

Beneath the words I once
underlined

The author conveys
feeling by his choice of words,
not by the expressiveness of his
lines.

Writing is to orientate
yourself

Writing is not equal to
inscription.

An author is not
a scribe.

Could we say that an
author is akin to a wordsmith?

But what about this performance
What about this writing.

The end
is never approaching.

'I' WONDER

Alan Dunn on Claire Potter

Claire Potter is a London-based artist and editor of the journal *soanyway*, an online repository of words, pictures and sounds that tell stories, founded in 2008 by Derek Horton and Lisa Stansbie. Claire's own practice is located between writing and performance and Alan Dunn interviewed her about three recent live pieces. ...*nonetheless bears witness* (September 2012) was created for the *PRIVATE* event at the top of Liverpool's Radio City Tower. *Performance with Sam Keogh* (July 2013) was presented at The Hardy Tree Gallery in London as part of the *Enemies* exhibition and *The audience is delayed* (June 2013) was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London.

AD: If we begin with ...*nonetheless bears witness*, a three-part spoken word piece based around the voice of an abused woman who we find out has six children; she describes incidents of domestic violence and her children gradually leaving her. It is a very harrowing work, could you reflect back on it, a year on?

CP: I remember wearing a blue shawl in adherence to the event's dress code. I drank blue WKD that was served at the bar. I held three sheets of A4 paper, sometimes I read from them, sometimes I didn't need to and delivered the content with my eyes closed. I spoke up unannounced three times from areas not designated for performance and I remember making a lot of people unsure as to

whether I was part of the programme or not. I spoke from an unclear position, at once an announcer and then a confessor. I know the content and the delivery were uncomfortable for people at *PRIVATE*.

AD: What were you reading or looking at when developing the piece, both as direct influences but also as those ideas that float around with us?

CP: What it means to say 'I' as a writer and as a performer. I was introduced to the idea that 'I' as a pronoun is 'promiscuous'. It belongs to whoever is speaking it and so, as an apparatus for writing and speaking 'I' can be said to be a site of temporality. It is a slippery site: 'I' can produce great impact but is also gone in a flash. Furthermore, 'I' is divided like a cell down to each thought or impulse. Around the same time I read Chris Kraus commenting that women writers operating within the first person are 'still subject to memoiristic interpretation as though female experience itself were so troubled the female 'I' could only be intensely self-reflexive.' Theoretically, this was how the work emerged. I wanted to demonstrate this problematic female 'I' by addressing it through the shifting/shifty temporal conception of the pronoun - shifting and utterly subjective.

'I' began to form as a character for me: a troubled drunk, which is something I decided to run with

during the performance. The speaking 'I' was a self-absorbed, stuck voice that disregarded anything other than its own emergence, its moment of speaking. It got drunk, butted in and made people uncomfortable. I had begun to read at poetry events around the time of making this work and was thinking around the uses of the A4 sheets of text and how it provided a textual site for the pronoun and how that delineated what was within and without the game of speaking to an audience.

AD: The accompanying text mentions Colin Wilson's seminal study of the outsider in twentieth century literature and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Is it fair to say the work drew on the uncomfortableness of trauma, especially within such a confined social space as the one you performed in?

CP: Yes definitely. To talk about this demonstration of 'I' in another way we could talk about trauma. Colin Wilson's book is a cartography of the divided self with many examples of literary characters in various states of consideration of a stable or whole self: the returning soldier, the wandering exile, the existentialist, the preacher, the outcast, the victim. The subject living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for example, has no delusions of objectivity. They are a walking testament to the *nouveau roman* - all detail, fracture and repetition.

The other text you mention by Professor Caruth took for its cultural example Margeurite Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, directed by Alain Renais. This piece of writing, and the film itself, illustrate PTSD as a rupture of narrative, a blind return that confuses the space and time of the self. I wanted to extrapolate these ideas for the delivery at *PRIVATE*. I wanted to use the exclusivity of the event, and the mannered tone that accompanies such a setting to amp up the performance. I would shout up, be too confessional and self-concerned. I'd have to not only talk about a singular experience, I'd have to enact it by having a total self-regard for my own speaking. I'd have to be the unwanted guest: the sentence that starts with 'I'.

