there were no pauses in the original text, creating aporia, held breath, a waiting and a wondering.

I speak the floating direction as I emerge from the attic hole wearing a paper suit and tail and descend the ladder to the bottom floor of the gallery. Francesca is sitting at a table in the main gallery space on which a jug full of blood-red juice and two glasses are placed. There are pages where the place settings would be. The table is set for two. I follow a path of uncrumpled paper stepping-stones towards the main gallery space, reading from the script, and join Francesca at the table.

I stop speaking when the alarm tells me to, and Francesca picks up where I leave off. These sonic interruptions continue, while Francesca invokes the ghosts of the past and I fail to recall, falling out of time. Facing her, I make a meal of the pages, washing them down with juice. Tearing strips of the paper like pieces of meat from my folded word bombs, I choke and chew while drinking, dribbling, spitting, spraying, forcing paper and masticated words out with bloody red juice. Words mashed up with saliva are born, not as voice but as small red packages, slippery and noiseless, organs on the outside. They fall to the floor, like clots. The red architecture of the throat is in refusal, glottis closing, opening, closing, the vocal folds quivering with the struggle to expel something more-than-language. Francesca leaves for the middle landing.



Figure 6: V Barratt, F da Rimini *III+P*, Format Systems, Tarntanya, Adelaide, 2017

My gory muteness makes a mess, and Francesca, standing between here and there, catches the text where it falls as an alarm sounds. The script continues haltingly, interrupted by the soundtrack alarms and the animal whoops and howls of drunk packs on a hot Hindley Street night, invoking the hot, sweaty, bruised, drunk, stoned, queer ghosts of the past. These reveal themselves in prosaic moments of storytelling to embody submerged narratives dispersed and distributed across time and space, coalescing in the discontinuous moment of performance.

The space we are performing in is about to close forever, part of the cycle of life for artist-run spaces. People are pre-emptively mourning its loss. Ours is the final performance in the space, and now our storytelling is be entangled with theirs, stickily.

On the stair landing, partway between the upper exhibition space and the ground floor, the text takes a turn for the unvoiced. One of many un-s the performance makes. It is by turns uncanny, unheimlich, unsound, undesirable, undead. On the landing, neither here nor there, speech becomes a quotidian cough and then a series of coughs, which veers into a trying-to-remember tuneless singing, searching across the scales for the right note, like searching for a radio frequency on an analogue radio. This peters out, is interrupted, fails. The failure is inevitable and necessary since the mouth is not made for speaking everything.

This making-with constraints and conditions, this in-performance textuality, and prior to this the collaborative writing process, is a process of making-in-crisis. There is a tension, a vibration, between the integrity of the text and the busting open of a text by an interloper. Before the text cracks open to allow ingress to the other, there is a stuttering, a spluttering, a knocking of the engine as it falters and gasps for air, opening and closing its mouth in the process, resisting the outsider. The interloper text slips in through the opening and makes itself a home. There is some discomfort, then assimilation and then the smooth rustle of language returns, until the next intervention. Artist and writer Ashley Haywood calls this process of mouthing “mouthness”, referring to sites and “openings that can tolerate disruption. Openings are a way for systems (minds) to build discontinuities into being and knowing (thereby generating newness).”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ashley Haywood, "The Cell of my Art as an Amoeba," *Axon* 7, no. 1 (2017).

Being open to interventions and the unexpected, to be open to encounters with strangers, is the basis on which a work which reclaims the remainder can be made. To let go and fall into the flows that snatch words away from us, and us away. Maybe a text will end on an “if”, a “but”, a “then” or an “also”. Perhaps it will end on “I cannot”. Maybe the point will be lost and so the text will be misunderstood/made new. The point is to let go of integrity and authorship and ownership, to be incoherent, to find a way of languaging that is infected by the “remainder”, and through that remainder, create a space for affect to resonate, so that bodies in relation to the work respond according to their own affective triggers and dispositions.

These responses are research outcomes, or emic data produced in situ, co-constituted by the relationship between the performers, the audience, the performance space, mouth architectures, the street outside pouring in, the heat, the light and so on. After—but I am getting ahead here—audience members told me their stories of sadness, frustration, distress, enthrallment, fear, panic, enjoyment and intrigue. The requirement of the audience to split their attention between multiple simultaneous activities and soundscapes generated some anxieties around fully apprehending and therefore appreciating the performance. This was an intentional provocation and created discomfort for the performers as well as the audience, or, “and thus” the audience.

Once when we were doing a table reading of the text, Francesca was timing her fragments of speech to the second. I asked her why she was timing her texts, since we are simply at the mercy of the terrible alarm, and we will no doubt have precious ends and beginnings amputated, given that performance time is elastic, and things take their own paths and technology fails, and lines of flight dictate that you do other than you rehearsed. It simply soothes her to believe she might get to the end.

There is a prescient grief haunting this writing, knowing it will not survive the experience of performance and I know this is challenging, this invitation to allow new deranged texts to emerge from the enabling constraints of the performance laboratory in *spite* of our bodies, our mouths, our capacities.

The terrible alarm sounds again. Glass breaking over and over and over. Francesca recalls a dream. I don't dream. I have a dream, I don't remember my dreams, I fall down the stairs, I break.

We have reached the upper floor of the gallery, stepped in and out of circles described on the floor by a witch's hand, sat on chairs, upturned chairs, all the while trailing an audience behind us like a tail, an excremental excess.

Here, the final stop on our journey, the pelt waits, waits for me to shed my human suit and take refuge in its interiority. The last vocal act that emerges gutturally from my body before I disappear into the folds is a tuneless, painful and wordless singing. I cry, from my last cell.

Finally, there is nothing but breathing paper, and the silence after awkward clapping, and drunken singing from outside, and the vocality that emerges after speech is done with.

I make myself a thin line, drawn with a sharp pencil, and I stay inside the thin line, the line which has no end. Sometimes the line vibrates with such intensity that it becomes a shadow of itself.

Inside the line I whisper to myself:

This is the first time. This is the only time.

There's nothing you can do, there's nothing to be done.



Figure 7: V Barratt F da Rimini *III+P*, Format Systems, Tarntanya, Adelaide, 2017