

## **Preface**

### **Background and a guide to reading**

I am a trans-media artist living on the lands of the Kurna people. I acknowledge the sovereignty of the Kurna people and honour their relationship to country. I acknowledge my privilege in travelling freely across sovereign nations in the pursuit of academic research, and the contribution of the land to my work. We are never working alone.

My pronouns are they/them. I have made every effort in this thesis to apply correct pronouns to the people I refer to. I ask forgiveness if I have misgendered anybody throughout this thesis.

My creative practice spans four decades—though of course it spans a lifetime. I performed for the first time in 1984 at La Boite Theatre in Brisbane with Michelle Andringa. I sang and I danced. This was also my first experience of collaboration, and in the 1980s and into the 1990s I continued to work with Michelle, and with others including Eugene Carchesio, Adam Boyd, Jay Younger, Adam Wolter, Tim Gruchy, Fiona Templeton and Hiram To, on other collaborative events. In the early 1990s I founded, with several young Brisbane artists, the Queensland Artworkers Alliance; and with Adam Boyd I founded and ran an artist-run space called John Mills National. This was an exhibition and performance space where the cultural “underground” of queer art, performance, music and fashion intersected. This consolidated my commitment to community projects, to collaboration and the margins, and to art and working life as a politics. I was also creating solo works of performance which were embodied, visceral, epistolary and physically challenging. As a young pre-coming-out queer, I worked through questions of an existential nature by hanging upside down in galleries, nightclubs and churches, by giving voice to becomings. I have continued, across my creative life, to work in marginalised spaces with others, placing collaboration at the heart of my art/life. We are never working alone. I create in collaboration with non-human and human others, with the flesh of the world, always.

This overview is important to contextualise the works of performance I refer to throughout this thesis, which is itself experimental creative practice in nature and orientation. A lot of

the works referred to are collaborative, often with all members working trans-media. That is—with all collaborators sharing all aspects of the making, and having a flat, non-hierarchical and sympoietic<sup>1</sup> relationship to one another and to the work. As a multi-limbed creative organism, we skillshare, lifting each other up, going to new making places with the support—not the judgement—of others, jumping into gaps in skills and knowledge and in that way filling them. Making-with is an entangled praxis for being, living, doing which I take from feminist thinkers and philosophers Donna Haraway and Karen Barad.<sup>2</sup> I have also long been involved with the ideas of DIWO (Do It With Others), a critical practice initially proposed by Marc Garrett from Furtherfield in London. DIWO shifts power “away from top-down initiations into co-produced, networked artistic activities...The practice of DIWO allows space for an openness where a rich mixing of components from different sources cross[es] over and build[s] a hybrid experience.”<sup>3</sup> In the DIWO experience “[t]he process is as important as the outcome, forming relationally aware peer enactments.”<sup>4</sup>

For example, and in practical terms: I don't have exemplary photography skills, so in my collaborative projects with Jessie Boylan and Linda Dement, they undertake photographic work of note. I dabble. I am comfortable performing in front of audiences, and so that is often my role, along with script writing, video editing, singing, making soundworks, crafting, and teaching yoga when we are on residencies together. For me, breaking down all prohibitive structures—including spurious notions of age and experience—is important. I work intentionally in a trans-generational space, teaching and learning. I am lucky to work in collaboration with young artists, often electronic musicians—such as Em König, Alice Nillson and Lauren Abineri—in a rich, sharing, creative environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Beth Dempster, "Sympoietic and autopoietic systems: A new distinction for self-organizing systems" (paper presented at the International Society for Systems Studies Annual Conference 2000, Toronto, Canada, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> In *Making Kin in the Cthulucene* Donna Haraway describes Mary Beth Dempster's concept of sympoieisis as “making-with” others in a diverse and multi-species environment. She asserts that humans are never alone. We are never making alone. The term “entanglement” is used by Karen Barad in multiple texts to speak about multi-species engagement and worlding. I see these two concepts as intertwined.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Garrett, "DIWO (Do-It-With-Others): Artistic Co-Creation as a Decentralized Method of Peer Empowerment in Today's Multitude.," *Turning Art into Real Life*, Marc Garrett, 2014, <https://marcgarrett.org/2014/02/12/diwo-do-it-with-others-artistic-co-creation-as-a-decentralized-method-of-peer-empowerment-in-todays-multitude/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Collaborative writing has always been a rewarding practice for me, pushing me into areas of experimentation that stretch and exceed my understanding of writing, and opening me up to the affect of writing with others. I have been writing with artist Francesca da Rimini, for example, since the early 1990s through to the present day, and I have written durational works with writers Ashley Haywood and Nick Taylor. In the early 1990s I began working with the collective VNS Matrix<sup>5</sup> (with Francesca da Rimini, Julianne Pierce and Josephine Starrs) and our collaborative trans-media works, which offered critiques of gender and technology, were exhibited internationally and continue to be exhibited and shared via open systems of distribution.