AD: You've always drifted towards words rather than images. Can I ask which visual artists, if any, had some bearing on your practice over the years?

CP: Working with words and/or images are essentially ocular practices and to that end I don't see myself as having drifted from one to the other as such. But it's funny, whenever someone asks me a question like this, I think of watching Tracy Emin's *Why I Never Became A Dancer* in Tate Liverpool when I was about fourteen and I also think of trying to move the cabinet of Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* with my

shoulder when the invigilator wasn't looking on a school trip to London. For better or worse, these adolescent experiences don't leave me when I am asked about visual art. I refer back to them perhaps because I haven't yet analysed them to death. They are protected by being before art education. They came a bit too early to be used as fodder for a pedagogical essay or presentation. They are remnants from the childhood memory vault.

AD: *Performance with Sam Keogh* was presented at The Hardy Tree Gallery in London as part of the *Enemies* exhibition earlier this year. As Sam Keogh spoke outside the gallery, a speech based around Oscar - from *Sesame Street* rather than Wilde I believe - you were inside, creating a live textual response to his words, is that correct?

CP: Yes that's right, however I'd stress that though I was writing a response, it was not textual. My conception of writing is more akin to orientation; it doesn't always have to take the form of inscription but serves to produce a line in, or a pathway through signification in order to produce meaning. This is as important a key for my reading practice as it is for writing performances.

Footage of my work is intentionally low-fi and subjective so I'll talk through the work and it's backstory a little. *Enemies* has been a year-long series of events and publications directed by the poet S.J. Fowler. For the closing night of the two-week residency at The Hardy Tree, Steven invited me to work within a fifteen-minute slot and to perhaps invite some other artists and/or writers to work with.

I have seen Sam perform *Taken out of/put into Oscar's Bin* a few times but always within the context of contemporary art. Fundamentally it is a script about the cultural history and uses of Oscar the Grouch that he has committed to memory by the allocation of a series of pictographs. The performance is the remembrance of these signifiers and the delivery and omission of recalled and forgotten information.

Generally, my writing performances develop through audience sensitivity and context. I have delivered the same texts in pubs as I have at art galleries and the variables not only alter the reception of a work but they act as an editing tool or a filtering system for the content. I wanted to invite Sam as an artist-performing to deliver something with me as a writer-performing. I felt like there was something to unpick there, particularly as the context was a poetry event at an art gallery. Blurring the fields of writing and art is a popular concept but as an art writer, it is very important for me to clarify the terms of my practice without it reducing to a juxtaposition.

The audience left the small hot gallery space for

Image by Alex Bell



Image by Lella Romanya



the pavement for a ten-minute break, Sam began his performance and I navigated the situation: the physicality, the theoretical divisions and unities between both our performances and also the role and responsibility of the audience and the host. I couldn't really think about these things without being in them and that situation is something that I had to induce. I walked about a lot, I talked myself through the situation, I arranged objects on the floor to mark and retrace what I'd said and statements began to emerge. These statements serve as the beginnings of a much bigger research practice, the results of an experiment if you like.

AD: The work seems to have been contingent on a lot of things from the way you describe it. Was there significance in having window between the two performers right up until the last minute when you join Sam on the street?

CP: Only in that Sam wanted his performance to spring unannounced from among the crowd. The window was a necessary and fortunate element that allowed me to refer to Sam's work while maintaining his performance specifications. That was the practical intention. Though I do concede that the bearing that the window has on the development of the work is great, not only in the reception of the mobile phone footage that you see, but in developing the writing performance at the time.

AD: Again, I am interested in what you were absorbing around this time, in terms of theory, fiction, images or sounds, particularly the manner in which the documentation sets the window as a background frame.