Having noted this, it is important to also make the point that working with others does not diminish my own contribution. It does not make the work easier, in fact quite the opposite. There's a level of skill required when with working with others that is not necessary when working alone. We have all made the entire work: I have made the entire work, as have the other collaborators.

The thesis refers to works I have made across the decades for historical context but focuses very specifically on the works that I have made across the period of my candidature. I have written the texts for all of these, either in collaboration or alone. When I introduce the works, I will be explicit about who has made which aspect of the work and the period in which they were made.

This covers the context of working in collaboration; the importance of collaborative practice I will unpack in more detail in the thesis.

As you will discover, the thesis as a whole is non-standard in its conception and structure. It is comprised of this text document and a dynamic website, and these two components are in conversation with one another through links. There is a flowing circular relationship between the two, leading back to one another again and again. The thesis is autotheoretical in approach, that is—it is a work of writing *myself* or *my selves* and also situating *the* self critically, philosophically and creatively. It is an appropriate positioning

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<sup>5</sup> I and my collaborators founded VNS Matrix in 1991, as a cyberfeminist collective creating works of digital media. We coined the term “cyberfeminist” in a zeitgeist of network and technological innovation.

for a queer non-binary and neurodivergent person who has lived with mental illness across a lifetime. I am non-standard, and so is my work. Structurally, the thesis operates via feedback loops. By this I mean that you are able to exit the linear text of the document at any point to follow links embedded in the thesis, leading to a website which has been created for the doctoral project.

*Beside Our Selves website* [\[LINK\]](#)

The site serves as a repository for documentation and my arts practice ephemerae—such as scripts, photographs, sound files, videos and performance scores. The entire thesis also exists on this website, and you can read this, chapter by chapter, by clicking on the “read this chapter” button. Or you can read across chapters on the site in any order you choose. You can return to the physical thesis after taking a spin around the website—which is an artwork in itself—and continue on. One of the driving forces of the thesis is its emphasis on temporality, linearity and integrity. Panic, as you will read, disrupts our accepted and normative notions of a well put-together human following an undeviating arrow of time. The form of the thesis reflects this: I have built a meandering temporality into the work. This doctorate, after all, is intended as a critical engagement with, and reflection on my lived history of panic and what my art practice can reveal about, and about our being in and of the world.

## **Notes on terminology**

This is a thesis on panic and my life with panic.

Throughout you will note that I have used some terms interchangeably, based on my personal lived experience with panic and its siblings. I use the terms *panic*, *anxiety*, *fear* and *terror* together, interchangeably, and in substitution. My experience of these affective events is that they are enmeshed. Sometimes one exceeds the other in intensity or temporality. Sometimes they appear together, and I cannot separate the two. There are nuances in meaning, but they all exist together on a never-ending continuum, it is only the intensity that changes. I note that in clinical and philosophical (phenomenological and affect theory) literature there are often clear demarcations between these terms, but this

is not the case in my experience. Linguistic and ontological delimitations melt away in the lived experience of panic and its siblings.



Figure 1: V Barratt, *Invert/X*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1992.