CP: It was Miwon Kwon's use of Mark Dion's *On Tropical Nature* in her book as an example of a site-specific artwork that divided over multiple sites. That spurred this work on. The idea that a work exists in its conception as a project AND in its existence in the gallery AND in its relation to the event AND in a site of discussion and documentation, excited me. I participated in Sarah Pierce's performance work *Campus* in London a little before Sam and I were at the *Enemies* show and this affected me too. *Campus* is a group rehearsal. About six participants were given a simple script of chants and actions. We ran through this a few times in an open rehearsal and then performed it without the script twice. What was miraculous about being involved in the piece was the activation of different forms of memory, linguistic, spatial and sonic, and how this produced a communal body of knowledge for us to access in order to perform a play we had only read forty-five minutes earlier. Though *Campus* was delivered among guests, I really felt that the work had existed among the performers and was not accessible to the

audience in the gallery. That has stayed with me.

AD: The texts you wrote could be said to have links with Joseph Kosuth's billboard *Text/Context* or even Alvin Lucier's soundwork *I am sitting in a room*. Did you plan these beforehand to some extent or do you ever wonder what would happen if your mind actually went blank and language deserted you just when you needed it?

CP: I think the two works you mention collapse the binary of delivery and reception. They both implicate the audience in their generation or emergence as artworks. The work is only there when it is happening. They are performance works. They both also exist as actions, demonstrations that fuse method and content. This is something that I am very interested in as it is crucial for my conception of art writing and I consider both these works to be examples of that, so yes, I do see similarities with my work.

In terms of planning, there is very little I plan. There are things I want to pull apart and assess about writing and its relationship to performance and I can't do that until I am in the midst of it and thinking to myself: right, now what's going on here? It's so fundamental a position for me that language doesn't get in the way of that. And anyway it's good when you get nervous or forget something, that's when I'm really performing writing, really navigating the situation. Yve Lomax once described language as having the burden of expression. But it can be freed up and invigorated. Language doesn't have to just serve some end, describing something; pointing outside itself, it can be active and do something or demonstrate something. And its absence is equally as useful as its presence.

AD: *The audience is delayed* was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London as part of an evening of writerly performances. Is it appropriate to describe your performance for those who did not witness it, or would you rather talk about the ideas around it?

CP: The event at the Whitechapel, *Language is the creek on a stair*, was conducted for two hours in two rooms on different floors. The three performances in each of the rooms had the same time slots. The guests congregated by the makeshift bar on the stairwell and when the time came were instructed to pick their room. There was no pandering to the audience. I really enjoyed that. There are no descriptions to help you choose; you have two minutes, pick a room. The show was really about delivery in that way and paid a little less attention to reception. I had a typewriter on a plinth, located on the stair well. I typed here for the duration for the event. I typed on the reverse of old bookplates that illustrated Persian and Turkish

carpets. I then posted these texts in production order on a partition window behind me. The guests could read them but I couldn't refer to what I had written, I just had to continue with a forward action without revising.

Essentially *The audience is delayed* was an act of performed writing, not only in sense of inscription and publication on the window but also the production of knowledge and content from pulling together and assessing the intersection of sites of performance: my body in the physical environment, my social relation to guests, my practical use of and the cultural location of the manual typewriter, and the intellectual and inter-textual application of my reading *Lines: A Brief History* by Tim Ingold and my study of Persian and Turkish carpet weaving techniques. It was a work of writing my experience of writing about what writing is.

I'm still considering what to do with the 27 pages that were produced. I can't decide whether their emergence in the performance was their publication, their life if you like, or if they might make a book themselves. Perhaps they are doomed to only be a document. Perhaps I shouldn't be so precious about it. In the end, I wasn't there to make a product. Selfishly, I was there to have a good live think.

AD: *The audience is delayed* has the phrase *writing engenders performance*, also used with Sam, which suggests you see the performances as events driven by texts which is an anti-improvisational approach rooted in a classic scripted theatre context?

CP: That's an interesting response to the phrase and yes in one way events are driven by language but writing in the way that I mean it is an action. In that way, writing for me essentially engenders performance. An action is performed from within a system of rules producing something sensible. Reading too for that matter begets performance. The activation of language is a well-remembered dance in that way. So I suppose theatre is not so far removed from that. It's important for me to make statements like that as part of the research. If for nothing other than to generate friction at a later date.

See clairelouisepotter.blogspot.co.uk. Links to video footage of *...nonetheless bears witness* and *Performance with Sam Keogh* - alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html